

Can I Get a Volunteer: Contemporary Improvised Theatre and the Audience

Jonas McLean

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Abstract

In this thesis I present a new dramaturgical model for understand improvised theatre. Improvised theatre is a field full of experimentation, and the art form has recently been evolving faster than the theories used to understand it. Rather than relying on colloquial terms such as “short form” and “long form”, I propose a new terminology based on Chris Johnston’s notion of “Restrictions”. I explain the use of the Restrictions: Location, Role, Narrative, Game, and Materials, and how to measure the “Scope” of Restrictions by the Number of affected performers and Duration. I explain how Restrictions affect four elements of improvised performance: Space, Time, Speech, and Physicality. By creating a rubric to illustrate the interaction between Restrictions and these elements, I move towards a new foundation for understanding improvised theatre. In addition, I propose four metrics to measure audience participation: Number of participants, Method of participation, Agency of the participant, and Duration of the participation. Using my Restriction rubric and audience participation metrics, I analyse four case studies. Each case study is a recent piece of improvised theatre. I attended each piece multiple times and interviewed the artists behind each production with a questionnaire. These are *Blind Date* and *Undercover* by Spontaneous Theatre, *Quest Friends Forever*, and GRIMprov’s *Guided Roleplay*. Each production features audience participation, the effects of which I explain using Erika Fischer-Lichte’s notion of the autopoietic feedback loop. By analysing these contemporary productions I demonstrate the efficacy of my new rubrics and terminology.

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<u>First Name</u>	<u>Last Name</u>	<u>Affiliation</u>	<u>Role</u>
Daniel	Mroz	Arts / Theatre	Supervisor
Jonas	McLean	Arts / Theatre	Student Researcher

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INTRODUCTION

Improvisation has been a part of my life for slightly over a decade. My early exposure to improvised comedy was through the TV show *Whose Line is it Anyway?* and later as a player in the Canadian Improv Games, both fairly common experiences for a Canadian teenager interested in performance. Pursuing theatre as an academic discipline and improvisation as a performance style, I became interested in finding new, innovative ways to perform and create, using improvisation. My undergraduate thesis, *Impro Gratia Improv: Critical Thought and Audience Participation in Theatrical Improvisation*, focused on giving the audience a higher degree of control over all aspects in an improvised performance. Around the time I was developing this project, in October 2015, I first saw Rebecca Northan perform the show *Blind Date*. In this show a single audience member became the main character for 90 minutes. This was the kind of performance I had theorized was possible being performed for a paying audience. Then I discovered that *Blind Date* had already been touring for almost a decade. How was it possible that I had no idea that a show involving this level of audience participation had proven to work? As it turns out, the answer was simple. All the top sources on improvised theatre were themselves at least as old as *Blind Date*. This fuelled my interest in the role of the audience in improvised theatre specifically, and in academic approaches to improvised theatre more generally.

Improvisation is certainly more well-known today than it was in the 1970s, before *Whose Line is it Anyway?* aired in the UK in 1988 (IMDB), and before the Canadian Improv Games were founded in 1977 (Improv.ca). Today, improvisation can be found just under the surface of many institutions, serving as a method of actor training or script devising within the theatre

world (Leep 1). Outside of theatre, the word improvisation is thrown around seemingly everywhere, from Forbes business articles (Scinto), to columns on game design (Rosewater, Improv-ing on the Job), to cook books (Schneider), to quilting (Wood). At the same time, improvisation as a form of dramatic performance has continued to grow. In Ottawa alone, the community has grown significantly in the past 10 years. The 2018 Ottawa Improv Festival featured acts from Toronto, Montreal, Guelph, and Boston as well as nine local acts (OttawaImprovFestival). One of these Ottawa troupes, Crush Improv, recently celebrated their 10th anniversary with a Canadian comedy award winning event (Canadian Comedy Awards). Beyond Ottawa, Canadian improvisers are touring shows around the country (Spontaneous Theatre), and the world (Hyprov). The scope of my research will specifically be four contemporary improvised shows whose relationship to, and use of, the audience falls outside the range of current theories: *Blind Date*, *Undercover*, *Guided Roleplay*, and *Quest Friends Forever*. In analysing these productions, I will demonstrate a new approach for understanding improvised theatre and the ways it involves and appeals to the audience.

Improvised theatre can be seen frequently by those who wish to see it. Many “improv troupes” operate under a model of monthly or weekly shows, and these shows may or may not have consistent elements from show to show. In Ottawa it is possible to see a different improv group every night of the week. In cities with greater populations, like Toronto or Chicago, there are often more. Because of this, improvised theatre is already a large part of many cities’ theatre communities and a significant influence on many people’s thoughts about theatre and performance. Outside of local scenes, there is improvisation happening on larger stages, and with higher production budgets, reaching audiences who may never otherwise have seen improvised theatre. *Whose Line is it Anyway?* has familiarized viewers with an assortment of short “improv

games” like Party Quirks¹, and groups like Chicago’s TJ & Dave expose audiences to longer, narrative based improvised formats (Love 30). As well, the importance of improvisation is being recognized in other types of performance, like the interactive performances at Renaissance Fairs (Izzo 135). Improvisation in music has been a topic within cognitive studies for some time and we are starting to see research that incorporates dramatic improvisation as well (Drinko, Kaufman et al). All of this means that improvisation is already reshaping the general understanding of live performance, and it is only becoming more relevant. As with so many things, new developments in improvised theatre are occurring at accelerating rates as the art form becomes more established. Even within the last ten years we can see the emergence of new trends, ways of doing, and understandings of what an improvised performance can be. We, on the scholarly side of the arts, have at our disposal largely the same frameworks, from the same books, as we did ten years ago. In that decade the face of improvisation has changed; we have some serious catching up to do.

This thesis is in some ways a celebration of improvised theatre, but more than that, it is an attempt to contribute to an expansion of critical thinking in how we think and write about improvised theatre. The problem I have found in reading through the seminal academic works about improvisation² is that the majority were published ten or more years ago. The definitions and parameters for talking about improvisation they provide, while we would not be where we are without them, are now limiting the way we think about improvisation. Artists are creating innovative new improvised work that flies in the face of what we as academics and critics would

¹ In Party Quirks, or “The Party”, a host tries to guess the character traits of each of their guests, given by the audience (ImprovEncyclopedia).

² Works like *Impro*, *Truth in Comedy*, *Theatrical Improvisation*, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*, *The Improvisation Game* and *Improvisation in Drama* are frequently found in the literature reviews of works on improvised theatre. See Adams (1), Drinko (3), Frost and Yarrow (3), Johnston (9), and Leep (2-3).

think possible based on the literature. Indeed, in J. Kelly Nestruck's review of *Undercover*, he declines to give the show a star rating because of its improvised nature. Nestruck rightly points out, that the show will be different every night, and he expresses frustration with the audience participant. However, with a better understanding of how the audience participation is handled by the cast, he and other critics could potentially give the show a more confident assessment (Nestruck). The bottom line is that we need to update our dramaturgy of improvisation. There are fascinating opportunities for more specific research within improvised theatre, but in order to discuss them, we need a basic foundation of understanding to approach from; we need to know what improvised theatre is and what it can do.

In this thesis I am looking specifically at one area of improvisational dramaturgy that needs the largest overhaul; improvised theatre's relationship to and use of the audience. I begin here because currently this is one of the most significant examples of theory not matching current practice. Many theories of improvisation have not been updated to reflect contemporary improvised theatre's use of audience participation.

I have chosen to examine *Blind Date*, *Undercover*, *Quest Friends Forever*, and *Guided Roleplay* for two reasons. The first is that each provides good examples of audience participation. Second, each is currently being performed or was recently performed and will almost certainly be performed again. Practically speaking, it was important to be able to attend these performances in person multiple times. The exception to this was *Undercover*. As the show only premiered in Toronto in September of 2017, I was unable to attend more than one production. Because the show is the creation of Rebecca Northan and Spontaneous Theatre, the creator of *Blind Date*, comparisons to *Blind Date* helped augment my analysis of this piece.

In order to understand these four productions, we must first understand the method by which they will be examined. In Chapter One, I will go into further detail about the foremost current theories (and their limitations), and introduce two rubrics I have created for analysing improvised theatre. Each chapter will then focus on one of the shows, using the rubrics to discuss the structure of each format. I also distributed a questionnaire to the creators of the shows, and will reference their answers in my analysis. In order to discuss the theories that will be used in Chapter One and beyond, we must first have an understanding of the terminology involved.

CHAPTER 1 –TOWARDS A NEW DRAMATURGY OF IMPROVISATION

1.1 Can I get a Definition? – Important Terminology

Many sources take for granted that the reader has familiarity with “improv”, and even the best sources on improvisation often use different terms for similar concepts. I wish to be clear about what falls within the scope of what I have been calling “improvised theatre” and what does not. Let us look at some existing definitions. In *The Improvisation Game*, Chris Johnston defines improvisation as “the spontaneous invention of words, behaviours, sounds, or movement within a context understood as fictional, aesthetic or representational” (C. Johnston xiii). In *Improvisation in Drama*, Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow define improvisation as “the skill of using bodies, space, all human resources, to generate a coherent physical expression of an idea, a situation, a character (even, perhaps, a text)...spontaneously, in response to the immediate stimuli of one’s environment...as though taken by surprise, without preconceptions” (Frost and Yarrow 4). These definitions are speaking specifically of improvisation within a performance context, though neither explicitly limits their scope to theatre. Improvisation also exists in a performance context within dance and music, though these are of course unique disciplines worthy of their own separate attention. Improvisation within a theatrical or dramatic context, then, means to create dramatic performance spontaneously.

When authors refer to improvisation in this context, they often use the abbreviation “improv”. This word is for many a simple colloquial shorthand for improvised performance, but it also evokes the history of what Amy Seham calls “Chicago-style improv-comedy” (Seham xvii). In *Whose Improv is it Anyway? Beyond Second City*, Seham breaks down the history of “improv” in North America, and specifically in Chicago where many influential trends

originated. Seham divides the period from roughly 1955 to the late 1990s into three broad movements that she terms ‘waves’ (xviii-xiv). The first wave began with The Compass Players founded by Paul Sills and David Shepherd and its evolution into The Second City (4-6). The second wave was characterized by groups such as ImprovOlympic (39) where Del Close and Charna Halpern sought to legitimize improvisation as an art form (Halpern et al 7), and ComedySportz (Seham 79) which added structures and conventions heavily based on sporting events in order to generate easy laughs (79). The third wave, beginning in the late ‘80s and ‘90s, was characterized by groups responding to what they saw as the underrepresentation of non-white, female, and queer identities in first and second wave institutions (113). Seham’s wave model gives us a sense of the political and philosophical trajectory of improvised theatre, but also reveals the problem with relying on well-regarded texts from this era, such as *Truth in Comedy*. Texts like these are generally focused exclusively on one style of improvisation, and are entwined heavily with the politics of the improvisation community at the time they were written. *Truth in Comedy*, for example, was written by Halpern and other members of ImprovOlympic, an organization founded in many ways as a protest against Second City’s style of improvisation (Seham 39).

Keith Johnstone’s 1977 book *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* popularised the term “impro”, a term more commonly used in the UK than “improv”. Frost and Yarrow, both UK residents, use “impro” throughout *Improvisation in Drama* without ever explicitly defining its meaning, just as many American authors take for granted that readers will understand their use of “improv”. Hoopla, a comedy group from the UK, have written a blog post about their attempt to understand the difference between “improv” and “impro”, concluding that it seems to be nothing more than a geographic difference, with Europeans saying “impro” and North Americans saying

“improv” (Hoopla). For those familiar with both terms, “impro” may evoke the style and formats of Keith Johnstone, just as “improv” evokes the “Chicago-style”.

Jeanne Leep uses the term “theatrical improvisation” to refer to performances that use improvisational forms of performing (Leep 2). Besides using improvisation as the medium of performance, Leep stipulates that she is interested only in improvisation performed by actors for an audience. For Leep, there is a distinction between improvisation that is intended as performance and the use of improvisation as a training tool, or as a creation process, in which performers may be replaced by facilitators or teachers (6). I agree with this definition, because even when audience members join the performers as participants, they are still understood to belong to the audience. On the subject of participation, Leep limits the participation of the audience in theatrical improvisation to “suggestions rather than actions” (2). For our purposes, I am using the term “improvised theatre”³ to mean theatrical performance in which the performance is improvised, with improvisation understood to be derived from Chris Johnston, Frost, and Yarrow’s usage. I use “improvised theatre” rather than “theatrical improvisation” to cover a broader range of improvised performance than Leep’s definition allows for. Like Leep, however, I still only apply the term to improvisation performed for an audience, and not to its use as an “actor tool” or “process” (Leep 5).

1.2 What the Audience Wants –Theatre Explicitly Open to Amendment

Now that we better understand what improvised theatre is, we can ask the question of why it matters. That is, from a theatre and performance studies perspective, why is it relevant that a

³ While there has been some use of the term “Improvisational” to apply to theatre, I reserve this word for subjects which relate to improvisation but are not necessarily improvised. For example, a theory of improvisation may be an “improvisational theory”, but the theory is not being created spontaneously.

performance is improvised rather than scripted? In the first sentence of *Improvisation in Drama*, Frost and Yarrow state that “Improvisation is a particular mode of performance activity in which key characteristics of ‘performance’ can be precisely located” (Frost and Yarrow 1). Improvised performances are, according to Frost and Yarrow, made up “on the spot” or in other words, “explicitly open to amendment during performance” (1). All live performance is in theory “open to amendment” because something could always happen that forces the performers to alter their performance. Whether or not this is a desirable quality is another matter. In improvised theatre specifically, the performance is “explicitly open” to amendment, meaning the unexpected is both anticipated and invited. In addition, Frost and Yarrow make clear that this openness being explicit means that the audience is made aware of their power to amend the performance. Frost and Yarrow present the case that acting and improvisation always include each other, since acting can be seen as improvising within the framework of the rehearsed elements of the play (4). While it is certainly important that the line between improvised and non-improvised theatre is not always clearly defined, for a definition to be useful, we must be able to draw a line somewhere. While we can accept that all theatre includes a degree of spontaneity, improvised theatre makes its openness to amendment a vital element of the performance.

Let us further examine the line between the spontaneous nature of any live event and spontaneity as a vital element of an improvised show. An otherwise scripted performance might include a moment of call and response, which Jan Cohen-Cruz defines as an exchange “which foregrounds the many opportunities for interactivity between a theatre artist and the people involved” (Cohen-Cruz 1). I witnessed a recent example of such a “call and response” at Tarragon Theatre’s 2015 Production of *An Enemy of the People*. During the play’s town hall scene, in which the townspeople turn against Dr. Stockman, the floor was opened to audience

questions. Rick Roberts, as Peter Stockmann, deflected all of these questions through the use of smooth political jargon. While this did require improvising on his part, it also prevented the questions from having any real effect on the performance. At the Sunday matinee I attended, one woman stood up and asked, “What part of this did Ibsen write?” to which Roberts/Peter responded, “none of this!”. I took particular note of this moment in my paper about the production (McLean, *The Wrongful Majority* 10). This exchange was a single moment, in a single scene, in an otherwise scripted production, and after this scene no one in the audience spoke again. Roberts was improvising in this scene, but it was clear that the rest of the performance was not “open to amendment” (Frost and Yarrow 1). Improvised theatre makes it explicitly clear to the audience, through the mode of performance at least, if not through outright explanation, that the whole performance will be unique, open to the unexpected, and never to be repeated exactly the same way again. The performance is meant, in some sense, to belong to the audience more than the performers (C. Johnston 170). In improvised theatre, even moments between fellow performers, which could be scripted, are improvised. This means that interactions with the audience can create real, lasting effects on the performance because the performers are free to alter the rest of the performance based on these moments.

Thus a piece of improvised theatre that invites the audience to participate will always do so more fully than a piece of scripted theatre with the same amount of audience participation. This is not to say, that scripted theatre cannot involve the audience more than improvised theatre. The 2015 production of *Enemy of the People* features more audience participation than a wholly improvised show that does not invite the audience to participate at all. Improvised theatre involving little to no audience participation does exist. The Chicago based group TJ & Dave, comprised of TJ Jagadowski and Dave Pasquesi, performs a format in which the audience is

never asked for a suggestion. In this case, the performance is “explicitly open to amendment” in a more subtle way. Because Jagadowski and Pasquesi are improvising, they are more able and likely to change their performance based on any exterior factor the audience may add. Someone sneezing or leaving in the middle of the show, rather than being ignored, could lead to a moment on stage as one of the performers acknowledges the event or takes inspiration from it. Most commonly, the laughter of the audience will influence which elements of the performance the performers will focus on from moment to moment. This is why it is so important to talk about how and to what extent the audience participates in any piece of theatre, but especially improvised theatre.

1.3 An Overview of Sources

Ignoring sources from outside the theatre and performance world that touch upon improvisation only tangentially, we are left with a relatively small pool of material that deals with improvisation directly. Many writers who approach improvised theatre “for its own sake” are not theorists but gurus and teachers of improvisation, who may, or may not know why the techniques they are passing on have worked for them. Charna Halpern, Del Close and Kim Johnson’s *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation*, for example, has been a highly regarded text among improvisers since its 1994 publication. For anyone seeking an understanding of improvised theatre as a whole, however, the book is best considered as a historical account of the performance style of the ImprovOlympic. Mick Napier’s *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out* from 2004 is a more recent but no less inward looking and anecdote-filled example of this sort of writing. None of this is to say that there is nothing to be gained from these sources. However, we are interested in attaining a broader theoretical understanding of improvised theatre than many of these works are offering.

Keith Johnstone's *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* at first appears as another collection of anecdotes from the stage and the rehearsal hall, but there are few writers on improvised theatre who do not acknowledge Johnstone's importance to the field. The most compelling reason to study Johnstone is precisely because so many other authors have studied him, and hold him in high esteem. Rebecca Northan and other creators of *Blind Date* and *Undercover* were directly taught by Johnstone (Northan Questionnaire 1). Chris Johnston notes that there are few works published on improvisation that do not cite Keith Johnstone, because "his thesis has been proved correct time and again" (C. Johnston 9)⁴. In order to understand certain principles that other writers will assume familiarity with, we must read *Impro*.

Theatrical Improvisation by Jeanne Leep, published in 2008, is a fantastic introduction to the field, and defines commonly used terms. In her work, Leep creates a rubric on which different formats for improvised theatre can be mapped. This methodology is useful, but due to the innovation that has taken place in the ten years since this book was released, the rubric itself has become obsolete.

Chris Johnston's *The Improvisation Game*, published in 2011, owes much to Johnstone and Leep. Building on the conventional wisdom of the improvisers of the past, Johnston examines the underlying principles of improvised theatre in depth. A key part of this book is the concept of restrictions, which Johnston believes all improvised theatre is based upon. He identifies four categories of restriction and explains the ways they can affect a performance. Expanding on his theory, I will add a fifth restriction and represent the restrictions and the affected elements of the performance in a rubric.

⁴ The similarity of these authors' names is a recipe for confusion, and so I will include first names wherever I feel confusion is most likely to occur, and use first initials in all citations of the two.

Since my case studies were chosen precisely because they fall outside the understanding of current improvisational theories, I have also included some more general sources on theatre and performance studies. Erika Fisher-Lichte's *Theatre and Performance Studies* and Garry Izzo's *The Art of Play* assist in our understanding of audience participation. I synthesize their writings with Johnston's terminology to create a second rubric to map the audience's role in a given production of improvised theatre.

1.4 Keith Johnstone's *Impro*

Impro is divided into four chapters: status, spontaneity, narrative skills, and mask & trance.

These are broadly the categories into which all of Johnstone's teaching methods and ideas about improvisation fall. Johnstone also speaks throughout about the importance of saying "yes".

Johnstone explains that good improvisation happens when actors say yes to each other's ideas and develop action, and that actors who are afraid of risk say no to protect themselves (95). This idea is best known today as the rule of "yes, and", the act of accepting what another improviser has established in a scene and building on it (Leep 15).

Status, according to Johnstone, is best understood as something you do rather than something you have (K. Johnstone 36). He believes that all people have relative status to one another as social beings, and that we unconsciously play "games" to lower or raise our status (34-37). This is especially evident within friend groups since friends are people who "agree to play status games together" (37). Johnstone thinks that all people have a preferred status and that most people become "status specialists" (43). Improvisers must instead be "status experts" so that they can raise and lower their status with ease as needed (35-36). Being an expert rather than a specialist is all about self-awareness. According to Johnstone, understanding status removes the

need for “given circumstances” in acting (47). If an improviser understands their own status, and their character’s status, they are free to react.

Spontaneity, the second of Johnstone’s concepts, is about unlocking a creativity that Johnstone believes most people already possess, but have repressed through the education system or personal censorship, derived from a fear of being labeled abnormal⁵ (83). Johnstone believes that the secret to spontaneity is the willingness to be obvious. One way of explaining this, is for the improviser to commit to the first thought that enters their head instead of wasting time thinking of a “better” idea (K. Johnstone 88). Many of Johnstone’s examples include students who found more success when they stopped trying to be interesting and instead committed to ideas they originally perceived as boring.

The next concept is narrative skills. While Johnstone believes that the narrative content of scenes does reflect on the subconscious of the performer, this is not helpful to think about and makes students feel self-conscious (142). Instead, Johnstone says, “I tell improvisers to follow the rules and see what happens and not to feel in any way responsible for the material that emerges”. In other words, he believes that the content of any individual scene is impossible to predict, but we can understand and control narrative structure (111). By focusing on the structure of a performance, Johnstone says, improvisers can trick themselves into thinking content will take care of itself, putting their minds at ease to actually invent the content.

Finally, Johnstone discusses mask and his interpretation of various theories of “trance”, and how he applies this in his teaching. Johnstone uses character masks to encourage students to

⁵ This is similar to the concept in *Theatre of the Oppressed* of “the cop in the head” as described in *Aesthetics of the Oppressed*. “If an internal oppression exists”, writes Augusto Boal, “it is because it comes from some barracks or other, exterior to the subjectivity of the subject”. (Boal 5-6).

not censor themselves and to absolve them of responsibility for their on stage actions (K. Johnstone 144, 165). Johnstone's early work with masks was about "trying to induce trance states" (K. Johnstone 143). A "trance state" to Johnstone and his collaborators meant the experience of "split states of consciousness, or amnesia... being inhabited by the character" (151). While Johnstone is speaking of mask induced trance in a context far removed from the cultures and traditions that these ideas originate from, there may be some weight to his techniques. In *Theatrical Improvisation, Consciousness, and Cognition*, Clayton D. Drinko describes how actors trained in Johnstone's techniques often are so intently focused on their scene partner's "subtle status physicalizations" that they enter a more active state of perception (Drinko 72-73). This altered state of consciousness seems to be correlated to the inability of improvisers to recall performances in which they were very focused on the scene, similar to the trance state Johnstone speaks of (Drinko 105).

We know that most improvisers possess a familiarity with Johnstone's works, even if they do not base their work on his theories. For the purpose of better understanding improvised work in general, Johnstone's four chapters can be reduced to some fairly simple principles. First, even though Johnstone does not mention audience participation, he does establish status as the difference between improvisers and the average member of the audience. An audience member is likely to be a "status specialist", whereas improvisers are "status experts". To ensure a successful interaction, therefore, it is the improviser who bears the burden of altering their behaviour and not the audience member. A good format, therefore, should reduce the chance for an individual audience member to negatively affect the quality of the performance. Second, Johnstone's other three chapters all deal with ways to act without thinking too much about what one is doing. Spontaneity for Johnstone means not stopping to think of something clever. Good narrative

comes from focussing on overall structure rather than content, and trance is seen as an ideal frame of mind. Therefore, whatever structure is prepared by improvisers ahead of time becomes very influential. Designing the structure of a show is that last chance for improvisers to consider the “best” idea.

1.5 Jeanne Leep’s *Theatrical Improvisation*

For a better understanding of structure we can turn to *Theatrical Improvisation* by Jeanne Leep. This book serves as one of the best contemporary sources on improvisation in theatrical performance. Leep sets out concrete definitions and lists of principles for colloquial terms such as “short form” and “long form”, which many improvisers are familiar with. Despite their widespread use, these terms are no longer as descriptive and helpful as they once were. Leep’s text is still important to our discussion because the types of improvisation she describes are still practiced and well-known, so newer theories should also account for these.

Leep’s overarching metaphor for the book is the “Forest of the Arts”. She explains the arts as encapsulating dance, theatre, music, and other broad forms of expression. Within theatre lies improvisation (Leep 4). This positions improvisation as a technique than can be applied to multiple art forms. Within theatre, it represents a particular type of theatre, rather than something exclusive to theatre. Leep further divides what she calls “theatrical improvisation” into three applications. These are: improvisation as a process for non-actors, as a tool for actors without an audience, and improvisation as performance (4-5). Improvisation as performance within theatre is what Leep says is commonly referred to as “improv” or “improv comedy”. She defines this more specifically as being “performed primarily by actors with input from the audience primarily coming in the forms of suggestions rather than actions” (2). In other words, the audience’s primary role is to offer suggestions, and otherwise only to observe. The use of the word

“primarily” makes clear that any instances of more involved audience members would be the exception rather than the rule. This is challenged by the increasing prevalence of improvised theatre where the audience participates in other ways than by offering suggestions, and gives us reason to question the relevance of Leep’s other points. It is therefore important to touch on the three forms of improvised theatre Leep identifies, these being sketch-based, short form, and long form improvisation. We must separate what is still relevant to contemporary improvised theatre and what is not.

Leep defines sketch-based improv as a series of short scenes compiled together to create entertainment (89), and as a form of collective playwriting (12, 90). In sketch-based improv, scenes are created using improvisation and then refined through rehearsal before the show. Leep’s “actor tool branch” of the “improv tree” would seem to already cover this method of creation as a form of devised theatre. Leep explains the difference between sketch-based and other theatrical improvisation as being one of process versus product. In short and long form improvisation, the improvisation is both process and product, whereas in sketch-based, the improvisation is only the process (89). I do not believe sketch-based improvisation is an accurate name for what Leep is describing, and it does not belong in the same category as short and long form, based on the criteria she herself has proposed. It would be more accurate to call it improvisation-based sketch comedy. What may be controversial about this is that the sketch-based approach she describes is a format used frequently at Second City, the originator of North American improvised theatre as we think of it today (Leep 12, Seham xvii, C. Johnston xvii). To say that sketch-based improvisation is not really improvised theatre would be to say that Second City’s shows are not improvised theatre. I believe we can discount sketch-based improvisation from this point on.

Short form improvisation is also referred to by Leep as theatre games, improv games, or spot improvisation (for “on the spot”). Games, in this case, are defined by Leep as “scriptless scenes restrained by sets of rules on which all players agree” (24). According to Leep, the basic principle of short form is that the constraint of the rule or gimmick for the game stops the scene from developing, but leads to faster payoff in the form of laughter (24). This both leads to and necessitates the shorter length of such scenes. She identifies three kinds of short form, these being team competitive (25), individual competitive (37), and non-competitive (44). What distinguishes these forms from each other, is the presence of some form of scorekeeping, which itself may or may not matter (25). Leep believes that all short form is 1) inherently comedic, 2) maintains high audience participation throughout the show, 3) is fast paced, and 4) creates a scene within the rules of a game (50-52). While “high audience participation” is vague, this is closer to what we might call a definition that “does something” or is “usefully performative”, as performance theory scholar Diana Taylor puts it (Taylor 6-7). These principles would help us identify short form improvisation and give us a guide of sorts for its creation. Before I discuss these principles further, it is important to understand long form improvisation according to Leep, as the two forms are defined in part through their opposition to each other.

The inception of “long form improvisation” is an often recounted piece of American improv history. As Amy Seham describes in *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*, Del Close and Charna Halpurn were at the centre of a wave of improvisers who felt dissatisfied with the mainstream short form format of Second City and wanted to explore improv as a theatrical art form unto itself (Seham 39). From this desire for experimentation came the Harold, the first long form format. The Harold was invented at ImprovOlympic in Chicago as a format that could serve as an entire show or at least the main event in a larger showcase (Leep 62). In a Harold the

improvisers solicit a suggestion from the audience and play an opening game to brainstorm ideas for the coming scenes. The players then perform a series of relatively short scenes, usually two to five minutes. These scenes are designated 1A, 1B, and 1C in written materials such as *Truth in Comedy* (Halpern et al 85). These scenes do not connect to each other, except in that they are influenced by the same initial suggestion. A second group game is then played, which may, or may not connect in some way narratively or thematically to the scenes. Following this are scenes 2A, 2B, and 2C. Each continues the story of the first round of scenes. Another group game is played and then a final scene is played to bring the A, B, and C storylines together (Leep 62-63). Following the Harold, other formats for long form improvisations have been created. Leep believes all long form formats adhere to six principles. These are: 1) the themes or stories take time to develop; 2) the goal is to entertain thematically or narratively; 3) there is a focus on truth; 4) there is a goal of establishing a “group mind” amongst the ensemble; 5) audience participation is intermediate, and; 6) the challenge is to find the game within the scene (83-87).

If we compare the principles of short and long form, principles four and six, respectively, are of particular relevance. In short form, the focus is on the improvisers struggling to establish a scene within the rules of the game they are playing. In long form, players are given plenty of time to establish and explore these elements, so the challenge is to find the “game of the scene”. Leep defines this sort of game, as players agreeing to a set of circumstances, echoing Johnstone’s explanation of agreeing to play status games (K. Johnstone 37). This demonstrates that short and long form improvisation strive to include the same elements but do it from opposite directions. Leep believes that the longer run time of long form is a symptom of themes and stories taking more time to develop, rather than a principle in itself. In other words, long form is “long” because it puts a focus on developing stories at a slower pace, and thus needs to take longer. We

can follow this logic further and see that many of the principles are symptomatic and not inherent, such as the fast pace and comedic tendencies of short form. There are principles on the short form list that could just as easily apply to long form, and vice versa, such as a “focus on truth” and “a goal of establishing group mind”. Johnstone tells us that both of these are essential to all improvisation (K. Johnstone 86, 99). This binary of short form and long form is not a useful way to talk about contemporary improvised theatre. With that said, Leep does identify that there are different ways to approach an improvised performance. Improvisers can establish the rules of a game and improvise within those rules, or they may explore thematic or narrative elements and let “games of the scene” emerge organically. We also have the notion of audience participation being higher, or at least more frequent in some formats than in others (Leep 86). While Leep equates short form, or what I would redefine as “game based improvisation” with higher audience participation, I do not believe this pairing is the norm in contemporary improvisation. Sometimes the rules of the game will be more important, and sometimes the narrative structure will take precedence. We can conclude that all improvised theatre includes the characteristics of both classical short and long form formats to some degree. As well, the audience’s level of involvement may be high or low, though Leep does not give us any metrics to measure this by. We need a new terminology to better discuss the differences in structure from one format to another, and Leep does provide us with a model that we can use as a base for our own method of analysis, what she refers to as the long form rubric.

Leep believes that detailed classification is not something that typically factors into the creation process of improvised theatre, but does function as a tool for understanding and explaining long form improvisation “after the fact” (77). However, she also believes that those new to the art form will often need such classifications as “a way of sorting the many formats”

that more seasoned performers may take for granted. Indeed, most improvisers will learn established formats before inventing their own, as was Chris Hannay's experience in moving from short games, to the Harold, to creating *Quest Friends Forever* (Hannay Questionnaire 1). Leep's study of existing formats led her to create a rubric to categorize them, seen in Figure 1.1. This shows the rubric as it appears in *Theatrical Improvisation*, and the examples contained in the rubric are Leep's own. While Leep does describe each of these formats in more detail, it is not necessary for our discussion of the rubric itself.

Long Form Rubric		Structure: Fluid	Structure: Segmented
Content: Thematic	Unmixed	Montage, Go	Advanced Montage, Ant Jam
	Mixed	Harold, Monologue	
Content: Narrative	Mixed	Soap Opera, La Ronde	
	Unmixed	Sheila's Instant Odyssey's Mythic Hero	

Figure 1.1: Long Form Rubric from *Theatrical Improvisation*

Structure can be fluid or segmented, referring to whether the reality of the scene is broken after the scene has begun. In fluid long form, a suggestion may be taken at the beginning of the show, but once the improvisation has begun, no additional suggestions are taken. In segmented long form, performers will return to the audience for input repeatedly, but the suggestions will be worked into the existing theme or narrative (75). Content can be thematic or narrative. This refers to whether the goal of a long form is to tell a story or to explore a theme. Unlike structure, which is binary, Leep says that there is a continuum within this part of the model (75). A Harold is structurally fluid and not segmented, and its content is thematic. However, it can have elements of narrative and is more narrative than a typical Montage, a style in which a series of scenes, which may, or may not be related, are performed based off of an initial suggestion (71). Leep clarifies, that while two Harolds may occupy different positions on the rubric, a typical

Harold will tend towards the position she has indicated (77). Perhaps the most interesting part of this rubric is the empty bottom right corner. The structure of the rubric suggests that a segmented structure with narrative content is theoretically possible, but Leep has no examples and leaves this unaddressed. A limitation with this rubric, therefore, is that what qualifies as “segmented structure” is very specific, and “fluid structure” is defined very broadly. Leep seems to define structure based on when the audience input takes place, and does not mention other factors, such as what form that input might take. What I think the rubric is well suited to show, is that some formats restrict the narrative more than others. Narrative restrictions are therefore similar to games, because they are a predetermined element that the improvisers work within. These predetermined elements would form the structure which Johnstone advises the improvisers to focus on in order to facilitate spontaneity. This idea actually seems to be expressed by multiple authors in different fields, using different terminology.

Mark Rosewater, a prominent game designer and former television writer, has written about the lessons from improvised theatre he has taken into his other careers (Rosewater, *Improv-ing*). Rosewater is also known for his often repeated phrase, “restrictions breed creativity”, believing that restrictions aid in creative thought (Rosewater, *Rules of the Game*). Kenn Adams is an American improviser and author of *How to Improvise a Full-Length Play*. Adams trained with a company originally named TheatreSports New York, which based its teaching on Keith Johnstone. Adams calls improvisation a “constant battle between spontaneity and structure” (Adams 2). He believes that even the “simplest game” works by imposing restrictions upon spontaneity to shape it into a purposeful form (2). This may involve restricting the way actors can move, how many words they can speak, or any other rule that forms the basis for an “improv game” (2). While Adams’ book is specifically about improvising a well-made

play, he explains that this narrative structure is just one shape for the spontaneity of the actors to fit into. The shape that restricts the spontaneity of the improvisers is, Adams says, what makes improvisation into art.

1.6 Chris Johnston's *The Improvisation Game*

The idea of restrictions as the driving force behind improvised structure is expanded on by Chris Johnston in *The Improvisation Game*. There is, Johnston says, always a question of how much structure a piece has. On one end of the spectrum of structure, he identifies what he calls “open score”. Open score improvisation can be more easily identified in music and dance, where performers simply play or dance without any agreed upon structure at all (C. Johnston 243-244). In music, harmony and rhythm are avoided and emphasis is put on the relationship between the musicians. The performers’ success is determined by their shared vocabulary of technique and personal chemistry, allowing for trust and risk taking. Johnston acknowledges that this kind of totally open structure is less common in dramatic improvisation, but possible in theory (244). Closed, or partly-closed, structures are more common. Even if there is no structure for the narrative, any agreed upon element, such as a location, or a game to be played, is a kind of structure. This helps give the improvisation some focus, since “by creating parameters, the improvisation is oriented around agreed points of reference” (245). Other ways of structuring dramatic improvisation include a determined location (the world of the story), roles (pre-determined facts about characters), and narrative (some planned events). The Harold, with its pre-determined pattern of scenes, would be an example of a closed structure with pre-determined narrative elements. A typical Harold would also involve two to three games, which may be predetermined. Johnston calls this kind of restriction “the essence of structure” (247). Similar to Rosewater’s notion of restrictions leading to creativity, Johnston says that restrictions do not

limit freedom, but rather guide improvisers into “tightly confined” areas where material “resonates more effectively” (C. Johnston 247). What Johnston shows us, is that predetermined locations, roles, and narrative elements are restrictions the same way that games are.

Johnston identifies four elements of a performance that can be subject to restrictions. These are space, time, physicality, and speech (248). Space restrictions may involve literally dividing up the stage into zones. This could involve predetermined settings or areas corresponding to different genres. Time restrictions can be built into the game like in the game *Death in a Minute*, which allows only a minute to perform the scene (*Improv Encyclopedia*), but it could also be an individual restriction, such as acting like you are in a hurry. It could be as simple as knowing that the relationship between the characters must be established in the first scene. Physicality restrictions could include not being able to move one’s head or wearing a costume piece that inhibits movement. Johnston does not give examples on a larger scale, but there are many games, such as *Sit-Stand-Lie*, which require multiple performers to follow the same or related physical restrictions (*Improv.ca*). Speech restrictions involve enforced speech patterns, rules dictating when to talk, what kind of sentences to use, how many words can be used in a sentence, and so on. Together these four elements can both describe the events occurring on stage and serve as instructions for the performers.

1.7 Building a Rubric for Restrictions

Based on Chris Johnston’s concepts we can now create a rubric to describe improvised theatre formats by defining their restrictions and listing their effects. This rubric forms the basis for my analysis, and as I am assigning new importance to Johnston’s terms, I will capitalize them from this point on when used in the context of the rubric and my own analysis. Location, Narrative, Roles, and Games form a list of Restrictions, and, Space, Time, Speech, and Physicality form a

list of four elements that can be affected by each Restriction. With specific elements that can be observed within improvised theatre, we can create a rubric, similar to Leep's, to visualize the interactions Johnston explains. This rubric is shown in Figure 1.2.

RESTRICTIONS	Location	Roles	Narrative	Games
ELEMENTS				
Physicality				
Space				
Speech				
Time				

Figure 1.2: Restrictions and Elements

To illustrate the use of the rubric, I will use Johnston's example of an improvised show called *Bassprov*. The Restrictions for this show are shown in the filled in rubric in Figure 1.3. In *Bassprov*, two men go fishing. The show is always set in a boat, with a conversation between these two men (245, 260). Before beginning, the two performers obtain suggestions from the audience to inspire their conversation. The format can thus be described as having Location and Role Restrictions. I have indicated these on the rubric. We can then look for examples of how these Restrictions affect each of the elements. For example, we may note that the actors' Physicality is affected because they are confined to a boat which they cannot leave.

RESTRICTIONS	Location	Roles	Narrative	Games
ELEMENTS	A boat	Two fishing buddies		
Space	Only one section of the stage is used			
Time	Cannot cut to other places or times			
Speech		Tell personal stories		
Physicality	Cannot leave boat, must remain sitting	Old man physicality		

Figure 1.3: Restriction Rubric for *Bassprov*

Johnston's company had another format called *The Visitor*, in which they would ask the audience to pick two actors and a relationship for them. They would then perform three scenes. In the first, they would establish the relationship. In the second, a third character would enter to create a complication. In the final scene, there would be a resolution (260). In the case of *The Visitor*, the audience is aware of the predetermined Roles, but not the pre-determined Narrative structure. By seeing the show multiple times, and noting the way Time and Space are affected by the audience's suggestion, one would be able to determine that a second Restriction was at play. The choice of whether to inform the audience about a given Restriction can be incorporated into the rubric as well.

Johnston explains that any Restriction could last for a moment, a scene, or a whole play (248). Similarly, a Restriction could apply to a single performer, multiple performers, or all the performers (249). If we accept that the Duration and the Number of Players together describe the "scope" of a Restriction, we can incorporate them into our rubric as well. Adding audience awareness, scope of Duration, and scope of Players into the rubric is shown in Figure 1.4.

RESTRICTIONS	Location	Roles	Narrative	Games
Aud. Awareness				
Scope				
Duration				
Players				
Affected Elements				
Space				
Time				
Speech				
Physicality				

Figure 1.4: Restrictions Rubric with Scope and Audience Awareness

What is not accounted for in this rubric is something that improvisation theorists rarely touch on, namely the material qualities of production. Many contemporary improvised theatre productions include theatrical lighting or sound. Some include costumes, whether in conjunction with predetermined characters or as a collection of varied costumes to be used as desired. Even improvised theatre with none of these elements still takes place in a physical space, which will itself restrict the spontaneity of the improvisers. Whether a performance takes place in a bar setting with food and alcohol, or in a theatre with a proscenium stage, will restrict the performance. For example, improvisers in a bar are free to take inspiration from what would otherwise be the distractions of a crowded or noisy space. All of these serve as a Restriction of the performance. If one of these elements is not present, the performance is still restricted by its absence. For example, not having control over the lighting means the performance cannot make use of blackouts. This may inspire the improvisers to describe lighting changes to the audience, or to find another way to transition from scene to scene. Therefore, I believe a fifth Restriction must be added to our model beyond the four Johnston identifies, which I will term Materials.

RESTRICTIONS	Location	Roles	Narrative	Games	Materials
Aud. Awareness					
Scope					
Duration					
Players					
Affected Elements					
Space					
Time					
Speech					
Physicality					

Figure 1.5: Restriction Rubric Final Version

The boxes in the rubric are blank for a reason because it is important to be able to fill in whatever actually occurs at a production. However, in general I expect certain descriptors to be most common. For audience awareness, the audience may be aware of a Restriction because they imposed it through suggestions (e.g. a location is asked for before the scene), because they are informed of it (e.g. the performers explain that their scenes will all take place in a boat), or they may be unaware of the Restriction (e.g. the show is always set in a boat, but the audience is not aware unless they see the format more than once). For both elements of Scope, Johnston identifies three possibilities. Duration, as discussed, may be a moment, a scene, or a whole play. For shorter formats, there may be little distinction between a scene and a whole game, but this will depend on the overall length of the show. Restrictions can apply to one, multiple, or all improvisers. In the rubric, I use Johnston's term Players. Players should be understood to mean only those improvisers who could potentially participate in the moment, scene, or play. Some Games, for example, limit the number of improvisers who can participate. If only two improvisers are playing the game, but others are waiting in the wings for the next game, we need only note the Restriction applying to the on stage improvisers. Restrictions that apply to multiple players could refer to a specific number of players, or any player who meets a certain condition, such as "everyone in the boat". Space, Time, Speech, and Physicality are more complex, and should be recorded more descriptively.

While I have stated that I am looking primarily at shows that use audience participation in some way other than suggestions, it should be noted how suggestions interact with Restrictions. This is simpler for some suggestions than for others. When an improviser asks for a suggestion of a "non-geographic location" to begin the scene, this directly informs the Restriction of Location. I call this a "direct suggestion" for this reason. An "indirect

suggestions”, by contrast, would be a suggestion that does not directly inform a Restriction, but inspires the improvisers in some other way. For example, a suggestion of “an object” may be used to inform the Location of a scene, or the Narrative may be the origin story of that object. The object “fishing pole”, for example, could inspire a Location for the scene, such as a boat, a lake, or a bait store. However, it could also inspire a Role, with the improvisers creating the character of a fishing master. The improvisers may have predetermined which Restriction the suggestion will apply to and how, or they may not have. For example, they may have an agreed upon Narrative Restriction to always tell the origin story of the suggested object. In such a case, the suggestion’s use is predetermined, but the suggestion is still indirect, as it is not directly supplying the Narrative Restriction by itself. If the improvisers asked for “a type of narrative” and received “origin story”, the suggestion would be direct. The question of what kind of suggestion to ask for may be worth considering in greater detail for improvisers devising a new format, but being able to put a name to these categories is enough for our purpose of analysing existing formats.

1.8 The Audience and the Autopoietic-Feedback-Loop

Suggestions are only one way the audience can participate in improvised theatre. Earlier in this chapter I discussed the importance of improvised theatre being “open to amendment during performance. This is easy to observe in games in which the audience literally suggests Restrictions for the performers, such as Party Quirks. What are the less overt ways the audience can affect the performers, though? How is the audience affected by the performers? Let us take a step back and consider these questions within all theatre, not just improvised theatre.

In *Theatre and Performance Studies*⁶, Erika Fischer-Lichte quotes Max Hermann's definition of performance, "a game in which everyone, actors and spectators, participates" (Fischer-Lichte 18). Fischer-Lichte calls this definition a "starting point for thinking about performance" (18), highlighting the importance of learning from the past while looking to the future. Hermann's definition, and Fischer-Lichte's analysis, point to live theatre's fundamental need for an audience and the complex nature of the performers' relationship with that audience. Fischer-Lichte calls this back-and-forth encounter the "autopoietic feedback loop" (20). The audience at a live performance exhibits all manner of "reactions", which the performers "perceive" and react to by becoming more or less intense, or even by improvising new lines (19). Audience and performer thus both contribute to the performance, but there is still a clear divide between them. Depending on the conditions of performance, this relationship may be more or less obvious, but it is always present. Fischer-Lichte believes that even though not all performances are designed to encourage audience participation, the autopoietic feedback loop is still present in all performances; it is simply less pronounced in some (20). As Chris Johnston puts it, even in scripted theatre "the alternations may be subtle but they do occur" (C. Johnston 168). Johnston says that the "notion of asking for suggestions" accomplishes several goals, including demonstrating that the performance is genuinely improvised, stopping the performers from planning, building a shared status with the audience, creating restrictions, and giving the audience a sense of ownership over the performance (170). Asking for a suggestion is thus one way in which improvisers can foreground the autopoietic feedback loop and demonstrate to the audience that the performance is truly 'open to amendment'. Frost and Yarrow expand on the importance of the audience and this feedback-loop. The process of improvisation involves not

⁶ While Fischer-Lichte discusses the autopoietic feedback loop in *The Transformative Power of Performance* (2008), I have chosen to reference the more recent 2014 publication.

just “an active performer and a passive spectator” but a spectator who is “active, too – more than usually so when watching something improvised” (Frost and Yarrow 209). In improvised theatre especially, “the audience does not only ‘read’ the performance – in a very real sense it ‘writes’ it, too” (209-210).

In the absence of asking for suggestions, how do audiences ‘write’ improvised theatre? Keith Johnstone notably acquired distaste for suggestions after creating TheatreSports, which relied heavily on them. He believed that improvisers allowed the audience to dictate the content of scenes to an unhealthy degree, and that scenes too often became banal, since the audience was attempting to be funny, rather than letting the improvisers find the humour in the moment (C. Johnston 172-173). Johnstone was not alone in this thinking. Coming out of classes in Chicago’s improv theatres, David Pasquesi and TJ Jagodowski have built a career on a style of improvisation that does not involve any audience suggestions.

In an article for the December 2014 issue of *American Theatre*, Matthew Love details how TJ & Dave begins with the actors on stage in silence, and how they discover a shared idea of a scene based on the first cues they pick up from each other (Love 30). The essence of improvisation found here may not be in the interaction with the audience at all, but in the foregrounding of the autopoietic feedback loop in a different way. Nothing is assumed and nothing is prepared, and they are open to anything. This follows Johnstone’s notion of assuming an offer has already been made (K. Johnstone 99). The improvisers look for small things to respond to, rather than inventing something, and thus appear “telepathic” because they are accepting everything so quickly (99). The duo has eliminated the gift of the suggestion. The audience is no more involved in the autopoietic feedback loop than at any live performance, but the performers have foregrounded the presence of this relationship with the audience through

their interaction with each other. Despite the lack of suggestions, *TJ & Dave* is rarely questioned as being ‘real improv’ by other improvisers (Love 32). At the other end of the spectrum are performances that invite the audience to participate beyond just giving suggestions, sometimes becoming a part of the performance themselves.

Gary Izzo, author of *The Art of Play*, is a pioneer in performances that interact directly with the audience. Izzo believes that when you are “welcomed into a place where you are not judged, where you cannot make a mistake or be inferior, where you are considered special just the way you are, your mind reacts as if to fond memories” (Izzo 17). He calls this space the *temenos*, a Greek term for a sacred circle. For Izzo, the *temenos* of theatre is the space marked off physically or mentally for play (9). Izzo acknowledges that many styles of theatre are inclusive of the audience (21), but lists six styles that are particularly inclusive. These are: intimate theatre, audience participatory theatre, variety entertainment, improvisational comedy, street theatre, and interactive theatre. Intimate theatre is simply theatre in which the production displays an awareness of the audience at times, but after these “breaches”, the production continues “undisturbed in its pre-planned order”. In audience participatory theatre, the audience is invited to cheer or boo characters or even to go on stage to “perform some integral action” (22). Outside these moments, the performance is still scripted. Variety entertainment includes vaudeville routines and performances of skill, such as magic (23). Improvisational comedy, as defined by Izzo, refers to “a particular witty ensemble of comics [taking] suggestions from the audience as variables in improvised scenes”. He speaks of games designed to create laughter and says that the form is “participatory only insofar as the audience suggests what may happen on the stage”. On the subject of actually inviting an audience member on stage, Izzo says that, since “production of laughter is the only goal...a material participant from the audience would hold the

show back” (24). Street theatre is a broad category which Izzo uses to refer to any performance outside a traditional theatre space. Interactive theatre is Izzo’s own creation, and the primary subject of *The Art of Play*. In interactive theatre, the audience is invited into the “temenos” and becomes as responsible for the drama as the actor. Interactive theatre is largely improvised, as “structures are prepared and honed as with any art, but the medium of interactive theatre is the spontaneous” (25). The actors in interactive theatre encourage and teach the audience members to improvise by interacting with them in character (26). Izzo’s views of improvisational comedy are obviously narrow, but as he was writing in 1997, they do not represent a currently dominant way of thinking. Izzo is familiar with more nuanced applications of improvisation, saying that ideas and techniques that make improvisation work, have always existed since theatre’s inception, and only their application has changed (135). He distinguishes ensemble improvisation (which he describes similarly to how Johnstone describes improvisation in general), from ComedySportz and TheatreSports (135). What Izzo calls improvisational comedy, is what Leep will later call short form improv, and which we can now understand as simply improvised theatre with game based Restrictions. Izzo’s believes that improvised theatre cannot effectively incorporate the audience beyond the suggestion. This is a more rigid definition than Leep’s. Of course, Izzo’s *The Art of Play* was published in 1997, about 10 years before *Theatrical Improvisation*. By looking at these early definitions from Izzo, we can see that while the importance of improvisation as a skill has been acknowledged for a long time, improvised theatre as a collection of distinct styles has been slower to gain acceptance.

Izzo’s discussion of including the audience in the *temenos*, or sacred playing space, brings me to a question that I wish to address. Based on everything I have discussed thus far, it may seem as though audience participation is to be considered a virtue, the more active the

audience the better. This is of course not necessarily true, as demonstrated by TJ & Dave. However, it also implies a potentially problematic binary between an active and “non-active” audience. In *The Emancipated Spectator*, Jacques Rancière addresses what he believes to be a privileging of acting over viewing and calls for an emancipation of the spectator. Emancipation to Rancière means the blurring of the line between those who act and those who look (13). Improvised theatre can certainly blur this line, but often does so in a way that upholds the privileging of on stage action over the active interpretation of spectators. Rancière makes the case that we should not be trying to turn spectators into actors, but rather acknowledging that spectators are not a passive collective but individuals who are always thinking their own autonomous thoughts (17). When looking at my four case studies I prioritized being able to describe the different forms of explicit action on behalf of the audience that are possible within improvised theatre. Simply keep in mind that this falls inside a larger web of audience “activity” which may include less obvious but no less important ways of engaging with improvised theatre.

The shows I have chosen as case studies for this thesis demonstrate that improvised theatre can include many ways of involving the audience beyond the suggestion. What is missing is a second rubric to explain the audience’s degree of participation in more depth. To measure the audience’s participation, I use four metrics to create a new rubric. My choice of terminology for these metrics is in part based on Chris Johnston’s language, to provide consistency between this rubric and the Restriction rubric. The concepts themselves are my own, based on all the improvised theatre I have read about, seen, or performed. The categories we will use to measure the audience’s participation are the Number of audience participants, the Method by which they participate, the Agency with which they participate, and the Duration for which they participate.

Using the same language as the Restriction rubric, we can say that the Number of participants may be one, multiple, or all of the audience. For our purposes, this refers to the Number of audience members who have the opportunity to participate, whether or not they make use of it. For example, when the entire audience is asked to shout a suggestion, not every member of the audience will necessarily respond.

The Method of participation can be a suggestion, storytelling, or performance. Storytelling refers to an audience member telling a true story from their life, which the improvisers will use for inspiration. Performance refers to an audience member entering the play space and performing in the scene or play, as in interactive theatre.

Agency may be prompted, which denotes that the involved audience members only respond directly to questions, or other prompts such as “what is an item I might have in my hand?” or “whenever I point to you please say the first word that pops into your head”. The other end of the spectrum, as displayed on the rubric, is free continuous. This indicates participation that is limited only by the audience participants themselves. If they wished, they would be allowed to participate without interruption⁷. Free segmented refers to a middle ground, between these two levels of Agency. In such a situation, the audience participant would be given certain windows of uninterrupted Agency. For example, they might be allowed to participate three times over the course of the scene or play, but when these moments occur, and for how long, are for the audience participant to decide. Participants may be prompted on when to begin participation, but the Duration of each segment of participation is up to them. Any case in which the audience

⁷While such a case may be unlikely, my goal is for the terminology to communicate what is theoretically possible rather than what is simply common practice.

participant is not being prompted, but is not fully in control of when they are able to participate, would be a case of free segmented Agency.

Duration of participation is similar to Restrictions in being a moment, a scene, or a whole play. A momentary Duration is typical when suggestions are asked for. There is a grey area when discussing participation for a scene, because it is relative to the length of the entire performance. I consider a scene to mean one scene within a longer format, or a single Game. During a Harold, for example, the audience participant would need to be participating for all of scene 1A, or for all of one of the group games. In a show comprised entirely of games, like a taping of *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, each game is essentially a scene in the episode. A whole play, therefore, could also refer to such an event, even though it is not a “play” in the traditional sense. The rubric is shown in Figure 1.6.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION METRICS			
NUMBER	One	Multiple	All
METHOD	Suggestion	Storytelling	Performance
AGENCY	Prompted	Free Segmented	Free Continuous
DURATION	Moment	Scene	Whole Play

Figure 1.6: Rubric Showing Audience Participation Metrics

Notice that each row of the rubric presents a choice between three distinct options, with options “increasing” in whatever metric is being measured, from left to right. A performance with all the rightmost options selected might resemble Garry Izzo’s interactive theatre, with everyone in the audience welcome to take on a character at any time (Izzo 25). This is what Chris Johnston would term a more “open score”. Turning all the dials to the left, so to speak, would describe a typical “improv comedy performance”, where a single audience member is

asked to provide a single suggestion, but who otherwise does not participate (Izzo 24, Leep 2).

The options between these extremes (multiple, storytelling, free segmented, and scene) are meant to communicate that the left and right options are poles on a spectrum. While the centre space could of course be left blank, I find that having to place a performance either at one of the ends or in the middle, is a useful exercise. I encourage practitioners and scholars alike to think about how far to the right, or left, within each column, a performance may lie, and what might happen if it were to move slightly in one direction or another. With that said, it is important, when first considering a performance, to locate it more simply as belonging in one of the three columns.

CHAPTER 2: BLIND DATE

2.1 From Stood Up to Stand Out, the Origin of *Blind Date*

Blind Date had its first incarnation in 2009 as part of the World Stage at Harbourfront Centre in Toronto. As Northan reveals in her questionnaire, it “came about as a bit of an accident” as she initially had no idea what she was going to perform during her 10 minute set. “I was on my way to meet with the costume advisor”, she remembers, “when I turned a corner, and the idea for *Blind Date* thumped into my head, fully formed” (Northan , Questionnaire 1). In this original version, Northan took on the character of Mimi, the French clown, who has been stood up on a blind date and invites an audience member on stage to be her new Date. At the end of the date, a second clown, meant to be the original Date, shows up late. After the first performance the second clown was cut, based on “overwhelming, unanimous feedback” (Northan 1). After performing the show that summer, Northan remained curious about what would happen if “we took the time to know the guy...” and she took the concept to Loose Moose Theatre in Calgary for development (Northan 1). Loose Moose Theatre was where Northan was first introduced to improvisation as “a practice with rules, philosophy, etc.” in 1988, when she volunteered at the theatre in exchange for free classes and the chance to perform (Northan 1). Loose Moose was founded by Keith Johnstone, who still taught there while Northan was taking classes. According to Northan, the teachings of Johnstone and Dennis Cahill “profoundly affected” her views on traditional theatre throughout her BFA program at the University of Calgary (Northan 1). While Northan was able to develop *Blind Date* into a full show at Loose Moose, after touring for a year, the show “was starting to deflate in some way” (Northan 1). Her stage manager, Sean Bowie, initiated a conversation about what the production was attempting to achieve each night, and from this emerged the notions of “take care of the Date, make him look good, make sure he’s

having a nice time” (Northan 1) as the core of the show. Northan expands on these notions in her TEDx Talk, saying “If I think about taking care of him, I’m less terrified” (Northan TEDx, 8:18-8:23). By focusing on her scene partner, in this case the Date chosen from the audience, Northan is managing her own fear response, focusing her attention outward to enter a different state of mind. This is similar to how Drinko describes the effects of Johnstone’s spontaneity and trance exercises (Drinko 72, 105). What makes this, not only a successful application of performance techniques, but a recipe for a successful improvised show is that this also directly contributes to the confidence of the Date and the progression of the romantic narrative arc that the audience is expecting.

In the same TEDx talk, Northan explains that focusing on one’s partner is not only a rule of improvisation, but something people do naturally when they are in love (Northan TEDx, 9:58-10:22). In other words, a date that is going well looks a lot like good improvisation, and vice versa. If we are speaking of what the audience is expecting, or what has been advertised to them, we must discuss whether what is being advertised is in fact improvised theatre, or something else. As Chris Johnston comments, all live theatre has an element of variation from performance to performance, and marketing theatre is “about commodification of a process that actually resists commodification” (C. Johnston 167). The commodification of improvised theatre is therefore even harder, as improvised theatre is seen as even less consistent. *Blind Date*, though, is always about a date with Mimi. While the specifics are different every night, the premise remains constant enough. Mimi brings a Date on stage and explains that they will put on a play about going on a date, but he does not need to behave as a character, he should simply be himself. They begin in a café, get stopped by a cop on the drive home, and end up at Mimi’s uncle’s apartment. After the first kiss, Mimi calls a Time Out and asks to jump forward five

years. At this point she is revealed to be pregnant and a birth occurs on stage. For Northan, the show was still improvised theatre, just a different kind than the kind she was used to performing. After a performance in Winnipeg, she recalls an audience member asking “what kind of theatre is this?” When she replied, “well, it’s improv”, the audience member insisted, “No - it’s something more than that...and you need to find a name for it, so you can claim the genre, and eventually you can teach it” (Northan Questionnaire 1). This is where the name Spontaneous Theatre originated, and it is meant to represent both the improvised aspect of the work and the more conventional theatre elements. This plays into the assumptions that scripted theatre is not spontaneous, and that improvisation is not theatre. I do believe the name is apt, since *Blind Date* is spontaneous and it is theatre. I also argue that it is not, as the Winnipeg audience member said, something more than improvisation. It is certainly innovative, definitely a departure from what was being attempted before it, and obviously a success. What that audience member demonstrates, is that no one believed this kind of work could emerge from improvisation alone. If one looks at the history of work written about improvisation, this is certainly the impression one gets. In practice though, the tools to create *Blind Date* are tools that improvised theatre had at its disposal all along. With this show, Northan illuminated a corner of improvisation’s toolbox that had remained largely unexplored, which I have explored further.

2.2 What Do You Call This? –Planning Versus Scripting

The question of whether *Blind Date* specifically, and Spontaneous Theatre more generally, constitute improvisation or theatre presents, I think, a false dichotomy. Nevertheless, it is one Northan has grappled with. She recounts, “I’ve been told by other theatre professionals, “What you do isn’t ‘real theatre’”, and I’ve been told by improvisers, “What you do isn’t ‘real improv’.” (Northan Questionnaire 5). Not only are practitioners on both sides of the scripted-

improvised divide suspicious of this seeming middle-ground, but neither seems ready to claim it as their own. Northan admits that this work is “far more structured than regular, long-form improvisation. We walk a tightrope between scripted theatre and pure improvisation” (Northan Questionnaire 5). This notion requires unpacking on multiple fronts. Since *Blind Date* has certain elements that are reused, does the show constitute “scripted” drama? More traditional longer improvised formats, such as *Bassprov*, have pre-determined elements after all. In this context, I believe Northan situates *Blind Date* along a spectrum of open and closed structures, with *Blind Date* being more structured in its narrative, locations, and characters than a more open format, like the Harold or Montage, described in *Theatrical Improvisation* (Leep 76). Restrictions allow us to understand *Blind Date* as belonging to exactly such a spectrum. *Blind Date* features restricted Locations, Roles, and Narrative elements. It features some additional rules of performance, like the Time Out, which can be understood as a Game. Finally, it is restricted and shaped by its Material elements as well.

2.3 All’s Fair in Love and Improv – The Structure of *Blind Date*

I have written before about the nuances of Northan’s performance and how the Date is guided through the process of learning to be a good improviser and a relatable romantic hero in my paper *Love, Improvisation, and Controlled Trance: Status, Spontaneity, and Mask in Rebecca Northan’s Blind Date*. In this paper I examine *Blind Date* through the lens of Johnstone’s notions of Status, Spontaneity, and Mask. If we remember Johnstone’s distinction between the status specialist and the status expert, we can see that Northan chooses a low status specialist to be the Date, looking for audience members who seem “reluctantly playful” (Northan Questionnaire 6). Northan herself is a status expert, positioning herself wherever she must in the relationship to raise the Date’s status in the course of the play (McLean, *Love* 7). This encourages spontaneity in

a way Drinko describes as “creating an environment where they have less fear” (Drinko 69). After the Date has gained enough confidence to initiate the first kiss, Mimi will call a Time Out and explain that the story will now jump five years into the future. The Date is allowed to dictate important details, like whether or not the couple is married. The Date then re-enters the playing area to get ready for bed, while Mimi converses with the Date from off stage before entering to reveal that she is now pregnant. In my previous analysis of this moment, I comment that while disrupting the status relationship between herself and the Date is a risk, “by invoking the strong positive emotion of ‘love’, [Northan] attempts to ensure quality improvisation” (McLean, *Love* 11). The play ends with a birth, using a baby doll as a prop. In *Love, Improvisation and Controlled Trance* I discuss, that while the red nose worn by Mimi can be seen as a kind of Mask, the true mask-object of *Blind Date* may really be the baby doll (McLean, *Love* 15). The baby is used to induce a child-like state of mind, an object through which to view the world and evoke a love-response in the audience. To put it simply, the presence of the baby gives permission for the Date and the audience to experience the “benevolence and tenderness” that Johnstone believes people repress (K. Johnstone 200).

In order to better understand the structure of the entire show, and how many different elements are at work in this one moment, we can use our Restriction rubric from Chapter 1. Figure 2.1 depicts a performance of *Blind Date* in June of 2017, at Tarragon Theatre. The rubric allows us to look at the production as a whole more easily. We can see how the Time Out functions as a Game that serves as a contrast with the unrestricted action of the scenes. The jump forward five years, can be understood as a Narrative Restriction that works in conjunction with the Material of the baby props to restrict both Speech and Physicality for both Mimi and the Date. What is also interesting to observe on the rubric, is that *Blind Date*'s Role and Narrative

RESTRICTIONS	Location	Roles	Narrative	Games	Materials
	A restaurant, a car, an apartment living room, a bedroom	Mimi. The Date. Two other actors play all other roles.	A blind date with a jump forward five years to a birth	Time Out can be called by Mimi or Date	Full lighting/sound. Variety of set pieces. Mimi has costume. Baby prop.
Audience Awareness	Not explained	Explained	Explained throughout	Explained	Explained
Scope					
Duration	Locations last one Scene	Whole Play	Whole Play	Usually a moment	Whole play
Players	All players	Mimi and Date fixed, others can change	All Players	Mimi, Date, and Date's partner	All players.
Affected Elements					
Space	Locations move from public to intimate spaces	Mimi has higher status in apartment		Time Out area is a distinct space on stage	Changing locations requires changing set
Time	Restaurant eventually closes		Time jump of 5 years always occurs after the first kiss in the apartment	Time outs limit the amount of time available for the story	Changing set requires time. There is a 90 min runtime
Speech	As locations become more intimate, conversation becomes more personal	Mimi has a French accent			Baby prop used to prompt a moral lesson from Date to close show
Physicality	Some locations require mime such as car. Others require naturalistic behaviour		The final act of the show involves an on stage birth		Lights and sound used to force actions like dancing or miming car

Figure 2.7: Restriction Rubric for *Blind Date* June 2017

Restrictions function primarily at the “Whole Play” level. Individual scenes are restricted more by their Location than anything else. While different productions of the show may involve additional locations depending on the Date’s choices, the locations on the rubric are the default. These locations become more intimate over the course of the show, aiding the manipulation of status. We also see how important the material props and set are to the show, which explains Northan’s insistence on using a full theatre for the show (Northan Questionnaire 8).

On December 16th and 17th 2017, I attended performances of *Blind Date* at the Great Canadian Theatre Company in Ottawa. I specifically attended the performance on the 16th in order to see one of the “queer performances”, with Mathieu, the male version of Mimi played by David Benjamin Tomlinson. This incarnation of the show originated at Buddies in Bad Times Theatre in 2016, billed as a “reimagined version of Rebecca Northan’s smash hit play” (Buddies in Bad Times). Reworked for Buddies in Bad Times by Evalyn Parry, *Blind Date* was opened up to “same sex, trans, and genderqueer dates” (Buddies in Bad Times) with performances alternating between Tomlinson and Julie Orton in the starring role. The run of *Blind Date* at the GCTC was the first integrated run, with Tess Degenstein performing both the straight and queer versions and Tomlinson performing the queer version⁸. Figure 2.2 shows a Restriction rubric of Tomlinson’s performance on December 16th. As can be seen on the rubric, the structure of this performance is almost identical to other performances of *Blind Date* with a few key differences. In an added Role, Degenstein plays a surrogate mother for the couple, which keeps the pregnancy and on stage birth a part of the Narrative.

⁸ Degenstein performs both “versions” of the show ([GCTC](#)), so it would in theory be possible for her to choose anyone from the audience, regardless of gender identity and sexual preference, on any given night. The designation of certain performance as queer may be born out of a desire by the GCTC to ensure the safety of the space for all persons attending, but it also runs the risk of functioning as a form of segregation. A full discussion of this topic is beyond the scope of this thesis, but it is important to acknowledge these potentially problematic elements.

RESTRICTIONS	Location	Roles	Narrative	Games	Materials
	Restaurant, car, apartment	Mathieu, Date, surrogate mother	blind date, jump 5 years to birth	Time Out and Puppet Sex.	Full lights/sound. Assorted set. Mimi costume. Baby prop
Audience Awareness	Not explained	Explained	Explained throughout	Explained throughout	Explained
Scope					
Duration	Locations last one Scene	Whole Play (Degenstein only Mimi for last scenes)	Whole Play	Time Out usually moments. Puppets a scene	Whole play
Players	All players	Mathieu/ Date fixed, others can change	All Players	Mathieu, Date, and Date's partner	All players.
Affected Elements					
Space	Locations move from public to intimate spaces	Mathieu has higher status in apartment		Time Out area. Puppets takes place at front of stage	Changing locations requires changing set
Time	Restaurant eventually closes		Time jump of 5 years always occurs after the first kiss in apartment	Time outs limit the amount of time available for the story	Changing set requires time. There is a 90 min runtime
Speech	Locations become more intimate, topics more personal	Mathieu has a French accent			Baby prop used to prompt a moral lesson from Date to close show
Physicality	Some locations require mime, others naturalistic behaviour		Final act of the show involves an on stage birth	Mathieu and Date puppeteer a sex scene	Lights/sound used to force actions. Puppets used for sex scene

Figure 8.2: Restriction rubric for *Blind Date* December 16 2017

In this performance, right after the first kiss, Mathieu called a Time Out. He gave the Date the option of playing out the rest of the date without any actual touching, saying “this is where the show takes a hard right turn from the straight version, bring out the puppets!” Despite this comment, there is evidence that puppets have been used in other version of the show. In 2012 Jaime Northan performed a version of the show as Stuart the Clown with a female Date, which according to one review did feature puppets (McNeely). Whether the puppets are an option at every performance of *Blind Date* is not as important as what happens when they are used. Tomlinson brought the Date to the front of the stage and a miniature bed and two puppets were brought out by the supporting cast. The puppet meant to represent the Date had no genitals, and it was explained that he would be able to customize his penis by choosing colour, length, hair, and whether or not it was circumcised. Mathieu and the Date then use the puppets to act out a sex scene in front of the audience. Here the puppets are not only being used for comic relief, but as a way to explore repressed desires. Again, this is less about sexual desire and more about basic intimacy as described by Johnstone (K. Johnstone 200). By inviting the Date to be vulnerable in front of the audience through the Mask of the puppet, and the mask of comedy, the Date is coached to be more comfortable and adventurous in the coming scenes. What makes this truly different, structurally, from all the other techniques used towards this purpose, is the space it happens in. While all other interactions in *Blind Date* take place in either the world of the play, or in reality, the puppet scene straddles the line. As explained by Mimi or Mathieu at the beginning of a show, the Time Out zone represents a space outside the world of the play and this is why it is physically separate, off to the side of the stage. Since Mimi and Mathieu behave largely the same in or out of the Time Out zone in voice, gesture, etc.

Space is used to denote the divide between actor and character, fiction and reality, date and performance. With the puppets, this distinction is challenged as the front of the stage is used for a discussion of puppeteering and the selection of genitalia. The customary first Time Out of the show establishes that the Date should “act naturally”. Puppets are not typically present in realistically acted romances, but since we are already watching someone from the audience on a *Blind Date* with a clown, this is not, I think, the strangest part of this moment. The use of the front of the stage as a combined Time Out and performance space, arguably breaks the rules of one of the few “Game Restrictions” *Blind Date* has. Ordinarily, any action that takes place outside the reality of the play must happen in the Time Out zone. The ease with which this seems to be accepted is due, I believe, because the Time Out zone can be understood as a performative space in its own way. The on stage action can thus be understood to always have an element of reality present. Frost and Yarrow’s ‘openness to amendment’ is always felt, and reinforced by moments like the puppet scene, a particularly explicit example of this (in that it is neither subtle nor G-rated).

2.4 The Autopoietic-Love-Triangle – *Blind Date* and the Audience

In order to further discuss *Blind Date*’s use of the liminal space between performer and audience, and how it foregrounds that relationship, we must turn to our other rubric and the autopoietic feedback loop. Spontaneous Theatre’s productions all rely strongly on this phenomenon to create their content, and *Blind Date* in particular is an exploration of the logical extreme of this relationship between performer and audience member. To further emphasize this, *Blind Date* represents this physically by using the Time Out zone into which an audience member is brought. In Chapter 1, I discuss how TJ & Dave make no use of the audience in their improvisation. *Blind Date* gives us almost the complete opposite approach. Figure 2.3 shows an

audience involvement rubric for *Blind Date*. In this rubric we can see a heavy slant towards the right hand side, which in general represents a ‘higher’ level of audience of involvement. Indeed, in *Blind Date* we see the previous discussed element of performance on behalf of the audience volunteer, and we see also a high level of Agency.

AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT METRICS			
NUMBER	One	Multiple	All
METHOD	Suggestion	Storytelling	Performance
AGENCY	Prompted	Free Segmented	Free Continuous
DURATION	Moment	Scene	Whole Play

Figure 2.9: Audience Participation Metrics for *Blind Date*

Asking for a suggestion at the beginning of a Harold prompts the audience to give a specific category of answer, and even when brought on stage for a game like Pillars, the audience volunteer is still prompted to say one word at a time (Improv Encyclopedia). Conversely, the Date in *Blind Date* is free to decide what to say and when to say it. Finally, while asking for a suggestion only takes a moment, and using an audience member for a single game only lasts that scene, in *Blind Date* the volunteer Date is on stage and involved in the performance for the entire play. The Date has become an audience-performer, creating a third identity in the autopoietic feedback loop. The audience-performer is not just a member of the audience, nor is the audience-performer fully an actor. They represent the space between the two, a celebration of the tension surrounding the crossing of the usual boundaries between performer and spectator. Identities within the autopoietic feedback loop do not disappear or diminish when combined with other identities, which is why I hyphenated this term rather than create a new word⁹. The audience

⁹ Augusto Boal’s term “spectactor” may seem to be appropriate for what I am describing, but I am deliberately avoiding it as “spectactor” evokes the specific style of Theatre of the Oppressed and the socially charged nature of that work.

participant did not enter the space as a performer, but is now performing, and so is, by definition, a performer. The audience does not forget their previous association with this person; however, the audience-performer does not cease to be an audience member. A double identity is created and the feedback loop becomes a triangle, as each person responds to the others, though now differently, depending on their respective identities. This triangle is visualized in Figure 2.4. All of this would seem to put a tremendous amount of pressure on the audience-performer for the success of the show. Inviting an audience member on stage to do whatever they want for 90 minutes is certainly a risk. Of course, they are being coached, both explicitly and subtly, by Mimi through her manipulation of their status. The high degree of unpredictability, created by Method, Agency and Duration, are counteracted by the Number of participants.

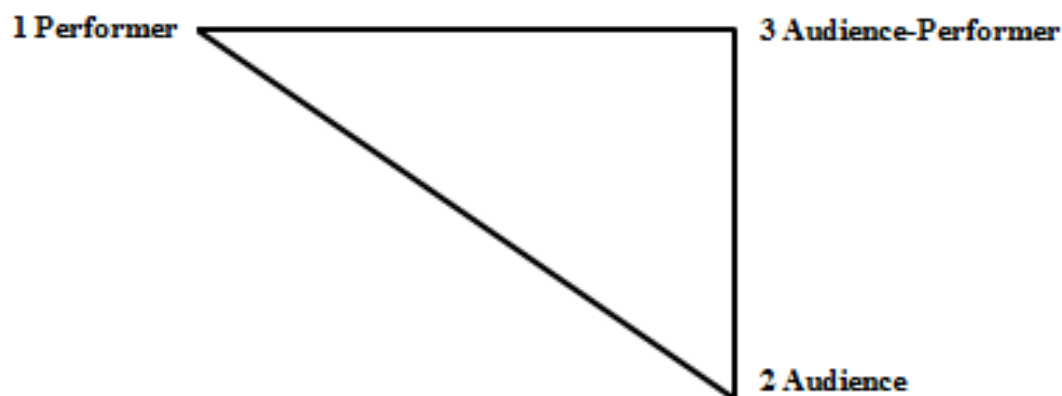


Figure 2.10: Autopoietic-Feedback-Loop with Audience-Performer

With only one audience participant, Mimi can focus on him completely. With multiple audience members involved, the show would be forced to take on a different nature. The June 2017 performance I attended, did in fact involve multiple audience members coming on stage, so we have some insight as to the effects of changing this variable. During the scene in the apartment, Mimi and the Date are sitting together on the sofa. Mimi is trying to prompt the first

kiss, but the Date keeps stalling. Mimi then asks why he has not kissed her yet, and he replies that he is nervous because he usually would not kiss someone on the first date. He suggests that maybe the lighting needs to be more romantic. Mimi claps her hands and the lighting improviser lowers the lights, but Matthew is clearly still uncomfortable. Mimi asks if he would like a Time Out, and they go to the Time Out zone. Mimi reminds the Date and the audience that the play is separate from reality, and that he has options. They can simply not kiss, or they can pretend that the kiss happened in the play but not show it and jump five years into the future. They can also get a stunt double. The Date likes the idea of a stunt double so Mimi asks for a volunteer.

Another man is brought up on stage. Mimi interviews him briefly, asking if his partner is in the audience. His wife is, who says not to take things too far. Mimi explains that they will resume the scene and when the Date feels he wants to call in his stunt double, he will clap his hands. The stunt double is to swap in, do the kiss, swap out, and leave the talking to the Date. This unfolds as described and the stunt double even grabs Mimi's rear. She calls a Time Out, the stunt double re-joins the audience, and the Date and Mimi jump forward five years. After the show, Northan revealed to a group of audience members in the lobby that she whispered instructions to the stunt double as they sat down to grab her, as it would get a big reaction. This shows the greater control Northan felt was needed to counteract the increase in the number of audience members. Creating an audience involvement rubric for this one moment gives us Figure 2.5.

AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT METRICS			
NUMBER	One	Multiple	All
METHOD	Suggestion	Storytelling	Performance
AGENCY	Prompted	Free Segmented	Free Continuous
DURATION	Moment	Scene	Whole Play

Figure 2.11: Stunt Double Moment in *Blind Date*

As the Number of audience participants increases, the Agency and Duration of participation decreases. For the moment that the stunt double is on stage, all participation by both the stunt double and the Date is prompted, since Northan gives very specific directions as to how they are supposed to perform.. The argument can also be made that the stunt double performing a kiss does not even constitute performance, since performing an action does not inherently constitute performance. This raises the question of how we define “a suggestion”. Is the audience-performer playing the Date himself the suggestion? He has offered himself as a potential choice before the show, and picking him has an influence on the narrative, so this is one possible definition. Another is that the audience participant who is chosen as the Date gives many suggestions. In this case, where do we draw the line between a suggestion – something that an audience member supplies – and an offer – anything an actor does within the context of a scene (K. Johnstone 97)? I propose that Johnstone’s definition of an offer extends to audience-performers. Once someone has an identity beyond that of audience member, anything they supply the scene is an offer. While storytelling toes the line between the two, I would consider it a type of suggestion more so than performance. While anyone can make a suggestion, an audience-performer makes *offers* the same way a performer does. The actions of the stunt double during this performance of *Blind Date* constitute neither suggestion nor storytelling and are thus best understood as non-verbal performance. The fact that an additional member of the audience was asked to perform is not insignificant to our growing understanding of the autopoietic feedback loop. The full ramifications of this are discussed in more detail in Chapter 5 through GRIMprov’s *Guided Roleplay* format.

2.5 And They Lived Happily Ever After – Concluding Thoughts

Blind Date's success can be attributed to the combination of two factors, the Restrictions of a romantic comedy format, and the use of a single audience-performer for the entire 90 minute performance. While many improvisers could guide an audience member through a brief interaction on stage, *Blind Date* excels by using a Narrative Restriction best described as “strangers to lovers”. The growing relationship between the characters mirrors the growing trust between the performers. The Restriction of the Roles limits the two performers to real facts about their lives. This allows for “obvious” answers, as Johnstone would put it (87), and a more authentic spontaneity. *Blind Date* also demonstrates the power of Materials in improvised theatre through the use of key props, such as the baby doll and puppets. This, along with the difficulty of transporting multiple large set pieces, also informs the Locations of the format. It makes sense to use the same locations and situations as often as possible.

Despite the many Restrictions, *Blind Date* is still “open to amendment” through the audience-performer. The final scene of the show, for example, has featured a home birth in three of the four productions I have seen. At the performance on December 17th at the GCTC, the Date insisted on making it to the hospital, and the supporting cast member performed a rapid set change and played a doctor for the final scene.

Blind Date's Restrictions could be applied on a smaller scale, as demonstrated by its origin as a ten minute piece. This demonstrates that defining formats with terms like “long form improvisation” is not useful. *Blind Date*'s success has much to do with its Materials. Performing *Blind Date* in theatres with lighting, sound, and a set, goes a long way to convince audiences that they are paying for “legitimate” theatre. The rest is confidence that “improvised” can still mean consistent quality, and this is a lesson other companies can take from this show.

CHAPTER 3: UNDERCOVER

3.1 Making a Murder: First Impressions of *Undercover*

While *Blind Date* has proven a success in the nearly ten years since Northan first put on the red nose at Harbourfront, *Undercover* represents one of many attempts to cut a new success from the same cloth. This improvised murder mystery is not the first of Spontaneous Theatre's projects since *Blind Date*. *Legend Has It* was the company's second foray into "taking audience participation to the next level" in a heroic adventure story with an audience member as the central hero character (Magnetic North). *Undiscovered Shakespeare* is a new project by Spontaneous Theatre, presented at The Grand and the Stratford Festival, in which an audience member's true love story helps inspire the writing of Shakespeare's "lost play". Its workshop production, opening October 11, 2018, was sold out before opening (Belanger). Between these two productions, Northan and collaborator Bruce Horak have found time to develop *Undercover*, which premiered at Tarragon Theatre in Toronto, September 19th, 2017. According to Northan, these shows were all deliberate attempts at innovation upon the unexpected success of *Blind Date*. She says that, while "Blind Date arrived on its own. The others....came out of asking, 'What else can we do with an Audience Member, while holding on to our core value?'" (Northan Questionnaire 1). This core value, as mentioned in Chapter 2, is to "take care of the Date, make him look good, make sure he's having a nice time" (Northan 1). This may seem simple enough, but it eliminates from contention any genre or type of performance in which the protagonist is made to feel uncomfortable, embarrassed, or villainous. For example, I doubt we will see a slasher-style improvised horror movie inspired piece from Spontaneous Theatre any time soon. A classic murder mystery, in which the Rookie always solves the case, however, makes total sense. I attended one of the last showings of this run of *Undercover* on September 30th, 2017. My

impressions of this show are based on my own notes taken during the performance and also on Northan's responses to my questionnaire. For all other case studies, I have made sure to attend at least three performances of each, as it is through repeated viewing that structure becomes evident. Chris Johnston's example of *La Ronde Improvised* by Fluxx shows that Restrictions may not be visible to the audience without repeated viewings. In this format the audience is aware of the Role Restriction in place, but not the Narrative Restriction on the order of the scenes (C. Johnston 263-264). This illustrates how important it is to see improvised theatre more than once if one is seeking a deeper understanding and not just entertainment. For *Undercover* this was more difficult for me than with my other case studies, as the play was just premiering and it was being performed in another city. Despite this, I believe my analysis of the show is valid for two reasons. First, as stated in Chapter 1, my rubric of Johnston's Restriction theory should function 'in reverse'. While the preferred way of analysing a show would be to know the Restrictions and record their effects, one can also observe ways in which the performers seem to be restricted in their Speech, Physicality, use of Space, and use of Time, and extrapolate Restrictions from this information. Second, because *Undercover* is a production of Spontaneous Theatre, we can look for similarities to *Blind Date* for clues to the overall structure.

3.2 Solving the Mystery: The Structure of *Undercover*

A co-production between Tarragon Theatre and Calgary's Vertigo Theatre, which specializes in murder mysteries, *Undercover* makes clear from the start that it is a largely tongue-in-cheek attempt to improvise a murder mystery about "One grizzled cop. One audience-member-turned-rookie-detective. One unsolved case" (Tarragon). Figure 3.1 shows a Restriction rubric for *Undercover*.

RESTRICTIONS	Location	Roles	Narrative	Games	Materials
	Police Station, Mansion	Detectives, party guests, Rookie	Rookie goes undercover at private art auction, solves murder and art theft.	Time Out. Private Conversation.	Lighting, sound, costumes, props, set
Audience Awareness	Partially Explained	Explained	Partially explained	Explained	Evident
Scope					
Duration	Whole Play	Cops/guests double cast.	Whole Play	Whole Play	Whole Play
Players	All	All, Time Out exempt	All	All	All
Affected Elements					
Space	All action takes place in one room	Some characters own house/know space better	Some scenes require positioning	Private Conversation has rules for distance	Set creates limited series of locations
Time	Travel is sped up, otherwise real time		Slight time jump between acts 1 & 2	Time Outs create a pause in the action	Takes time to change set
Speech		Cop slang, higher society language.	Mystery and crime story tropes (screams)	Private Conversation mutes talking depending on distance to Rookie	
Physicality		Sgt. Collins secretly pregnant	Rookie encourage to 'snoop' around if alone	Private Conversation requires walking upstage	Props, costumes may factor in. e.g. Rookie's moustache

Figure 3.1 Restriction Rubric for *Undercover* September 2017

Looking at the rubric as a whole gives us a snapshot of the Restrictions that form the building block of *Undercover* and how they interact. Every Restriction category is present to some degree and for the whole play, but the extent to which the audience is aware of these varies. How much the Restrictions affect the use of Time, Space, Speech, and Physicality also varies from Restriction to Restriction. Present in *Undercover* are two Games, which we must remember are specific sets of rules that affect the performance as an event, as opposed to the Restrictions that affect the reality of the world of the improvised drama. Also notable for *Undercover* is the importance of materials. To take a deeper look at how this unfolds in practice, I will recount my experience of seeing *Undercover* performed, based on my notes at the time of viewing.

The play opens on the set of a police station done in dark, muted colours with a lighting gobo of window blinds casting shadows across the stage. The first moments of dialogue between Rebecca and Jaime Northan's characters (the two are real life siblings) begin as if in a scripted example of the detective genre. Soon enough though, Jaime finds an excuse to plug a deal on tickets that Tarragon is offering, introducing an element of parody. Their discussion turns to the "applicants" for the new detective position who are described as being in the "waiting room". Jamie Northan walks to the edge of the stage and calls out a name from a clipboard. Some audience members may recognize it as the list of people, who have expressed an interest in being chosen in the lobby before the show¹⁰. The opening of the play is similar to the *Blind Date* formula, as Sgt. Collins (Rebecca Northan's character) asks the Rookie basic questions about himself, takes his picture and tells him that the photo is for his "ID badge". In *Blind Date* the

¹⁰ As in *Blind Date*, audience members must consent to being chosen before the show begins. Cast members will approach those who seem "present, comfortable in their own skin, alive behind their eyes" (Northan Questionnaire 6) to ask if they will sign up. Unlike in *Blind Date*, there is no restriction on age, gender, or sexual preference.

photo taken at the restaurant appears later on the nightstand after the couple has journeyed forward in time, but in *Undercover* it seems to be just a souvenir for the participant. Just as in *Blind Date*, Northan then leads The Rookie to the Time Out area at the side of the stage. Unlike in *Blind Date*, this moment is a complete departure from the world of the play.

In *Blind Date* Northan, or whomever is playing Mimi, will continue to refer to herself as Mimi and maintain a French accent in the Time Out zone. In *Undercover*, Northan drops character and introduces herself with her real name. She explains how the play will work and how it is everyone's jobs to make sure it happens, "the rules of the game", so to speak. "Our job", says Northan, "is to take care of you. Your job, with us, is to put on a play". She explains the Time Out, which works much the same as in *Blind Date*. The Rookie can call a Time Out at any time, as can anyone in the cast. No one else in the audience is able to call a Time Out in this production. Northan also explains that the show is double cast, with most of the actors playing two roles. She explains that if an actor appears wearing a wig, new costume, or moustache, they are playing a different character and not the same character in disguise. At the performance I attended, the Rookie asked if he could have a fake moustache to help get into character, a request which apparently no other Rookie had made, according to Northan. One of the other actors went to find a moustache for him which they attached to his face with tape. The Rookie is also given a jacket containing a "wire" so the other detectives can listen to him. The 'wire' is in fact a microphone, removing the need to remind the audience member to speak louder, (Northan Questionnaire 7). The remainder of the scene includes meeting the rest of the detectives, who tell the The Rookie, that if he is ever alone on stage, he should search for clues. They also explain the new game specific to *Undercover: Private Conversation*. If anyone ever says that they are

going to have a “Private Conversation”, the Rookie should try to listen in, but must be within three feet of the speakers to hear them.

The detectives also explain to the Rookie the case he will be working. A known criminal is attending an art auction at a private residence and the Rookie will go undercover to investigate. This explanation, complete with pictures of suspects, makes clear to the audience that the narrative of this show is predetermined, and that the spontaneity must result from reacting to the unique choices made by the Rookie within this structure. We then see a scene in a car much like in *Blind Date*, and much like in *Blind Date*, the humour of miming the car is played up. This is interwoven with subtle coaching, such as asking The Rookie what he did “before he became a detective” and telling him that this will be his cover at the party he is attending. This reminds The Rookie that he is playing a detective in this play, but also aims to teach him Johnstone’s principle of the obvious.

Better spontaneity can be achieved from the audience members if they feel as though they have permission to be ‘boring’. In the world of the murder mystery, responding to questions about himself quickly and confidently, will make the Rookie seem like a more formidable undercover cop, more so than any ‘clever’ answer he would have to stop and think about. After the car scene, Northan takes the Rookie back stage during the set change. In her answers to my questionnaire, Northan reveals, that if any performer is alone with a volunteer back stage at any point, they will “find a moment to touch base and praise them. We also coach them if they need it: “Speak a bit louder. Keep doing what you’re doing.”” (Northan Questionnaire 7). This may be surprising to some in the audience who believe more specific coaching about the upcoming scenes must be taking place back stage. It may even look like a wasted opportunity to speak to the volunteer back stage and not give them any more than encouragement, but to an improviser’s

mind it makes total sense. I have been on stage and had the opportunity to exchange words out of earshot with fellow improvisers, and those conversations are usually no more specific than “I have an idea, follow me”. The assumption is that you will back one another up without needing details, and that planning too much will spoil the fun. Beyond this etiquette, Dr. Charles Limb at the University of California in San Francisco has conducted experiments with jazz musicians and freestyle rappers using fMRI machines to track brain activity during the process of improvising and found that parts of the brain responsible for self-expression become more active and those parts responsible for self-monitoring become less active (Drinko 95, Kaufman et al.). Drinko hypothesizes in *Theatrical Improvisation, Consciousness, and Cognition*, that dramatic improvisation has a similar effect on the brain, and that many of Johnstone’s training techniques are in fact ways to force the brain into this outward focused state (Drinko 75). This would suggest that giving an audience member any specifics to remember backstage would be difficult for them to remember, or negatively impact their focus. It is far better to build confidence with basic instructions like “speak louder”, and to distract them from being able to plan, thus allowing them to behave spontaneously and authentically when they return to the stage.

When the Rookie does return to the stage, he is greeted by Jaime, now in character as Daniel, the housekeeper of sorts. Daniel asks the Rookie “What’s your poison? We have wine, whiskey, vodka...” prompting the Rookie to respond “Do you really have whiskey?” Daniel in turn asks, “Do you really have a moustache?” This moment foregrounds the separation between performer, audience-participant, and audience. While the Rookie has been coached to stay in the reality of the story and play along with theatricalities like double-casting, he has also been coached in a more subtle fashion to remain firmly out of character, responding as authentically as possible to situations as they arise (such as what he prefers to drink). What makes this moment

particularly interesting is that there is yet another layer to Northan's quip. The line "Do you really have a moustache" works for Daniel's sarcastic characterization, but in the context, it is also a clear reminder to the Rookie to remember he is supposed to be ignoring the fact that he is in a play. Were this line a scripted exchange between two actors in a simple murder mystery comedy, it would not be performing quite so many functions. It would be meta-theatrical and humorous to be sure. We would still understand it as not only meant to be from one character to another, but also from the actor to the audience. In this improvised moment with an audience member, we also understand it to be from actor to actor. Through Daniel/Northan, the production is signaling, that while the Rookie should try to ignore the audience and focus on the show, the rest of the audience should not.

Following the introduction of Peter¹¹, the Rookie's contact at the party, Daniel asks the Rookie for a Private Conversation and leads him into the Time Out zone, at which point he drops character and introduces himself as Jamie. This establishes the boundaries between on stage and off stage behaviour more concretely than in *Blind Date*. The phrase Private Conversation can exist within the reality of the play, but can also be understood to mean Time Out when necessary. In addition, by dropping all attempts to keep the illusion going in the Time Out zone, it is further reinforced, that each side of the line has clear rules about what is allowed. Jamie's reason for calling the Time Out is that the Rookie's moustache keeps falling off and it is so entertaining to watch him struggle with it, that it is upstaging the rest of the show. Jamie uses glue to fix the moustache, *and* explains that the whiskey is actually tea! This serves to show the Rookie, and the audience, that no question is off limits, as long as it happens in the right space. It

¹¹ Bruce Horak, who plays Peter, is a painter and visually impaired like his character. Peter lets the Rookie know that sometimes people do not believe him when he tells them he is visually impaired, but that it really is true. Why this conversation was located within the narrative rather than the Time Out zone is worth considering, but is not within the scope of this thesis.

also continues to build the Rookie up by not withholding any information from him. Every offer the Rookie makes is accepted in the ‘Yes, and’ fashion explained in Chapter 1.

After mingling with more guests, two Private Conversations happen simultaneously and the Rookie is forced to choose which one to listen to. The conversation not chosen continues long enough that he is able to also hear the end of it, so this moment evidently has more to do with forcing the Rookie to make the choice and to feel his own agency, than to hide information from him. Act 1 ends with what appears to be a mostly scripted scene. The characters switch wine glasses repeatedly during the art auction, lightning flashes, and the lights go out. Someone screams in the darkness, before saying that they are just kidding. A glass breaks, and again someone apologizes and says that everything is fine. After this, everyone pulls out their flashlights and notice that the painting has disappeared. Georgie falls over dead, and this time there is no subversion of the trope, and Act 1 ends on the murder. This scripted beat is the chance for the production to make it clear that they are parodying murder mysteries. The tone throughout the rest of the play could fluctuate, depending on the Rookie, but this moment is restricted enough in Speech, Physicality, and timing that it must be scripted.

Act 2 begins with Rebecca Northan back in the role of Sgt. Collins; since Georgie is dead, she is free to play this role for the remainder of the show. She reveals to the others, that the Rookie is a detective and they are all escorted to separate rooms. Once alone, Collins asks the Rookie if he has any hunches he wants to share. He immediately checks the secret compartments that the character Brook reveals in act 1 (she hides her cannabis there) and he finds the stolen painting. Collins exclaims, “Wow, you found that immediately! And it is hard not to see her as Northan in this moment, surprised at how quickly this portion of the mystery has been solved.

In a review of *Undercover*, Christopher Hoile commented on this aspect of Northan's acting. Hoile says, that Northan has "a wonderful irony in her voice that basically functions as a wink to the audience whenever she has a supportive conversation with the rookie" (Hoile). Once she has appeared on stage out of character, Northan is always partially visible beneath the character of Sergeant Collins, and she uses this to her advantage. Rather than attempting to mask her efforts to coach the Rookie towards good choices, she allows the comedic undertones of such moments to shine through. When the Rookie makes a clear decision, Northan similarly plays up the comedy in always saying yes to the audience member, regardless of the consequences. For example, Collins and The Rookie venture upstairs to question suspects, starting with Horak's character Peter. The rest of the cast change the furniture and rotate the walls to create the new set, and they enter to find Peter crying on the bed. The following exchange occurs:

Collins: "You any good with emotions?"

The Rookie: "No, you?"

Collins: "No."

The Rookie: "Maybe we just come back later."

Collins: "Sure."

The two then leave the room after barely thirty seconds, requiring the cast to undo the set change they just completed. The audience laughs because of the lines, because of the exasperation that the rest of the cast must be feeling, and because they know this was unexpected. Taking the cast by surprise is clearly one way to keep the audience entertained, and Northan knows it. In the next room, the Rookie finds a shelf of books, some containing strange maps. Collins, though importantly also Northan, exclaims "Wow I didn't know that was here. That's very distracting, that needs to be put away!" The Rookie is clearly picking up on the best

ways to “pull back the curtain” on the production at this point, as when in the next room he comments that a plane ticket belonging to one of the suspects has a boarding time of 8:45 pm, but a departure time the next morning, saying that it is “probably irrelevant”. While the “do you really have whiskey” remark required a response to be funny, this moment is funny on its own. Through his interactions with the actors, the Rookie has learned the right balance of keeping in character and pointing out the inconsistencies in the world of the play.

The plot continues relatively smoothly from this point on, with Collins and the Rookie taking secret passageways and spying on other characters. Then Northan calls a Time Out to discuss with the Rookie what action makes the most sense to take next. This could be because the show is running low on time, or because the scene calls for decisive action and Northan is concerned that the audience member playing the the Rookie is unsure of what to do. Following this, Collins and Peter have a Private Conversation, in which they reveal that Collins is in fact a criminal, working with Peter to kill his wife Georgie and sell the painting so that the two can run away together. This saves the Rookie from having to piece together everything for the audience, as the Rookie in such a story usually would. I believe that this was due to time constraints, as Northan explains during the curtain call, that the ending of the play has been different each night. If the narrative allows for variation on the ending, then it follows that Northan would only reveal information so freely in order to speed up the process.

3.3 Under the Covers: What Makes *Undercover* Work

The real question is what makes *Undercover* different from *Blind Date*? Through the examination of the production I witnessed, we can see many similarities to *Blind Date*. The beginning of the show is strikingly similar, with the audience participant being called up on stage and asked about himself before being taken to the Time Out zone to learn the rules of the show.

Even the order of the opening scenes is similar, with the second scene taking place in a car. Despite this, obvious differences also appear. Sgt. Collins begins the show by talking to her fellow officer, whereas Mimi's directs her opening dialogue to the audience. Figure 3.2 outlines the audience involvement in *Undercover*.

AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT METRICS			
NUMBER	One	Multiple	All
METHOD	Suggestion	Storytelling	Performance
AGENCY	Prompted	Free Segmented	Free Continuous
DURATION	Moment	Scene	Whole Play

Figure 3.2: Audience Involvement in *Undercover*

A single audience member is asked to participate. The rest of the audience does not participate, and is never acknowledged by the characters. During Time Outs, the actors may address the audience as a whole with statements such as “Is [participant] doing a good job so far?” which may serve to encourage the participant. This is nearly indistinguishable from the rubric for *Blind Date*, though there is a question of the Agency of the audience-performer, the Rookie. Because the Rookie acts as a character, instead of merely providing suggestions, the first impression is that the Agency in *Undercover* is the same as in *Blind Date*. However, because we understand Agency of the participant to be distinct from the Method of involvement, we can potentially distinguish the two. Any Rookie is theoretically able to participate to the degree they wish; however, *Undercover* has something that *Blind Date* does not: an increased cast size that allows for interactions not involving the audience volunteer. In fact, one of the games of *Undercover* relies on this. Private Conversations may be opportunities for the Rookie to gain information pertaining to the mystery, but they are also cues for the Rookie to stop talking and

listen. Even outside the Private Conversations, characters have moments of interaction that might as well be scripted, such as the murder scene at the end of Act 1. During moments like this, the audience participant is incentivized to observe and fade into the background of the scene. These moments may be a small portion of the overall action of the play, but there is no requirement that the segments of participation be shorter than the segments of non-participation, only that they are distinct segments. Therefore, *Undercover* can be described as having Scenes of Free Segmented Agency, this being the major difference between it and *Blind Date*. However, at no point does the audience-performer revert to being simply an audience member. Considered as a whole, *Undercover* should be understood as having Free Continuous audience-performer Agency, but not to the same degree as *Blind Date*.

3.4 Turn in Your Clown Nose and Gun – Concluding Thoughts

Recall that in the original production of *Blind Date*, a second clown appeared at the ending of the date, and that this clown was cut shortly after. While other cast members were eventually added back into the show, they were firmly relegated to supporting roles. Every character in *Blind Date* interacts with the Date; there is never a scene just between Mimi and another character. As stated in Northan’s questionnaire, Spontaneous Theatre cast members will attempt to “open first, offer vulnerability first”, and “tell the truth about ourselves, from our own lives” (Northan Questionnaire 7). In *Blind Date*, this fits into the style perfectly, as much of the conversation is personal in nature. In *Undercover*, the characters have more specific backstories, and their answers must fit into a more restricted narrative. This means that there is less opportunity for spontaneity with the audience-performer.

The Restriction of a murder mystery Narrative guides the performers towards secretive Speech and closed Physicality. For the audience-participant, this creates the risk of undermining

the principle that “whatever THEY do is “right” [emphasis Northan’s] (Northan Questionnaire 7). Northan says in her answer to this same question, that “we resist making jokes, or clever comments, in favour of letting them have a moment”. This is contradicted in *Undercover* by the necessity of cementing the show’s tone as a parody of murder mysteries, and the necessity of creating certain moments, such as the murder, to happen more or less at the same time each performance. The cast of *Undercover* are improvisers who have worked together for a long time. I have identified that *Blind Date* works, in large part, because it has, not only a set of solid Restrictions, and features a less explored use of the audience, but because the same tools that are used to achieve spontaneity fits with the romantic genre. *Undercover* does not set itself up to accomplish the same thing. In some ways, the more Restricted Agency of the Rookie, offers a more solid foundation for the show and ties the success of a performance less to the qualities of the audience-performer. *Blind Date*, though, was designed to make the audience volunteer look good by the end of 90 minutes, regardless of how they were when they came on stage. *Undercover* has less time to accomplish this, despite its longer runtime, so a ‘bad’ volunteer may be more of a danger to this show. Maybe that is why Spontaneous Theatre’s latest work *Undiscovered Shakespeare* returns to the love story as its Narrative Restriction (Belanger). We can conclude that Spontaneous Theatre has a workable model for creating improvised theatre. With a different set of Restrictions, a new Game, the same successful Materials, together with a slight shift in the audience involvement, a brand new creation is achieved.

CHAPTER 4 – QUEST FRIENDS FOREVER

4.1 Every Hero Has an Origin Story: The Background of *Quest Friends Forever*

Quest Friends Forever at first appears to have a similar emphasis on audience agency to *Blind Date* and *Undercover*, since it takes much of its structure from roleplaying games in which all participants perform as characters. What I found in my analysis of this show may be somewhat surprising. *Quest Friends Forever* does not feature the same kind of audience participation seen in my other case studies, but it does provide some insights about the nature of suggestions and the relationship between audience and performer.

Dungeons and Dragons is a game that is in many ways a natural fit with improvisation. In D&D, a Dungeon Master, or DM, functions as a combination of writer, referee, and narrator for the game, creating the world and story for the game and populating it with characters and monsters (Crawford et al. *Dungeon Master's Guide* 4). The players take on the roles of the heroes of the story and describe the actions of their characters within the story, with the characters' skills and the rolling of dice determining success or failure (Crawford et al. *Player's Handbook* 5). The DM determines what success or failure looks like and narrates the effects of the players' actions in the world. Each player performs their character through some degree of voice and gesture, referred to as "roleplaying" (*Player's Handbook* 185). D&D can be thought of as a kind of theatre where players take it in turns to function as audience for each other, and because the players are not privy to the DM's plans for the story, the roleplaying aspects of D&D must by necessity feature a degree of improvisation. The theatrical aspects of the game are the primary focus of Live Action Roleplaying events, in which participants wear costumes and act out scenarios ranging from battles with prop weapons to complex social interactions between

characters (Frost and Yarrow 58). Many Live Action Roleplaying events, or LARPs, are set in fantasy worlds inspired by D&D and similar games, but others may be set in real time periods and locations with an emphasis on performing historical authenticity (Fairweather Manor). Frost and Yarrow consider LARP to be a natural evolution of the increasing power of the audience within theatre and improvisation, as the audience has replaced the actors almost entirely (Frost and Yarrow 60). Also representing an increased level of performance, are live streamed games of D&D like Geek & Sundry's *Critical Role*, in which games are played episodically as entertainment for an audience. When such a show is held live, as at a convention (GenCon), there is also a live audience to be performed to, and the autopoietic feedback loop must be considered. Even online, such an effect is potentially present as long the players/performers can see the live chat room of the audience, as I argue in my paper on the theatricality of live streaming (McLean, *Reconceptualising Presence and Liveness* 16).

Meanwhile, there are a growing number of improvised shows across the country advertised as improvised adaptations of D&D. Winnipeg features a show simply titled *The DnD Improv Show*. The group's Facebook page features the tagline, "a cast of improvisers take to the stage to embark on an adventure. Who will reign supreme: the forces of good or the band of evil doers? Only the dice of doom know for sure." (dndimprov). In Toronto, *D&D Live* is a popular recurring show featuring a cast of improvisers from a variety of troupes as well as special guests, including Christy Bruce (who has toured in *Blind Date* and *Undercover*) and Colin Mochrie (of *Whose Line is it Anyway?*). The show's premise is given as "Using D&D game mechanics, audience suggestions, the random chance of a twenty-sided die, the show will follow the exploits of a group of brave adventurers questing through the realm of T'rannah" (Bad Dog Theatre). Since May of 2015, *Quest Friends Forever* has stood as Ottawa's own fully D&D inspired

improvised show (Hannay Questionnaire 3). The show has been performed monthly at the Improv Embassy theatre, as well as having a run at the 2017 Ottawa Fringe.

Chris Hannay is a co-founder of both the Improv Embassy and *Quest Friends* itself. He also filled the Dungeon Master role for most of the shows history. Hannay's responses to my questionnaire tell the story of the show's inception. Hannay himself started improvising in university in 2005, where he also tried Dungeons and Dragons and ended up as a Dungeon Master. In 2010 Hannay moved to Toronto and was exposed to more structured "long form" improvisations, such as the Harold structure (Hannay Questionnaire 1). Hannay marks 2013 as the earliest incarnation of the ideas that would lead to *Quest Friends Forever*, when he performed a show at Toronto's Comedy Bar based on "choose your own adventure" storytelling (Hannay 2). After Hannay helped found the Improv Embassy in Ottawa, Angus MacDonald and Rich Hilborn approached him about creating a recurring show based on Dungeons and Dragons. Hannay had seen other examples of this premise, and wanted to try a different direction from what he had seen. In Hannay's experience, many shows relied heavily on costumes and special effects and had plots that carried over from show to show (Hannay 3). For the Embassy cast, preparing too much ahead of time seemed less spontaneous, and spontaneity was what they wanted to emphasize. In addition, a part of D&D they wanted to incorporate was the process of creating a new character, so that each show would include new heroes and a new story (Hannay 4). The most structured version of *Quest Friends Forever* was the version performed at the Ottawa Fringe Festival in 2017. As Johnston reminds us, much of theatre is about the commodification of a process that resists commodification (C. Johnston 197), so in order to ensure more consistency, the cast added an opening scene to the show, which remained the same each night (Hannay 5). The cast discussed a loose story structure before shows, but still valuing a

Johnstone-esque approach to spontaneity, was always ready to throw it out (Hannay 5, K. Johnstone 99-100).

4.2 Epic Quests 101: The Structure of *Quest Friends Forever*

Quest Friends Forever as it has been performed would seem simple enough to describe as a long form format. Hannay's account of his early training in long form, such as the Harold, would no doubt tempt many writers to consider this show a good example of Leep's definitions. Of course, Leep admits that the typical length of so called long form improvised theatre is symptomatic rather than an inherent quality of the style, since narratively driven formats simply require more time (Leep 84). When examining the varied contexts *Quest Friends Forever* has been performed in, it is clear that the length of this format is flexible. On May 13th 2017, I attended a special performance of *Quest Friends Forever* at Ottawa Comic Con, featuring the core cast of Chris Hannay, Rich Hilborn, Angus MacDonald, Matt Barrow, and Nicole Bedford. This performance featured all the elements of the style that I would later see at subsequent performances at the Embassy theatre, but in a tighter thirty minute time frame. The point being, that the format of the show does not rely on time. While thirty minutes is still typical of most classic "long form" formats, such as the Harold, we can follow this principle to another example. In the Canadian Improv Games, teams compete in a series of events, each with specific requirements, but all with a time limit of four minutes (CIG Rulebook, Rule 2.2). One such event is the Style event, in which teams must perform "a scene that recreates a style", where 'style' is defined as "the combination of distinctive features, conventions and common elements that characterize a group of works" (CIG Coaches Manual 14). No matter which genre, or 'style', a team chooses, they must provide the judges with the elements of that style (CIG Rulebook, Rule 2.4.4). Hannay describes *Quest Friends Forever* as always being the same genre (Hannay 5). If we were to

imagine *Quest Friends Forever* as a Style event, we might say that the elements of the style are the use of dice to determine the outcome of events, a party of adventurers, a nefarious villain, and a DM who narrates the story. It is easy to imagine these elements being met in four minutes. What the Canadian Improv Games describes as the “elements of a style” is another way of describing what I have called Restrictions. Figure 4.1 shows the Restrictions for *Quest Friends Forever*, specifically based on the model used by performances of *Quest Friends Forever* at the Improv Embassy theatre after the 2017 Fringe production.

In this version, the show begins with MacDonald and Hilborn on stage at a table covered in miniature figures and books. They explain that the show will be “mixing the worlds of improv comedy and dungeons and dragons” and that improv comedy means, “It’s an improv show which means everything is made up on the spot”. Next, a lighting transition tells us that we are now in the world of the play. MacDonald and Hilborn exchange some banter about how their game is missing players. They then bring three audience members on stage to create characters for the game of Dungeons and Dragons about to be played. Hannay explains that these people are chosen by seeing who is willing to make eye contact, and who “says yes” (Hannay 6). This approach echoes two of Izzo’s rules for interacting with the audience, “be sensitive about who wants to play” (Izzo 216) and “make eye contact with the guest” (218). Once on stage, the volunteers are presented with a large cardboard “character creation” guide with a list of fantasy races such as elf, human, and dwarf, as well as classes, such as fighter, wizard and rogue. The audience participants are also asked to name their characters, but not directly. Rather, they are asked “leading questions”, like “what was the name of your first pet” (Hannay Questionnaire 7). Hannay explains that the cast used to ask open questions, but that this did not work.

RESTRICTIONS	Location	Roles	Narrative	Games	Materials
Suggestion: A Fear	Audience Suggestion: a fantasy location	Adventurers, Villain, DM	“fantasy story”	Dice	Lighting and sound. Large dice. Capes. Character creation board
Audience Awareness	Suggested	Evident	Partially explained	Explained	Evident
Scope					
Duration	Whole play	Whole Play	Whole Play	Moments throughout Whole Play	Whole Play
Players	All	All players have broad roles	All	DM, players attempting task	DM seated by lighting and sound operator
Affected Elements					
Space	Represent multiple sub-locations	DM behind audience	Cut back and forth from heroes to villains	When dice are rolled playing space extends	DM sits with lighting and sound behind audience
Time	location affects how much time spent on travel, other challenges	DM has final say on time jumps, can also control pacing of exposition	Final confrontation with villain is expected ending	Die rolling halts the action. DM may ask final scene to be repeated	Lights and sound can force scene changes
Speech	Jokes and characterization based on location	Medieval fantasy speech. DM is storyteller	Motivations and ideas stated explicitly to make plot clear	Die rolls require justification	Lights and speech do the work of a set
Physicality	Focus on physical offers that establish facts about location	Embody racial traits like height and strength	Often a fight scene	Dice determine action/reaction speed	Minimal materials requires over the top physicality

Figure 4.12: Restrictions for *Quest Friends Forever* Post-Fringe

Asking simple, closed questions is a different approach than Spontaneous Theatre uses, where participants are asked very open questions to demonstrate trust (Northan Questionnaire 7). However, in Spontaneous Theatre's performances, the participants have much longer to respond since they are involved in the entire performance. This all indicates that *Quest Friends Forever's* goals for their audience volunteers are fundamentally different from Spontaneous Theatre's.

After creating the characters, the rest of the audience is then asked to suggest a "fantasy location" and "a fear". At the show I attended on October 14th, 2017, the suggestions were "a tall forest"¹² and "ladders", respectively. *Quest Friends Forever* provides us the opportunity to discuss suggestions in more depth, since while suggestions are a common element in many improvised theatre shows, neither *Blind Date* nor *Undercover* featured suggestions.

In chapter one, I describe the difference between what I call direct and indirect suggestions. A direct suggestion will be straight forward and directly correspond to one Restriction. In *Quest Friends Forever*, the suggestion of a "fantasy location" is a direct suggestion and corresponds to the Restriction of Location. Of course this affects other Restrictions as well, but it does so as a by-product of directly affecting the Location. For example, the Roles in the performance may be inspired by the Location. An indirect suggestion may be more abstract and affect multiple Restrictions more ambiguously. In *Quest Friends Forever*, asking for "a fear" is an indirect suggestion. In the case of "a fear of ladders", this influenced the Location, since multiple characters decided they lived in tree houses accessible only by ladder. It also influenced the Roles by having multiple characters afraid of heights, and

¹² "Tall forest" was in fact my suggestion. I usually refrain from giving suggestions or trying to participate in performances I am writing about, but I had seen *Quest Friends Forever* several times and wanted to see if I could guess the sort of suggestion most likely to be chosen. My goal was to suggest a location that did not reference any specific fantasy story but contained some sort of descriptor that could be interpreted as fantastical.

the Narrative by having the villain perish by falling from a ladder. I have indicated the direct suggestion on the rubric under Location, and the indirect suggestion under Restrictions, outside any one Restriction. This is intended to indicate its affects over all the other elements of the performance¹³.

The remainder of *Quest Friends Forever*, from a performance standpoint, unfolds in a relatively simple and consistent fashion from show to show. Much of the work of the improvisers lies in demonstrating the Location and Roles as influenced by the audience's suggestions. The Narrative of a fantasy adventure has certain expected elements, such as a final encounter with the villain. The Dungeon Master's narration helps to progress the story and prevent the improvisers from spending too long on any one scene. The characters have clear status relationships with the villain and each other, which will usually shift by the end of the play, such as the villain being defeated or the heroes overcoming their own insecurities. Spontaneity is achieved on the part of the actors through the mutable quality of a wholly improvised environment. With no costumes beyond capes, the improvisers can freely interpret what it means to be a "half-orc wizard" and the like. This lack of Material Restrictions is a frequent source of humour for the cast. For example, at the October 2017 show I attended, it was revealed that one character "had been nude the whole time"; a moment not possible if the audience takes the clothing of the performers at face value. The format also adheres to many principles of Narrative structure as described by Johnstone such as reincorporation (K. Johnstone 112) and the interruption of routine (138). Everything discussed so far forms the current core of the *Quest Friends Forever*, but there were

¹³ It is possible the Restriction Rubric should include a separate section for the recording of suggestions and a way to distinguish between Direct and Indirect suggestions, but since the primary focus of this thesis is Restrictions and audience participation, not suggestions, I cannot be sure of this at this time.

several versions before the current incarnation. The progression of changes gives some further insight into the choices the cast has made in the development of the format.

Previous versions of the format I have attended include a performance at the 2017 Ottawa Comic Con and one at the 2017 Ottawa Fringe Festival. The Fringe production featured several elements that prior versions did not, some of which were kept for subsequent shows. Hannay explains in his questionnaire that, in the larger venue used for the Fringe show, the cast endeavoured to create more interesting visuals on stage and took workshops in improvised stage combat in order to live up to the expectations of the larger space (Hannay Questionnaire 8). The dice at the Fringe version were given to specific audience members, who kept them for the duration of the show. This was due to the time constraint of transferring the dice from person to person. In a smaller space with more flexible time allowance, Hannay prefers involving more audience members (Hannay 8). The performance I attended at Ottawa Comic Con was shorter, only a little over 30 minutes, but at this show the dice were passed from person to person. With no backstage area, all the performers, including the Dungeon Master, were visible at all times.

The Comic Con performance also began with a short playing of a Game called “World’s Worst”, which is fairly well known as it was played on *Whose Line is it Anyway?*. In this Game, players deliver examples of the “world’s worst version of something”, one at a time. For this show, Hannay asked the audience for D&D themed suggestions, including a class (they received “bard”), monster (“owl bear”), and “person to play D&D with”. This Game was unconnected to the subsequent performance of *Quest Friends Forever*, intended only to warm up the audience. This gives us the opportunity to examine what a more conventional “improv game”, illustrated in Figure 4.2. World’s Worst is a simple Game, reflected in the amount of empty space in the rubric. The Game involves no interaction between players, and no clear Locations, Roles, or

Narratives are ever established. While the variety of Restrictions on this format is low, the Game Restriction present is very limiting. There is essentially no room to deviate, structurally, from the typical way the Game is played. Asking for a Location, for example, would barely have a noticeable effect and would seem out of place. The only thing that can be noticeably adjusted is the Duration of the Game, as one could in theory play for an hour if one was not worried about the Game becoming boring. Despite all of this, World's Worst does allow performers a surprising range of choice in regards to their performance. Most of the descriptions of Affected Elements in Figure 4.2 are typical of World's Worst, but are not strict requirements. While short, one sided scenes, featuring a single joke are the norm, this may be a case of improvisers copying a formula that they have observed to work. On *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, the improvisers would usually continue until cut off by the host hitting a buzzer. This convention of being as fast as possible has, it seems, been internalized by many improvisers. All this is a reminder that what is typical is not always inherent or fundamental to a structure. Focussing on what has been done is often less helpful than focussing on what could be done.

The tendency for improvisers to open shows for audiences who may not be familiar with improvised theatre with short games is a convention that seems to stem more from habit rather than any real evidence of benefit. In the case of *Quest Friend Forever*'s use of World's Worst, I believe they are attempting to foreground the 'openness of the performance to amendment' by inviting the audience to give multiple suggestions early on. In theory, the main event will do this already through the use of the dice, but the audience at a Comic Con panel may need more explicit signifiers than audiences who regularly attend improvised theatre. That this was a concern for the cast is evident in the phrasing they used to ask for suggestions.

RESTRICTIONS	Location	Roles World's worst example of a kind of person	Narrative	Games World's Worst	Materials
Audience Awareness		Suggested		Suggested	
Scope					
Duration		Until a new suggestion is asked for		Typically multiple suggestions. Typically lasts a few minutes	
Players		One at a time		Most or all performers one at a time	
Affected Elements					
Space				Performers form line and step forward	
Time				Once audience gets the joke players step back	
Speech				Speak in-character to unseen character	
Physicality				Limited. As much as needed for joke	

Figure 4.13: Restrictions for a Typical Playing of World's Worst

Hannay asked the audience to create the hero and a villain of the story by filling in blanks for him. This resulted in “Bob, the high intelligence, high strength, low dexterity, elf mage”. A somewhat simpler process was used for the villain, resulting in “Clarence, the mind flayer, whose weakness is music”. Finally, a fantasy location was asked for. While later versions of the show cut down on the number of different suggestions, the addition of more characters requiring a race, class, and name, keeps the total number of suggestions quite high. Every one of the versions of *Quest Friends Forever* I have seen, has featured a number of different suggestions,

and involved some members of the audience through die rolling. Because of this, the audience is quite active during the show. Many improvised shows ask for a multitude of suggestions, but *Quest Friends Forever* invites the audience on stage and has them perform actions (the rolling of dice). Does this extra involvement constitute the kind of participation we observe in *Blind Date* and *Undercover*? The short answer is no. It is worth understanding exactly why, so I will go into further detail.

4.3 Pawns or Players: *Quest Friends Forever* and the Audience

Quest Friends Forever takes multiple steps to ensure the audience feels involved in the performance, and makes it clear that the performance is ‘open to amendment’. We can consider the opening scene and the rolling of dice as the moments when the audience is invited to affect the performance. During the opening scene, three members of the audience are brought on stage and asked a series of questions to help create the characters who will serve as heroes of the story. After this, they are given large prop dice and asked to sit down. Throughout the show the DM will halt the action of the story at various points to announce that there is a chance of failure and the dice will determine the outcome. The DM will announce the number between 1 and 20 required for success and ask for a roll from the audience member holding the die with the colour corresponding to the cape of the hero attempting the task. In some cases, a roll may be required from multiple characters. If the roller does not call out the number, a cast member will look to see the number and announce it loudly enough for everyone to hear. After an audience member has rolled a die, the DM will request that they pass it to someone near them. There is enough to distinguish the process of character creation from the process of rolling the dice to label them separate instances of audience involvement, and so we will create a Rubric for each, seen in Figure 4.3 and Figure 4.4.

AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT METRICS			
NUMBER	One	Multiple	All
METHOD	Suggestion	Storytelling	Performance
AGENCY	Prompted	Free Segmented	Free Continuous
DURATION	Moment	Scene	Whole Play

Figure 4.14: Audience Participation in *Quest Friends Forever* Character Creation

This rubric represents the opening scene of *Quest Friends Forever*. Three audience members are brought on stage for a scene, and endowed as being players who are late for a game of Dungeons and Dragons. Despite being endowed as characters, I argue that their participation in the scene does not constitute performance, and the audience participants, as a result, do not become audience-performers. First, there is the question of Agency. As Hannay explains, open ended questions are avoided in this scenario (Hannay Questionnaire 7). Rather, the participants are asked leading questions, and, in the case of the options for fantasy races and classes, are simply provided with a list of options. It is not uncommon in improvised comedy for the improvisers to ask for a suggestion in a way that makes the audience member providing the answer appear to have a greater degree of Agency than they really possess. One example of this technique is to decrease the Number of participants in the exchange to one improviser and one audience member. An improviser might ask someone in the front row directly, rather than having the entire audience shout out suggestions. This makes the person in the front row look important, and indeed they are having a real impact on the performance. However, they are still being prompted by the improviser, who may ask them to name an occupation or even to invent an object, for example by asking “what do I have under this hat?”

In some cases, an improviser might single out an audience member because they want to ask them for a longer answer, such as what they did that day before coming to the show. This will usually constitute a storytelling Method of audience involvement, but it does not actually change the Agency of the audience member. They are still providing their suggestion or their story within the window of opportunity created by the improviser. For Agency to go beyond this, the participant must have a degree of control over when and for how long they are involved. This is important to remember, because while certain Methods often pair with certain Agencies, it is not inherently required. It is possible, for example, to see an instance of prompted performance. In such a situation, an audience member would be allowed to perform as a character in the improvisation, but only within a specific window of opportunity prompted by an improviser. This might involve an audience member reading a monologue that the performers then use as inspiration. *Quest Friends Forever* may be providing us with an example of just such an occurrence, since the chosen audience members may be understood to be characters in a scene while on stage (remember that the lights go off and on between the welcoming statements and the selection of the audience members). In my introduction, I establish performance in improvised theatre as being the spontaneous creation of dramatic performance. We have established also, that according to Johnston, Frost, and Yarrow, this means the use of speech, gesture, and other behaviour to communicate an idea or character in a situation understood as fictional (C. Johnston xiii, Frost and Yarrow 4). Should the audience volunteers in this scene be understood as performing, or as giving suggestions?

Blind Date showed that playing oneself can absolutely constitute performance. In that format, the Date is told to just be himself, but within the context of a fictional play. *Quest Friends Forever*, however, does not appear to affect its audience in the same ways as *Blind Date*,

so we must ask why it does not. *Quest Friends Forever*'s opening scene bears a strong resemblance to the first Time Out from both *Blind Date* and *Undercover*. The improvisers are partially in character, but the audience members are not in character at all. It is possible to see the audience members as playing the characters of "players at a D&D game". However, are they truly adopting characters or are they just answering questions about their real lives to fuel the show? If, in *Blind Date*, Mimi interviewed the Date in the Time Out zone for 90 minutes, I do not believe we would say the Date had actually performed. Similarly, if the Date were interviewed for 20 minutes and then another improviser played the role of the Date based on his answers to Mimi's questions, we could safely say that the Date only provided suggestions. The whole scene is understood as setting up the information necessary for the Narrative rather than being a part of the Narrative. In *Quest Friends Forever*, the improvisers instead explain the concept of roleplaying a character in Dungeons and Dragons. This helps the audience members on stage understand that they will be helping to create the characters for the show, but I believe it also reassures them that they are not being asked to perform. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, the cast intentionally asks "leading questions" rather than open ended ones, which supports the idea that the audience participants are not meant to feel pressured to come up with original ideas (Hannay Questionnaire 7). Of course, sometimes the audience may do more than is expected of them. At a show I attended on October 14th, one of the audience members on stage asked if his character could be a "Halfling", even though the options presented to him were "Half-orc", "Human", "Dwarf", and "Elf". The improvisers responded that yes, he could, and the improviser playing the character being created, adjusted his Physicality accordingly, by sinking to his knees to appear shorter. In this scenario the audience member seems to be communicating his own ideas rather than only choosing between options presented to him. This displays a

moment of Agency that is less Prompted than the improvisers may have been expecting, but in fact, it is still only an attempt to provide an answer to the question of “what race would you like your character to be”. The Method of participation, therefore, is still best characterized as suggestion and not performance.

Rolling the dice presents a new set of factors to consider, though it is in fact quite similar to the opening scene in its metrics. Figure 4.4 illustrates the differences between this involvement and the opening scene. From a theoretical standpoint, the only difference between the opening scene of *Quest Friends Forever*, and the rolling of the dice throughout the show, is that the rolling of the dice has a shorter Duration. The Number of people rolling dice at one time could be anywhere from one to three, but what we are more interested in is how many audience members are given the opportunity to roll dice over the course of the show. Not every member of the audience will have the chance to roll, but more people than the three from the opening scene will. Rolling the dice takes only a moment, and the DM always initiates the rolling, but does the actual rolling of the dice constitute a moment of performance? Just as with the opening scene, whichever member of the audience rolls the die does not communicate a character or idea in a fictional context, but rather supplies a number that informs the performance of the improvisers. The audience member rolling the die is not even in control of the number. Furthermore, the DM decides how high a number is needed for success, and the improvisers determine what success or failure looks like. Thus while rolling dice is the performance of an action, it is not performance.

AUDIENCE INVOLVEMENT METRICS			
NUMBER	One	Multiple	All
METHOD	Suggestion	Storytelling	Performance
AGENCY	Prompted	Free Segmented	Free Continuous
DURATION	Moment	Scene	Whole Play

Figure 15.4: Audience Participation when Rolling the Dice

4.4 Levelling Up, Looking Forward – Concluding Thoughts

Quest Friends Forever is the only one of my case studies that does not involve performance on the part of audience participants. One purpose of my new dramaturgy of improvised theatre is to expand the scope of our definitions to include improvised theatre that complicates the relationship to the audience through the use of audience-performers. However, my intention for the rubric is that it applies to all improvised theatre, and not only formats using audience-performers. While *Quest Friends Forever* does not feature audience-performers, it does feature audience participation. The audience members from the opening scene are more noteworthy than an average member of the audience, but they have little more impact than anyone whose suggestion is chosen. More impact perhaps, but not a significant amount for our consideration. It is still important to consider all of the efforts to include the audience. The autopoietic feedback loop is in full force in *Quest Friends Forever*. There is a heightened awareness of the multiple layers of performance present through the repeated addresses to the audience. While the relationship between the improvisers and the audience is fundamentally still the same as in most improvised theatre, and even in scripted theatre, that relationship is highlighted. The feedback-loop still only contains performer and audience, but we should be mindful that the relationship between the two is more visible, more felt by those present in the room than it would be at many other performances.

CHAPTER 5: GRIMPROV'S GUIDED ROLEPLAY

5.1 You Find Yourself in an Improv Scene, What Do You Do?

We have now looked at two productions in which a single audience member takes on a performance role, and one format in which many audience members are included in shorter moments of participation. In this chapter I will focus on a particular format called *Guided Roleplay* developed and performed by the group GRIMprov. It represents a middle ground in some ways between *Blind Date*, *Undercover* and *Quest Friends Forever*. In the first two shows, a spotlight is placed on the Date and the Rookie, respectively. In *Quest Friends Forever*, the spotlight is diffused, so to speak, across the whole audience. What would happen if the audience were to take turns in the spotlight, combining some of the techniques we have discussed so far? This is what GRIMprov does, inviting multiple audience members to take turns as the central figure in the improvisation. As we will see, this turns the performance into a complex collective effort. Before discussing *Guided Roleplay* specifically, the general context of a GRIMprov show should be understood.

GRIMprov is comprised of performing members Joel Garrow, Mike Kosowan, Drew McFadyen, and Jordan Moffat, with DJ Helicase (Austin Vair) providing live music. The troupe performs twice a month at The Cock and Lion¹⁴, a pub located below street level in downtown Ottawa. At the back of the room, the troupe moves tables and chairs aside to create a makeshift performance space, with audience members watching from tables with drinks and food.

GRIMprov's performance nearly always begin with a performance of a 'Cul-de-Sac', a format

¹⁴ At time of writing the Cock and Lion is undergoing renovations by new management and a change in name. The effects the new arrangement of the space will have on the troupe remains to be seen.

similar to the Montage described in Chapter 1 (Leep 71), with the variation that each improviser asks for a suggestion for a total of four suggestions. The Cul-de-Sac is so named because it takes the form of a series of scenes that have a tendency to ‘circle back around’ to the initial offers. There are no clear rules for a Cul-de-Sac besides this short description, and often the format ends up progressing in whichever way the audience seems to be enjoying most, adding to the casual environment of GRIMprov’s performances. Most GRIMprov shows follow the Cul-de-Sac with “a newly developed experimental form” which can range from the incorporation of various theatrical techniques to attempts at mixing improvisation with popular movies (GRIMprov Website). Any of these formats can be understood through their Restrictions like any of the other improvised performances we have discussed, but each is usually only performed once. *Guided Roleplay* is unique in that the format went through four different versions before achieving its current form. I attended the three most recent incarnations, and with questionnaires from two members of the troupe, we can track the changes to the format from inception to its present shape.

In *Guided Roleplay*, the audience’s participation comes in the form of acting in the role of the Protagonist in a Roleplaying game, conceptually not unlike *Quest Friends Forever*. Similar to *Blind Date* and *Undercover*, the members of GRIMprov pass around a sign-up sheet before the show, so those who wish to be called on stage may express their interest. The performance then begins with an explanation of the Restrictions of the format (though GRIMprov does not use that term). The first audience member is then called on stage and seated in the middle of the stage. This audience member is referred to as the “player” by the improvisers (Kosowan Questionnaire 3) and I will refer to them as the “Player” in the same fashion as the Date or Rookie. Like in *Blind Date* or *Undercover*, the Player is the protagonist of the narrative,

but unlike in those formats, GRIMprov changes between multiple Players in one performance. The exact mechanics of how this is accomplished, as well as other Restrictions for the format, changes with each new version of the show. The first version of *Guided Roleplay* I attended was subtitled *Castle of Chaos*. After that, I also attended *Village of the Damned* and *Guided Roleplay 4*. I will go into some detail about the differences between these versions, but we are primarily interested in the evolution of the format's structure, so I will focus mainly on the elements that were kept from one show to the next. As will become clear, the essential element of this format lies in how the improvisers interact with the audience, as narrators of a game they are inventing based on the audience member's choices.

Figure 5.1 shows a Restriction rubric for *Castle of Chaos*, performed February 22, 2017. The performance begins with McFadyen explaining the basic rules of the format. The Location is a fantasy world, similar to one found in a typical of Dungeons and Dragons game. The Player takes the role of a solitary hero, and Garrow, Kosowan, and Moffat fill in the details of the world, while McFadyen serves as Dungeon Master in a similar fashion to Chris Hannay's role in *Quest Friends Forever*. McFadyen serves both as both a narrator of the story, and as a facilitator for the interaction between the Player and the other improvisers. The Narrative is to be a quest to find the titular "castle of chaos" and kill the evil warlock at the top of the tower. The format also draws on aspects of the Dungeons and Dragons rules, such as character creation. The first question the Player is asked is what 'class' they would like to play. This is very similar to the character creation from *Quest Friends Forever*, with the Player being presented with choices, but it is a faster and less involved process. McFadyen asks Players what kind of character they wish to play, presenting the options of a Warrior, Wizard, or Rogue. Each new Player goes through character creation when first joining the stage and as the performance progresses, more options

are added and the Players are able to suggest options of their own. This is one of three rules of the format that I consider Games, in the same way as *Blind Date*'s Time Outs or *Undercover*'s Private Conversations. The second Game is that every five minutes McFadyen will find a reason for the Player to die, and call the next participant to the stage. The third Game is the set of rules by which the Player navigates the world of the play. For this, *Guided Roleplay* draws on tropes of D&D but also of text-based, point-and-click adventure computer games, and choose-your-own-adventure books (Moffatt Questionnaire 3, Kosowan Questionnaire 3). The Player 'roleplays' their character by narrating what they wish to do, rather than acting it out, much like the "descriptive approach" outlined in the D&D *Player's Handbook* (185). After McFadyen narrates the basics of a location to the Player, Garrow, Kosowan, and Moffat each describe an object or character that the Player can choose to investigate further, in a style improvisers frequently refer to as "scene painting" (Moffatt Questionnaire 3). In Figure 5.1, we can see how the three diegetic Restrictions of Location, Role, and Narrative are employed in tandem with the non-diegetic¹⁵ Restrictions, Games and Materials, to communicate the correct tone for the world of the performance. The plot and characters, placed within the generic fantasy Location, evoke the sort of "text-based games" that Garrow, Kosowan, McFadyen, and Moffatt, are hoping will resonate with the audience. It is evident that Role is the most important Restriction overall.

Garrow, Kosowan, and Moffat are restricted heavily in their Speech, Physicality, and use of

¹⁵ I use the term non-diegetic here as opposed to "extradiegetic" due to the latter's specific use by Gérard Genette in *Narrative Discourse*. Genette defines extradiegetic as the level of the narrator's voice, as opposed to the diegetic level of the characters or the metadiegetic level of a story within a story (228). In *The Language of Film*, Edgar, Marland, and Rawle use extradiegetic to refer to narration such as voice-overs with reference to Genette's usage (56), as well as "non-diegetic" to mean anything part of a film not part of the diegesis, such as the musical score or credits (164). To avoid confusion between an improviser narrating from off stage (an extradiegetic event) with the explanation of a game, Game and Materials are best understood as non-diegetic Restrictions.

Space because of their Roles as the ‘scene painters’. Besides describing the objects, they also physicalize them, either miming the use of the object or acting as the object. They must find ways to progress the Narrative, and say “Yes, and”, not only to the Player, but to each other. They must also be humourous within the parameters of describing objects and characters that could just as easily be forgotten as investigated.

Despite the otherwise spartan performance conditions, GRIMprov shows do feature sound and lighting. The group attaches remote-controlled LED stage lights to the ceiling. DJ Helicase provides music from a sound board beside the performance space. Each aspect of the performance is done in full view of the audience and the physical separation between the improvisers and their audience is frequently quite thin. “The improvisers usually have to find a space to perform within the audience”, says Moffatt. He adds that “this further adds to the feeling that the experience is one of participation rather than observation” (Moffatt Questionnaire 8). *Blind Date* and *Undercover* create a physical signifier, the Time Out zone, to represent the permeable barrier between the on stage and off stage world. GRIMprov creates a similar effect through more intangible means. Through repeated actions that draw the audience’s attention to the performers’ awareness of the audience, GRIMprov fosters an environment in which any accident or unforeseen moment can become a moment of connection. For example, at one point during the *Castle of Chaos* show, it was suggested in the scene that dwarves can speak to possums since they both live underground. In response to laughter from the audience, Kosowan turned towards the crowd and exclaimed, - “it makes sense!” - making clear that engaging directly with the audience is something GRIMprov will break character to do. Kosowan describes the feeling of performing close to the audience in his questionnaire, saying “We have no backstage, wings or fourth wall meaning we are part audience and part performer” (Kosowan 8).

RESTRICTIONS	Location	Roles	Narrative	Games	Materials
	Fantasy world	Dungeon Master, Player, scene painters	Scale the castle and kill the warlock	Character creation, scene painting, timed death	Remote controlled lights, DJ for sound, small space
Audience Awareness	Explained	Explained	Explained	Explained	Evident
Scope					
Duration	Whole Play	Player – Scene Others – Whole Play	Whole Play	Whole Play	Whole Play
Players	All	All, one Player at a time	All	Character creation: DM and Player. Others All	Improvisers control LFX. DJ for SFX
Affected Elements					
Space		Improvisers create circle around Player.		Player sits in chair centre stage.	Audience close to stage, improvisers face Player
Time		DM controls passage of time. Improvisers keep moments short		Every 5 min. DM kills Player	
Speech	Fantasy trope language	DM narrates in second-person. Others use cadence of text-based games			Performers compete with bar sounds
Physicality	Physicalize fantasy objects (suits of armour, chests)	Improvisers physicalize their described objects and characters			Small play space to perform within

Figure 5.16 Restriction Rubric for GRIMprov's *Guided Roleplay: Castle of Chaos*

5.2 Checkpoint Reached – The Structures of *Guided Roleplay*

Each remounting of *Guided Roleplay* has featured significant changes from the previous incarnations. Moffatt explains in his questionnaire, that it is unusual for GRIMprov to repeat show formats, and that *Guided Roleplay* is one of the group’s favourites (Moffatt 2). Each incarnation has featured both significant changes to the Narrative and the rules for cycling through participants. The first version of the format I saw, *Castle of Chaos*, was in fact the second version overall. In the first incarnation of the show, the Player was attempting to escape from a room. Each new Player would restart from the beginning, which tested their memory of what previous Players had done. Moffatt explains that the group received complaints about this aspect of the show, with many feeling that restarting each time, “instead of being *humorously* repetitive, was *annoyingly* repetitive” (Moffatt 2). This caused GRIMprov to introduce the idea of a “checkpoint”. If a Player made significant progress, they would be declared to have reached a checkpoint and “the next participant in the story would begin from there, rather from the beginning” (Moffatt 2). Kosowan adds in his questionnaire, that a major decision point from the beginning was how quickly to replace Players. The troupe rehearsed with the idea of a “three strike rule”, but Kosowan says that “the first performance had far too many players so we adapted by having very severe consequences” (Kosowan 4). Along with the checkpoint system, *Castle of Chaos* added the more complex Location and Narrative Restrictions of a fantasy world and quest.

The second *Guided Roleplay* I saw was subtitled *Village of the Damned*, and this version took place in a “macabre village” with no discernable Restriction on the Narrative. The Player simply explored the environment, encountering various objects and puzzles inspired by horror movies and games. With fewer story based Restrictions, it became clear to me that the basic

foundation of *Guided Roleplay* was the Roles, since this was the most consistent element of the format. The interaction between the Dungeon Master, the scene partners, and the audience, was the key to the success of the format. The remaining problem the group was focusing on was how to incorporate multiple Players from the audience. For *Village of the Damned*, the group added a deck of cards “to take the decision away from the actors...placing the responsibility onto the audience player” (Kosowan Questionnaire 4). Each time that a Player did something the Dungeon Master deemed risky or dangerous, the Player drew from the deck of cards. The deck consists of four blank “life” cards and three marked “death cards”. If the Player drew a death card, their character died and the next audience member took over. During the show, it quickly became clear that this made it possible for one audience member to remain on stage for far too long. The first Player happened to draw six ‘life cards’ in a row, which caused McFadyen to change the rules of the deck during the show. While this was not made explicit until after the show, it was not hard to determine that he had begun removing the cards as they were drawn rather than shuffling them back into the deck. This caused the chances of death to increase with each subsequent risky decision, ensuring that the fifth card would always prove fatal. This also added a sense of tension appropriate for the new horror theme of the show.

In *Guided Roleplay 4*, the format more closely resembled the original *Guided Roleplay*, which I did not see, but have learned of through the questionnaires. Moffatt explains that the game he was most directly inspired by was Douglas Adams’s “*Hitchhiker’s Guide to the Galaxy* text adventure game” (Moffatt 3). Both Moffatt and Kosowan were interested in the aspect of “choosing incorrectly” in text-based games and choose your own adventure books. *Guided Roleplay 4* returns to this basic premise, with the Player attempting to escape from a Location suggested by the audience, and potentially uncovering additional plots along the way. To echo a

sentiment of Keith Johnstone discussed in Chapter 1, “once you decide to ignore content...you can concentrate on structure” (K. Johnstone 111). While the content of each version of *Guided Roleplay* is unique, it is the differences and similarities in the structures that we care about. In order to better visually represent the changes in Restrictions from one version to the next, I have altered the rubric. Figure 5.2 shows all three versions on one rubric, but only the Restrictions. Scope and Affected Elements are nearly identical across each show to those shown in Figure 5.1.

In *Guided Roleplay 4*, the Player needed to escape from a Location, similar to the Narrative of the very first *Guided Roleplay*. The checkpoints introduced in *Castle of Chaos* remain, as does the deck of cards introduced in *Village of the Damned*, in order to facilitate cycling through multiple Players. The character creation from *Castle of Chaos* was no longer relevant to the genre in *Village of the Damned* and has therefore been dropped. The scene painting done by Garrow, Kosowan, and Moffatt remains as a central element of the format. With the exception of the addition of the physical deck of cards, the materials of the performance remain the same throughout all the versions.

The Restriction of Location changes completely from version to version. In *Guided Roleplay 4*, the troupe no longer predetermined the Location. Instead, it was a suggestion from the audience. In each version, the Location becomes less entwined with the other Restrictions. In *Castle of Chaos*, the Fantasy World inspires Games like the character creation and influences the kind of Narratives that make sense within the world. In *Village of the Damned*, the Location is still predetermined and meant to set a certain tone, but does not have much of an effect beyond this. In *Guided Roleplay 4*, the Location is still a huge inspiration for the performance, since the goal of the Players is to escape from the Location. The specific Location still has influence over the improvisation, but not on a structural level.

RESTRICTIONS	Location	Roles	Narrative	Games	Materials
SHOW VERSION					
CASTLE OF CHAOS	Fantasy world	DM, Player, scene painters	Climb the castle, slay the evil warlock	Character creation, scene painting, timed death, checkpoints	Lights, sound, small playing space
VILLAGE OF THE DAMNED	Creepy village	DM, Player, scene painters	Explore and survive the village	Scene painting, checkpoints, deck of fate	Lights, sound, small playing space, deck of cards
GUIDED ROLEPLAY 4	Suggested by audience	DM, Player, scene painters	Escape the Location	Scene painting, checkpoints, deck of fate	Lights, sound, small playing space, deck of cards

Figure 5.17: Restrictions Across All *Guided Roleplay* versions

The Restriction that changes the least between shows is the Roles. The set-up of a Dungeon Master, three scene painters, and an audience Player is the core of this format. What GRIMprov seems to have realized over the course of four performances, is that these Roles create plenty of complexity on their own without extra predetermined elements.

Guided Roleplay 4 as a format could be used again immediately with no additional preparation as the audience simply supplies a new Location. Having an audience participant on stage, and having multiple participants in one show, will naturally create unexpected moments. GRIMprov seems to thrive on being ‘open to amendment’ as demonstrated by their willingness to use direct address to the audience during the Cul-de-Sac, and of course the *Guided Roleplay* format itself. The Roles of the show form the basis of the improvisers’ interaction with the audience participants. By stripping away many of the Restrictions besides the Roles, I believe GRIMprov has, whether consciously or not, isolated the part of the format that allows them to be the most ‘open to amendment’.

5.3 Be the Audience-Performer of Your Own Story

I have described that the use of the audience in *Guided Roleplay* existed somewhere between *Blind Date*, *Undercover*, and *Quest Friends Forever*. It is not only that the format combines elements seen in other shows. *Guided Roleplay*'s use of the audience affects the autopoietic feedback loop differently from the other case studies. Before I discuss these new effects, we must consider how the participation of the audience compares to the productions examined in previous chapters. At first glance, we can see that in comparison with the works of Spontaneous Theatre, the Agency and Duration of audience participation has been reduced, but at the same time, the number of participants has increased. Figure 5.3 shows audience participation as it exists in all versions of *Guided Roleplay*.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION METRICS			
NUMBER	One	Multiple	All
METHOD	Suggestion	Storytelling	Performance
AGENCY	Prompted	Free Segmented	Free Continuous
DURATION	Moment	Scene (one each)	Whole Play

Figure 5.18: Audience Participation in *Guided Roleplay*

The choices for where to place *Guided Roleplay* on this rubric may not be immediately obvious. The number of participants depends on how many audience members sign up during intermission. While the show could theoretically be done similar to *Blind Date* with a single audience member, GRIMprov designed the format around the assumption that multiple audience members would want to participate.

I have chosen to describe the Method by which the Players participate as performance. While the improvisers do physicalize the objects they describe, *Guided Roleplay* is based on

text-based video games featuring “limited movement” (Kosowan Questionnaire 3), and the Player is meant to sit in a chair and be less active than the improvisers. However, the first Player in *Castle of Chaos* showed a strong instinct towards physical performance, rather than just narrating her actions. The limited space available made this difficult, and the improvisers assured her that she could simply sit and verbalize her actions. As discussed with *Quest Friends Forever*, physical actions do not necessarily imply performance, and performance does not necessarily require physicalizations. What differentiates this from the opening scene of *Quest Friends Forever*, which we determined did not involve performance from the audience, is that the Players in *Guided Roleplay* are understood to be representing their own characters. While less recognizable as performance than acting in a play, the Players are making creative choices within a fictional world and communicating their choices to the improvisers and the audience through voice and gesture.

The Agency of the Player can look prompted at times, but I can demonstrate that is free but segmented. With *Undercover*, we observed how thin the line between free segmented and free continuous Agency can be. With *Guided Roleplay*, we see a similarly thin line between prompted and free segmented Agency. When we describe audience participation as being prompted, we may picture the classic suggestion format, “we need a _____”, the “fill in the blank” formula. The improvisers give a clear indication of what sort of contribution they require, the audience members provide this, and with that, cease their involvement. However, this scenario is actually a combination of a Method of suggestion, a prompted Agency, and a momentary Duration, rather than being only a function of Agency. This is important because changing only one metric’s value can result in a significantly different experience. For example, we could imagine a scene where the Method of participation is still a suggestion, the Agency of

the participant is still prompted, but the Duration is a scene of three to four minutes. This combination of metrics describes the audience participation in the Game “Pillars”¹⁶, a much different format from *Guided Roleplay*. Because *Guided Roleplay* features such a clear formula for the Player’s participation, it could be argued that the Player only has prompted Agency, and I would agree that it is closer to prompted than to free and continuous. However, having participated as a Player myself in *Guided Roleplay 4* and having watched over 20 other Players participate, I will argue that that, as a Player, one has a great deal of control over all aspects of one’s participation. In *Castle of Chaos*, Players were able to suggest new character creation options. At every show, each Player had their own style of describing their actions, and many Players went well beyond the minimum level of participation that would be required to move the narrative forward. Moffatt believes that the “best kind of audience member is one who does things we don’t expect them to do” (Moffatt 6). Therefore, I am classifying the Agency of the Player in *Guided Roleplay* as free and segmented. GRIMprov is looking for participants who “are willing to play” (Kosowan 6), not ones they need to prompt constantly.

Lastly, there is the question of the Duration of participation. Because the format requires the Players to be killed off and replaced, I have determined that each audience member’s turn as the Player constitutes one Scene. The rubric itself describes the entire *Guided Roleplay* performance, not including the Cul-de-Sac format performed beforehand. In *Guided Roleplay 4*, there is an additional moment of audience participation that, while part of the *Guided Roleplay* format, requires its own rubric. This is the beginning of the performance, when the audience is asked to suggest the Location, and this is illustrated in Figure 5.4. Figure 5.4 looks like the rubric

¹⁶ In Pillars, one or more audience members stand on stage as “pillars” and are instructed to say the first word that pops into their mind when prompted. Improvisers prompt the “pillars” by tapping them on shoulders, hands, or some other agreed upon method ([Improv Encyclopedia](#)).

we would use to describe any typical solicitation of a suggestion from the entire audience. All participation after this moment is covered under Figure 5.3.

AUDIENCE PARTICIPATION METRICS			
NUMBER	One	Multiple	All
METHOD	Suggestion	Storytelling	Performance
AGENCY	Prompted	Free Segmented	Free Continuous
DURATION	Moment	Scene	Whole Play

Figure 5.19: Audience Participation at Start of *Guided Roleplay*

Figure 5.4 is different in every possible metric from Figure 5.3. If a single metric changed values, we would use a new rubric, but as every metric is different we know we are dealing with a much different instance of audience participation. This particular instance is not very complex on its own, but the more distinct instances of audience participation are in a show, the more complex the relationship to the audience becomes.

In previous chapters, we have seen that a sure way increase the complexity in an instance of audience participation is to have multiple audience-performers. When Northan invited a stunt-double on stage in *Blind Date*, she lowered the Agency of the Date and stunt-double to compensate. GRIMprov only brings one audience participant on stage at a time, but they are all given a lot of Agency. GRIMprov's *Guided Roleplay* show, including the opening Cul-de-Sac, features a particularly unique alteration of the autopoietic feedback loop.

5.4 All the Room's a Stage and All the Audience Potential Performers

In all improvised theatre there is a foregrounding of the autopoietic feedback loop. Not only is the performance live, but it is “explicitly open to amendment”. Acknowledgment of the

audience, such as through asking for a suggestion, highlights this. The performers may also invite the audience to exercise more power of the performance. In his answers to the questionnaire, Moffatt says of the challenge of memorizing facts during *Guided Roleplay*, “sometimes as an improviser you can get away with being lazy on stage, but when an audience member is calling the shots, you have to always be on” (Moffatt 4). During the Cul-de-Sac which GRIMprov performed on June 7th before *Village of the Damned*, this interaction took place:

MOFFATT (referencing a suggestion received before the scene): “...a glove with four fingers and three thumbs.”

KOSOWAN (from off stage): “Two thumbs!”

SEVERAL AUDIENCE MEMBERS (in unison): “Three thumbs!”

KOSOWAN: “Oh, sorry!”

MCFADYEN: “I don’t pay you to talk, I pay you to type!”

KOSOWAN: “You pay me to answer phones!”

In this exchange, Moffatt acknowledges the audience’s contribution to the performance indirectly by incorporating the suggestion of “a glove with four fingers and three thumbs”. Kosowan then demonstrates the permeable nature of the wall between improviser and audience. While not addressing the audience directly, he acknowledges the suggestion and foregrounds the fallibility of improvised performance, questioning Moffatt’s recollection of the suggestion. The audience reacts to this, not only by laughing at the meta-humour, but by exercising the agency they have been endowed with and responding to the performers. McFadyen then reestablishes the reality of the scene, endowing Kosowan as a character who would have a reason to speak from off stage. Kosowan completes this action by accepting the character he has been given and responding in character. Here we see audiences expressing themselves as active participants in the performance event rather than inactive spectators. After the Cul-de-Sac, some audience

members become audience-performers as part of *Guided Roleplay*. When these audience-performers sit down, another level of complexity emerges.

Players in *Guided Roleplay* do not lose their double identity as audience-performers when they leave the stage. This is because of the principle described by Erika Fisher-Lichte, that any action at a live event contributes to the autopoietic feedback loop no matter how small (Fischer-Lichte 19). The fact that a Player is no longer performing when they are removed from the stage, does not change the fact that the audience now knows this person's name and voice, and has seen them perform. This is reinforced by the subsequent performance of the next participant, as they must remember what their predecessor did within the narrative in order to avoid the same fate. There are now four identities within the autopoietic feedback loop rather than two or three, each connected to each of the others. This new point of contact, which I will call the "inactive audience participant", creates three new lines of autopoietic feedback in the loop. This describes an audience member who has participated, but is not currently participating. With performers and an audience there is one line of feedback, and with a single audience-performer added, there are three lines. With four separate identities, there are six lines of feedback. Figure 5.5 illustrates the relationships between these four identities as a square.

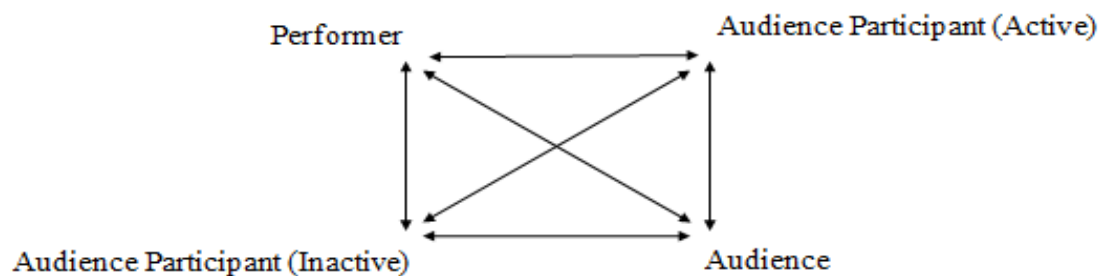


Figure 5.20: Autopoietic Feedback Loop with Four Identities

A hypothetical fifth identity would result in ten lines of feedback. At the risk of straying too far into mathematics, this sequence (1, 3, 6, 10 and so on) can be described as a “triangular sequence” and can be represented by the formula $N = N(N+1)/2$ where N is the number of points of contact (Weisstein). Each new number in the series contains all the previous numbers, in addition to adding the next number to the series. For example, 6 can be expressed as 1+2+3, and 10 can be expressed as 1+2+3+4. The relevance of this for our discussion is that each new element, not only adds new lines of interaction, but adds more new lines than the previous element. In other words, the complexity increases more and more with each additional identity. I do not think this would go on forever, though. The performance would reach a breaking point at which a critical mass of points of contact is achieved, and the autopoietic feedback loop becomes a tangled web. I theorize that this would resemble Gary Izzo’s “interactive theatre”, in which the sacred playing space is opened to all (Izzo 9). In such a scenario, the performers are simply there to encourage the “audience” to become performers for each other. GRIMprov stops short of this by limiting the number of active audience-performers at any one time, to one.

Each time a Player in *Guided Roleplay* is eliminated and returns to their seat, the performance takes on a slightly different quality. Even as the audience and improvisers turn their attention to the new Player, they now have an increased awareness of a fellow member of the spectating audience. While there is no system built into the format to encourage it, interaction with the former Players is, in theory, possible. One Player could, hypothetically, ask a previous Player to remind them of a key detail. This may be against the spirit of the format, but we have already noted the willingness of GRIMprov to interact with their audience outside the reality of a scene, and their aptitude at navigating these moments to maximize the humour of the

performance. Each Player who rejoins the audience adds to the sense that the performance is, as I have stated, “explicitly open to amendment” (Frost and Yarrow 1).

5.5 One of Many Possible Endings – Concluding Thoughts

Guided Roleplay is playing with many elements of storytelling, audience participation, and norms of improvised theatre in general. The group is attempting to capture the storytelling style of adventure games, notable for their “limited movement, strange items and puzzles” (Kosowan Questionnaire 3). This creates a performance style inherently lacking in complex visuals and meaningful interaction between characters. At the same time, they are counting on the audience’s participation to drive the structure of the show. Moffatt feels, that in this format, GRIMprov is relying on the audience members: “we are guiding them through the story, but they are guiding us through the improv” (Moffatt Questionnaire 5). Through its iterations, *Guided Roleplay* has revealed, that little else is needed for improvised theatre besides an audience. What we have learned from studying these iterations, is that the key to developing a format may be found in setting up Restrictions that allows one’s audience to participate best in whichever way you wish them to.

CONCLUSION

This thesis is a celebration of improvised theatre, and an expansion of the critical thinking surrounding it. I was attracted to each of the formats I have looked at because they made the audience an important part of the experience. When I tried to determine why, I realized the right tools to answer that question did not exist. My goal in writing this was to create those tools, and to determine what these shows had in common that made them so interesting.

I have shown that these four shows, and all improvised theatre, can all be understood as using Restrictions of Location, Role, Narrative, Games, and Materials, to structure the creativity of the improvisers into a form that will resonate with the audience in particular way. The Restrictions may be evident to the audience, or they may not. They may apply to one, some, or all the improvisers in the performance and may apply momentarily, for a scene, or for the whole play. Each Restriction's effect on the improvisers can be described in terms of how it restricts the use of Time, Space, Speech, and Physicality. It is my opinion, that the terminology I suggest and use in this thesis, better describes contemporary improvised theatre than the terms "short form" and "long form", since practitioners have moved beyond working within these binaries.

Expanding on the significance of my research to the academic study of improvisation going forward, my models allow artists to preserve and distribute descriptions of improvised theatre formats. Improvisers can develop new work by determining the extent to which they want to employ different Restrictions, or by taking a formless idea and attempting to map it to the rubric to determine what is necessary to make the idea into a useable format. Improvised theatre has previously lacked the artefacts of scripted theatre due to its lack of scripts. Of course there are written accounts and video recordings of many shows, but my model also does the work of separating the specifics of a particular performance from the underlying structure. The restriction

model provides us a tool to ‘read’ the structure of improvised theatre formats for the themes and concepts they reinforce.

In theatre and performance studies outside of improvised theatre, the Restriction model gives us the ability to read scripted theatre for its Restrictions as well. We can understand scripts as densely packed sets of restrictions that guide the creative energy of actors, directors, and designers. Beyond this we can also read a script or a performance for the open spaces in its restrictions, so to speak. Where has the playwright, or the director, left room for the unexpected?

I do foresee that certain changes may need to be made to the rubric. One limitation of the rubric is how the effects of suggestions on Restriction are represented. Direct suggestions can be included in the same column as the Restriction they affect. Indirect suggestions are harder to represent. Another element the rubric does not make clear is the degree to which the Restrictions affect each other, rather than being completely separate.

Being open to amendment during the performance is an essential quality of improvised theatre. Through the autopoietic feedback loop, the audience has an effect on the improvisers, and the improvisers on the audience, at all times. In many cases, improvised theatre invites the audience to participate through the offering of suggestions, or other means. With my audience participation metrics, we can now discuss audience participation in more concrete terms. The Number and Agency of participants, and the Method and Duration of the participation, combine to describe all potential cases of audience participation. This is both a descriptive model and a useable one. It allows scholars and critics to record and compare different instances of audience participation across multiple shows. It can also, I believe, be used to develop instances of participation within both improvised and scripted theatre.

Blind Date demonstrates how a heavy use of Restrictions can create an improvised show consistent enough to tour theatre for over ten years. The Restrictions create a structure that puts the focus of the improvisers on taking care of the audience participant. By tailoring the Restrictions towards a romantic narrative and limiting participation to a single audience member, Northan and other *Blind Date* performers can allow an audience participant to become an audience-performer. I have shown that granting the audience-performer a double identity adds an additional component to the autopoietic feedback loop, creating three avenues of feedback.

In *Undercover* we see the effects of the same audience participation metrics applied alongside a different set of Restrictions. *Undercover* maintains the three identities in the autopoietic feedback loop we observed in *Blind Date*, but adds more trained performers. This leads to less focus on the audience-performer, and creates a similar but distinct experience for the audience. *Quest Friends Forever* does not feature audience-performers, but does feature a high degree of audience participation in the form of multiple kinds of suggestion. This format is an example of contemporary improvised theatre that does not have as complex a relationship to the audience, but still pushes the boundaries of improvisation. Finally, GRIMprov's *Guided Roleplay* shows us "the next level" of the autopoietic feedback loop compared to *Blind Date* and *Undercover*. With multiple audience-performers, *Guided Roleplay* creates six lines of interaction. Such a complex relationship with the audience manifests as a fluid "back and forth", which the improvisers must facilitate. By examining three different versions of *Guided Roleplay*, I observed how GRIMprov naturally settled on a set of Restrictions that allowed them to focus the majority of their attention on negotiating the complex relationship to their audience.

Where I think the audience participation model excels is its ability to describe the ways in which much improvised theatre is engaging its audiences. Where I think there is room for

expansion is in interrogating what it means for an audience to be engaged. While each of my four case studies fits into the model of four variables I identify as making up audience participation, there are examples of improvised theatre that do not. I believe that there is potential to instead use this model to challenge the notion of what it means to be an active participant. Revisiting *The Emancipated Spectator* which I mention in chapter 1, we see that Rancière challenges the notion that an audience who “only” observe theatre is inactive (13). He makes the case that theatre’s aim should not be trying to turn so-called passive spectators into active individuals. Rather, we should consider that spectators are not a passive collective but individuals who are always thinking their own autonomous thoughts. As improvised theatre continues to innovate and our understanding of it grows, we must be careful not to privilege only certain kinds of experimentation as progress. Just as there are multiple ways to have the audience participate in a performance, there are many ways besides participation to “activate” an audience so to speak. What my current model does is zoom in on the more visible kinds of participation. This is valuable because audience participation is not a single method but a complex intersection of variables, as I have demonstrated with this model. An important next step for this research would be to place my model within a larger web of audience theory, and indeed zoom in on other parts of that web. While this is beyond the scope of my current project, the loose ends serve as potential points of connection to future research.

Improvised theatre is a balancing act. There is a balance to be struck between structure and creativity, between performers and audience. Any study of improvised theatre must likewise take all these aspects into consideration, and be prepared for anything.

“Follow the fear” – Del Close

APPENDIX: ANSWERS TO THE QUESTIONNAIRE

In this thesis I have cited the answers to my questionnaire in the format (NAME Questionnaire QUESTION NUMBER) or (NAME QUESTION NUMBER) for multiple citations in the same paragraph. For example, (Northan Questionnaire 1), or (Northan 1), refers to Northan's answer to question one.

Unless otherwise indicated, all answers are the unaltered responses of the artists.

THE QUESTIONS

1. How long have you been involved with this type of work?
2. How long have you been doing this specific show for?
3. What motivated you to create this show?
4. Did you face any unique challenges when creating this piece?
5. How would you define your work in comparison to other forms of improvisation or other forms of theatre? How does this show differ from other works of theatre or other instances of improvisation that you have created or participated in?
6. What, to you, makes an audience member an ideal candidate for participating in this show?
7. Inviting an audience member on stage can be risky. What techniques, if any, do you use to ensure that the experience is positive?
8. Does the space this piece is performed in have an impact on the performance? What can you say about that?

REBECCA NORTHAN

Co-creator of *Blind Date* and *Undercover*. Originated the role of Mimi in *Blind Date*. Plays Sergeant Collins and Georgie in *Undercover*.

1. How long have you been involved with this type of work?

“This type of work”...for as long as I can remember, really. Aren’t the seeds of this ‘work’ to be found in the natural play that we engage in as children? Meeting up with children that you don’t know at the park, agreeing to engage in an extended make-believe that might begin with, “Let’s pretend I’m a witch, and you’re lost in the forest.....” More formally, I had drips and drabs of optional drama in school, but at 16 years old, I was fortunate enough to have been invited to participate in a Theatresports tournament at the Loose Moose Theatre (I think that might have been in 1988). That was my introduction to improvisation as a practice with rules, philosophy, etc...helmed by Keith Johnstone & Dennis Cahill. At 16, I already knew I wanted to be an actor, and Loose Moose would let me on stage, and give me free classes in exchange for volunteer hours. I continued as a company member there, all while completing a Bachelor of Fine Arts at the University of Calgary. Things I heard from Keith & Dennis profoundly affected my views of traditional theatre - so much of which seemed somewhat stale in practice when compared to improvisation, but I fell in LOVE with Shakespeare: the language, the Universal themes.

In terms of my own work, Spontaneous Theatre emerged quite organically over a long arch of time. After a summer of Shakespeare in the Park, I formed a small company called Upstart Crows, and we had good traction doing reduced Shakespeare productions in pubs. In particular, it was always my preference to perform in more blue collar pubs, and my belief about Shakespeare is that it ought to have space to improvise. I encouraged the performers to make eye

contact with pub patrons during soliloquies, and to truly attempt to solicit replies from the crown (then improvise if anyone participated). It was deeply satisfying to be cornered by somewhat rough-around-the-edges patrons post performance, who said things like, “I fucking hated Shakespeare in school, but this was awesome!”, or, “I never thought I was smart enough to get that shit, but you guys funny. I totally understood it!”. Coming from a blue collar family, who had little interest in attending my theatrical performances, this felt like true success on so many levels.

I have always lived in two theatrical worlds (though, I tend to see it more as having flexibility along a spectrum). Traditional, mainstream/classical theatre, and improvisation. Somewhere along the way, I also had the opportunity to experiment with mask work (at Loose Moose), street performing (at the Edmonton Fringe), partially improvised historical murder mysteries, theatre for young audiences, etc....The common thread in my experience has always been a closer than average relationship with the audience mid-performance.

Blind Date came about as a bit of an accident. I was asked to create a 10 min piece for the Spiegelshow as part of World Stage at Harbourfront Centre in 2009 (?). I had no clue what I was going to do. I watched the show, which was a very sexy variety show, and was still at a loss. I was on my way to meet with the costume advisor, when I turned a corner, and the idea for Blind Date thumped into my head, fully formed. Originally, in the 10 min version, there was a second clown - the fellow who was meant to be my blind date, who shows up late. After the first performance, the overwhelming, unanimous feedback was, “you don’t need the second clown”. At the end of a long summer, I was left with a curiosity about what might happen if we took the time to get to know the guy.....and took the notion to Loose Moose for development.

.....a year into touring Blind Date, the show was starting to deflate in some way. It was my Stage Manager, Sean Bowie, who initiated a conversation asking us to distill what we're trying to achieve each night....this is where our notions of "take care of the Date, make him look good, make sure he's having a nice time" started to solidify as our core value. The notion of "what kind of theatre is this?"....only came about after an audience member asked me that question after a performance in Winnipeg. When I replied, "well, it's improv", she said, "No - it's something more than that...and you need to find a name for it, so you can claim the genre, and eventually you can teach it." After much discussion, we settled on Spontaneous Theatre, because I wanted to clearly represent both the improvisation aspect of the work, as well as the structure. I suppose we've been doing Spontaneous Theatre for 9 years (?).

2. How long have you been doing this specific show for?

Blind Date: 9 years, Legend Has It: 2 years, and ongoing development, Undercover: 2 years development, 18 months of performance, Undiscovered Shakespeare: 4 years of sporadic development.

3. What motivated you to create this show?

See above. Blind Date arrived on its own. The others....came out of asking, 'What else can we do with an Audience Member, while holding on to our core value?'

4. Did you face any unique challenges when creating this piece?

This is not a show that can ever be phoned in. You never, as the performer, feel like you've "got this"....because your co-star changes every night, there is no way to anticipate how the performance will unfold. Yes - there are signposts to provide the structure, but what happens

between the signposts is a nightly discovery. This is the challenge, and the joy of Spontaneous Theatre.

5. How would you define your work in comparison to other forms of improvisation or other forms of theatre? How does this show differ from other works of theatre or other instances of improvisation that you have created or participated in?

Certainly, my work is far more structured than regular, long-form improvisation. We walk a tightrope between scripted theatre, and pure improvisation. We set new challenges for ourselves as performers on a nightly basis, so in that sense, we continue to play, and remain malleable during performance. The needs of the non-performing co-star (Date, Hero, Detective) demand that we are FAR more in the present moment than any other form of theatre (scripted, or improvised) that I've participated in. It can be quite exhausting to be that present, and to listen that hard. (I really did think I was a good actor/listener until I started doing Blind Date - then, I was amazed to discover that it's quite likely that previous to Blind Date, I was hardly listening at all. True listening takes everything!)

I've been told by other theatre professionals, "What you do isn't 'real theatre'", and I've been told by improvisers, "What you do isn't 'real improv'." Fascinating, right?

6. What, to you, makes an audience member an ideal candidate for participating in this show?

We always say, "We're looking for someone who 'POPS' in the lobby." So, hm, what does that mean? On one level, we're talking about energy (are they present, comfortable in their own skin, alive behind their eyes), we're also talking chemistry (do we get a 'good vibe' from them?), and, if this were a cocktail party, are they someone you'd want to hang out with and get to know? We

sometimes use the phrase, “reluctantly playful...or....playfully reluctant”. It’s almost easier to say what we DON’T want: we don’t want someone who is too eager to get on stage (because that is simply unnatural and indicates they have some sort of agenda, or desire to shine), and we would never, ever choose someone who clearly does not want to participate. Keith Johnstone always advises improvisers to “be average”, so in some sense, we’re looking for the Average Person, and the average person, in my opinion, is kind, and pleasant, and nice to chat with.

7. Inviting an audience member on stage can be risky. What techniques, if any, do you use to ensure that the experience is positive?

- we make eye contact, with a slight smile
- when possible, the actor who will be the audience member’s “partner”, will make non-threatening physical contact: a hand on the shoulder, or on the forearm, light, reassuring, and non-lingering
- We operate under the assumption that whatever THEY do is “right”, and we will shift the show around them to support their choices.
- In conversation, we ask open ended questions: this demonstrates true interest, and is also a subtle way of letting go of control, and letting them take the conversation where they want to go
- WE open first, offer vulnerability first
- We tell the TRUTH about ourselves, from our own lives. Our belief is that, on a subconscious level, they can FEEL the difference between a truth and a lie.
- We invite them to be themselves, and let go of the pressure to be: interesting, entertaining, or

clever. We assure them, “You are enough, just the way you are.”

- We allow them to take a Time Out any time they feel overwhelmed, confused, lost, or nervous. They have total control as the show unfolds, and they can talk through any issues they have. We tell them that we will FIX anything that comes up for them.
- We assure them that they CANNOT “break the play”.
- If we get them alone, backstage, mid-show, ALL the performers find a moment to touch base and praise them. We also coach them if they need it: “Speak a bit louder. Keep doing what you’re doing.”
- We LISTEN. If they mention it is their birthday, we will run to the restaurant across the street and get a piece of cake for them. If they wish that it would snow, we rip up paper backstage and get an improviser into the grid to make it snow. This is a) why some people think we’re lying about it being improvised, and b) how MAGIC happens
- We are willing to spank them in a Time Out if they are letting their fear get the better of them, resulting in “bad behaviour”. Sometimes, we have to save them from themselves.
- We resist making jokes, or clever comments, in favour of letting them have a moment.
- We do our best to keep our egos out of it.

8. Does the space this piece is performed in have an impact on the performance? What can you say about that?

For us, it’s really best to be in a traditional theatre space. Over the years, we’ve been asked to play in more “comedy club” settings, and we always refuse. I think that gives the wrong message

about the work. We will always turn down a booking in a space that wants to serve food during the performance. For Blind Date, I am ok with a cabaret set up in the house - but it works just as well with traditional seating. Initially, we were only playing spaces with 150 - 200 seats. It's nice to have that intimacy...but, recently, we've done Blind Date in a couple of "A" houses, (750 - 800 seats). I was delightfully surprised to find that the show holds in that size of space.

CHRIS HANNAY

Co-creator of *Quest Friends Forever*. Plays the Dungeon Master.

Hannay was interviewed in person. These answers are my own transcript of his answers to the questionnaire.

1. How long have you been involved with this type of work?

13 years, Since September of 2005 while at Carleton University. Played mostly improv games, but was fascinated by long form. He played “Dungeons and Dragons video games”, like *Baldur’s Gate*, and then *Rifts*. He then tried tabletop D&D and ended up as Dungeon Master. Moved to Toronto in 2010 and tried long form, mostly the Harold.

2. How long have you been doing this specific show for?

In 2013 Hannay did a “choose your own adventure” long form show in Toronto’s Comedy Bar, which Hannay considers in some ways the earliest incarnation of *Quest Friends Forever*.

3. What motivated you to create this show?

In 2016 Hannay was back in Ottawa and had co-founded the Improv Embassy. Angus MacDonald and Rich Hilborn approached Hannay about doing something Dungeons and Dragons related with improvisation. Hannay was interested and they started brainstorming. They started doing monthly shows at the Embassy from September 2015 to May 2016, and then a show at Ottawa Fringe 2016. The opening scene of the show was added for Fringe.

4. Did you face any specific challenges when creating this piece?

Hannay had seen some D&D improvisation before. *Quest Friends Forever* wanted to be different. Hannay mentions using fewer costumes, and not being “serialized”. *Quest Friends Forever* has different characters each show. For the cast, part of the joy was the character creation. Preparing ahead of time at all seemed less spontaneous to them.

5. How would you define your work in comparison to other forms of improvisation or other forms of theatre? How does this show differ from other works of theatre or other instances of improvisation that you have created or participated in?

“There’s a balance in how prepared you are. The conceit of the show is always the same, it’s the same genre”. The cast wants to keep using whatever elements work well. They want to ensure a good show, but keep it spontaneous. The opening scene added for Fringe was the same each show, which Hannay says was “fun but less spontaneous”. For Fringe they had a loose story structure planned but were willing to toss it out.

6. What, to you, makes an audience member an ideal candidate for participating in this show?

In the moment, who seems like they want to make eye contact. They are looking for audience members who readily say “Yes” to being brought on stage.

7. Inviting an audience member on stage can be risky. What techniques, if any, do you use to ensure that the experience is positive?

The cast found that asking open questions did not work. Instead, they made the character board, which took the pressure off of the audience volunteers. Now the cast asks leading questions like “what was your first pet’s name”.

8. Does the space this piece is performed in have an impact on the performance? What can you say about that?

Yes. The Embassy space on Rideau Street was a smaller venue. At the Fringe and the Ottawa Improv Festival, the space was larger and the cast got to explore more options with their staging. They took a workshop with a member of Sex-T-Rex on improv stage combat and “making cool visual moments” with their bodies. Inspiration was taken from musicals and action movies. Bigger spaces meant more freedom but also made them feel they needed to “up their game”. The die seemed like a quintessential part of the feeling of playing D&D, so it had to be included somehow. Its function was partly inspired by the “choose your own adventure” style Hannay had done in Toronto. Passing the dice around the audience started at the monthly Embassy shows early on, but it was cut from the Fringe version because it slowed the pace of the show due to the larger space. However, involving more audience members was more fun. There was talk of coming up with a new system for larger spaces, but this was not considered to be worth it.

MIKE KOSOWAN

Co-creator of *Guided Roleplay*, plays a scene painter

1. How long have you been involved with this type of work?

Type of work? I've been involved with theatrical improvisation for a total of 12 years now. Starting in high school with the Canadian improv games and later performing weekly at Yuk Yuk's with the group Insensitivity Training for 3 year. I've been performing with GRIMprov for about 7 years creating and exploring new ideas.

2. How long have you been doing this specific show for?

We've done this specific show, GGR, 3 times to my recollection. Each time it has slowly evolved and improved.

3. What motivated you to create this show?

We tried to make a show that involved the audience as player. We started with the idea to create a style comparable to the old PC point-and-click adventure games. The ones with the pre-rendered environments, limited movement, strange items and puzzles. It slowly evolved by combining that idea with story structure of a text-based adventure game which provided options like a classic choose your own adventure book. And both the book and the game can have a consequence for "choosing incorrectly." These wrong answers help us craft the overall story.

4. Did you face any unique challenges when creating this piece?

The first challenge involved how severe the consequences towards the player should be. At first we thought of a 3 strike rule, in rehearsal, but during the first performance we had far too many players so we adapted by having very severe consequences. This was to help cycle through the players faster so everyone got a turn.

We learned a lot for that first performance. We later added the idea of chance by using shuffled cards to take the decision away from the actors and placing the responsibility onto the audience player. Pacing was also a challenge. Instead of having the game completely restart after switching players we added in checkpoints. This is so the game didn't become a memorization game of the past choices but focused on future choices to help push the story forward.

5. How would you define your work in comparison to other forms of improvisation or other forms of theatre? How does this show differ from other works of theatre or other instances of improvisation that you have created or participated in?

Highly interactive, is what we strive for. Granted some of our styles are more theatrically based with minor communication with the audience while others like GGR are extremely interactive. We like to push boundaries and we are not afraid to fail. I think many shows take it safe by performing classic structures/styles or altering them slightly with audience suggestions. Shows that bring up audiences tend to keep them off to the side and have them safely make a choice while GGR puts them center stage and has their authentic reactions to the risk their "character" is taking within the scenario become part of the show.

6. What, to you, makes an audience member an ideal candidate for participating in this show?

That they are willing to play. By writing their name down and putting in the hat is the first indication of their willingness to participate. We as performers should award that willingness by giving them an experience to remember.

7. Inviting an audience member on stage can be risky. What techniques, if any, do you use to ensure that the experience is positive?

Well the hat helps. It filters those who are only there to observe versus those who may be embarrassed around friends or to seem too eager, it adds anonymity. Now you don't have to worry about forcing someone up through peer pressure or an obligatory reaction. I don't think GGR would work as well if it was an open call to the audience.

8. Does the space this piece is performed in have an impact on the performance? What can you say about that?

Space always has an impact. I believe it makes it a relaxed environment since it's a common social setting. It's not on a high stage so it should not be taking overly serious and should be fun. We have no backstage, wings or forth wall meaning we are part audience and part performer.

JORDAN MOFFAT

Co-Creator of *Guided Roleplay*, plays a scene painter.

1. How long have you been involved with this type of work?

I started performing improv in 2007 (11 years ago), co-founded Grimprov in 2011 (7 years ago).

2. How long have you been doing this specific show for?

We've done this show 4 or 5ish times now over the course of a year and a half or two years. We are a group that doesn't usually repeat our show formats, so this is one of our favourites.

3. What motivated you to create this show?

I pitched this idea to the group after playing Douglas Adams's *Hitch-hiker's Guide to the Galaxy* text adventure game. I was struck by how similar the game was structured like one of our improv scenes: the game introduces a setting with brief descriptions, which in improv is called "scene painting." Usually we scene paint and then begin a scene. In the text adventure game, however, the story is already out there, and the point of the game, essentially, is to figure out what the story is by being the main character and choosing how to interact with the environment that was just described. What makes this an actual *game* is that if you get the choices wrong, the game will find clever ways to kill you because of your poor decision, at which point you have to start all over again. I liked this idea of repetition, and the group was also interested in finding clever ways to kill our audience members.

Guided role-play begins with us introducing an environment, and then the audience participant has to figure out what to do with it. Unlike the interactive fiction game a story is not already in place — but we as improvisers have to *pretend* that there is a story, so that the main character knows when they are making correct or incorrect decisions. So mostly I was interested in slicing

the improvised experience in half: usually we create an environment and then play it; with GGR we create an environment and let others play in it.

(Here's a link to the game)

<http://iplayif.com/?story=http%3A%2F%2Fwww.douglasadams.com%2Fcreations%2Fhgg.z3>

4. Did you face any unique challenges when creating this piece?

This format requires a great deal of focus, memory, and spontaneous thinking by the improviser.

The audience participant will always provoke you for more information about something you just made up, and you have to keep that memory in store for later. For example, if you describe there being “an envelope on a table” the audience member may ask “who is the letter addressed to” — and you, as the improviser have to that up *now*. Then the audience participant may ask you to open the envelope and read the letter — and you, as the improviser, have to make that up *now*, and also, remember what you said in case they ask you to read the letter again *later*.

Sometimes as an improviser you can get away with being lazy on stage, but when an audience member is calling the shots, you have to always be on. It's normal improv, but faster and more demanding.

We've made some adjustments to the format each time we have performed it. For example, we received feedback that the idea of going back to the beginning after each audience member death was, instead of being *humorously* repetitive, was *annoyingly* repetitive. So we introduced a “checkpoint” where, if a participant got to a certain, arbitrary “checkpoint”, the next participant in the story would begin from there, rather from the beginning. A challenge is to make adjustments that will make the show more fun for the audience, while still being more fun for us. I have less fun with the checkpoint system, but I also know it's bad business to annoy the customer.

5. How would you define your work in comparison to other forms of improvisation or other forms of theatre? How does this show differ from other works of theatre or other instances of improvisation that you have created or participated in?

GRIMprov began as a direct response to other forms of improv in Ottawa. At the time, there was no improv group involved in creating new long form formats, and few groups that would do long form at all. So, at the beginning at least, our work was more experimental and it took more time. More recently, other groups have played around with new, longer formats.

This show differs from other works of improv that I've participated in because of its high degree of audience participation. There have been improv shows in the past where improv is stylized as “unscripted theatre” — and audience participation is minimal, aside from a suggestion at the top of the show. Short form improv is similar, in that the audience member is only needed at the beginning of each game, or briefly in the middle of each game. Guided Roleplay depends on the audience member. We are guiding them through the story, but they are guiding us through the improv.

6. What, to you, makes an audience member an ideal candidate for participating in this show?

We discovered early on that the best kind of audience member is one who does things we don't expect them to do. If I, as the improviser, say “there's a red bicycle in the driveway,” there's an expectation that the audience participant will want to ride it. It's much more exciting for me as a performer — and it takes the story into unpredictable territory — if they do something surprising, like ask if there's anything tucked inside the handlebars. This kind of lateral thinking makes the show much more fun for everybody (especially the performers).

7. Inviting an audience member on stage can be risky. What techniques, if any, do you use to ensure that the experience is positive?

I don't think there's much we do about this. We are lucky in that many of our audience members are regular audience members. I don't know many of them personally, other than being audience members, but it's reassuring to know that whoever shows up to our show *really* wants to be there.

One thing we do is that we don't FORCE people to participate. We have them write their names up on a sheet of paper if they want to participate, and then we call out those names one-by-one once the show begins.

Our one negative experience involved us improvising that the audience member was covered in spiders, only to discover that she had a significant, real-life phobia of spiders, and broke down in tears for a few moments. After some calm reassurance, we went back on track to, ideally, making people laugh rather than cry.

8. Does the space this piece is performed in have an impact on the performance? What can you say about that?

Yes it does! Usually we perform in the typical adversarial set-up: audience members facing one way and performers facing the opposite way. Us vs. them. For this show, however, we have the audience member sit on a chair, and have the performers and improvisers surround them in a half-circle. The improvisers usually have to find a space to perform within the audience. I feel this further adds to the feeling that the experience is one of participation rather than observation.

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