

## Principles in Contemporary Improv Theatre

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### ***Abstract***

*This article explores the foundational principles of contemporary improvisational theatre, focusing on the methods of Keith Johnstone, Viola Spolin, and Del Close. It examines the evolution of improv in Romania and its impact on actors and audiences. Key principles such as status play, "Yes, and...", "Follow the Fear," and the "Group Mind" are discussed in the context of enhancing spontaneity, creativity, and collaboration in performances. The article also highlights how improv training fosters adaptability, deep listening, and authentic expression, making it a vital practice for all actors. By integrating these principles, improvisers can push the boundaries of theatre, creating dynamic and engaging performances that resonate with modern audiences.*

**Keywords:** *Improv, Keith Johnstone, Viola Spolin, Del Close, "Yes, and..."*

### **Introduction**

We find ourselves in the autumn of 2024. On a personal level, this means that in a couple of months, I will be celebrating my coming of age in the art of improvisation - 18 years since my first show. Coming of age marks the transition from adolescence to adulthood, but paradoxically, I firmly believe that in order to be a good improviser - always spontaneous, fresh, attentive, playful, and eager to play - you must maintain that curiosity and perpetual desire for knowledge specific to a child. Improvisational theatre (improv) in our country has had and continues to have a rather winding development. It was only in 2002 that this new type of theatre appeared for the first time in

Romania. More than ten years passed before a special festival dedicated to improv took place. "In September 2013, there were 15 active improv troupes regularly performing in Bucharest. In the rest of the country, 7 more troupes were active."<sup>1</sup> Since then, improv has surpassed its status of club or bar theatre, reaching the stages of professional theatres across the country. Currently, this type of show is performed in theatres in Arad, Baia Mare, Constanța, Oradea, Râmnicu Vâlcea, Satu Mare, Târgoviște, Târgu-Jiu, and Târgu-Mureș. To this list, we can add the Maria Filloti Theatre in Brăila, which hosted the "Improv Olympics" between 2011 and 2013.

Improv can take two forms: short form or long form. For the first, performances are based on short, independent games. The long form can take various structural forms, but the basic idea is that, from just a few audience suggestions, a 45–60 minutes show can be created. Unfortunately, this type of performance is not currently found in any theatre in the country and can rarely be seen in a few comedy clubs in Bucharest.

As I mentioned earlier, I have been involved in improv for 18 years, missing just the first four of its presence in our country. My journey in this art has mirrored the entire phenomenon. At first, I performed in unconventional spaces (clubs, on the street, even in buses) and later I directed such performances on professional theatre stages. Throughout this journey, I realized that all the principles I've used from the beginning until now come from just two sources: one British (Keith Johnstone) and one American (Viola Spolin).

I will conclude this introduction with a personal observation. Improvisation became much more widely known in our country once its specific techniques crossed the borders of drama schools and theatres and made their way into workshops and team-building sessions held by multinational companies.

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<sup>1</sup> Muscalu, Dragoș. *Incursiune în Teatrul de Improvizație*, UNATC Press, București, 2019, p. 150.

## I. Methodology

The methodology for this study involved two primary components:

1. A thorough examination of existing literature on improvisational theatre, including texts by Spolin, Johnstone, Del Close, and contemporary analyses of their principles.
2. A direct analysis of the process of doing improv from the perspective of an improviser and trainer.

## II. Keith Johnstone Principles

I began this study with Keith Johnstone because his method formed the foundation of the first improv performance in Romania: "*TheatreSport - after Keith Johnstone*." His principles were tested by Romanian director Vlad Massaci, who in 2001 worked with Volker Quandt<sup>2</sup> at the Theater Der Jungen Welt in Leipzig, and brought them for the first time in our country in 2002. According to Vlad Massaci<sup>3</sup>, before staging this first Improv show, he introduced students at the National University of Theatre and Film in Bucharest to Johnstone's improvisational principles. So, there it was: improv, officially, for the first time in a drama school in Romania.

Keith Johnstone is a true force in modern improvisational theatre. His innovative thinking has deeply influenced both the way improv is taught today and how improv performances are carried out on stage. He is also the founder of the registered theatre trademark *TheatreSport*. Though he has written only two books - *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* in 1979 and *Impro for Storytellers* in 1999 - the principles he laid out provide a framework that is both solid and flexible, guiding countless actors and directors.

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<sup>2</sup> Volker Quandt is a prominent figure in the German improv comedy scene. He is known for his work as a performer, teacher, and director in improvisational theater.

<sup>3</sup> As mentioned in the interview he gave on the show "Cronicar după ureche," broadcast on April 13, 2024, on Metropola TV.

Johnstone's approach emphasizes the importance of spontaneity, creativity, and collaboration, establishing the foundation for dynamic and surprising performances.

One of his fundamental principles is the idea of status shifts. Johnstone is not referring to social rank when he talks about status. Instead, he uses the term to describe the behavioral cues that reveal whether characters have high or low status in their interactions with scene partners, objects, or scenic elements. "To play high status, you don't have to act snooty; just be relaxed and assertive."<sup>4</sup> A mastery of different statuses and sudden shifts allows improvisers to create nuanced and convincing characters. A high-status character typically occupies space and maintains direct eye contact, while a low-status character minimizes their presence and avoids confrontation. Understanding these subtle status games can lead to characters with greater depth and realism.

Johnstone's exploration of status doesn't stop at the first level; it becomes a deeper investigation of human behavior and interactions. He noted that status shifts are a natural part of daily life. These shifts influence how people perceive themselves and respond to others depending on the new situation. "Status is something you do, not something you are. It's fluid and can change from moment to moment."<sup>5</sup> This fluidity, which Johnstone highlights, gives actors incredible opportunities on stage.

Furthermore, status can be a powerful tool to examine social dynamics and hierarchies. Artistically - and even more so in improv - this exploration can lead to richer and more varied character narratives. For example, a character who starts with high status in a scene may lose it as the action progresses, revealing vulnerabilities and complexities that add depth to the narrative. On the other hand, an actor playing a low-status character who rises to a higher status can deliver masterful moments of transformation. "When actors are

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<sup>4</sup> Johnstone, Keith, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, Ed. Routledge, Abingdon, 2007, p. 33.

<sup>5</sup> Johnstone, Keith, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, Ed. Routledge, Abingdon, 2007, p. 34.

aware of status, they can create tension and conflict in their scenes, making the interactions more engaging for the audience.”<sup>6</sup>

Johnstone encourages improvisers to intentionally change status throughout a scene. This practice helps actors become more adept at reading cues from their partners during improvisation and collaborating more effectively to solve problems on stage. “Status play can reveal hidden aspects of a character as the actor explores different ways of asserting or deferring power.”<sup>7</sup>

Moreover, status transcends individual characters. In group work, understanding status or its changes can enhance cohesion and effectiveness. Imagine a scene where a family is trying to escape the wrath of a tornado. The action could easily follow a catastrophic, predictable path or a happier one, like in *The Wizard of Oz*, where the tornado kills the Wicked Witch. When all improvisers are attuned to subtle status changes, not only can realistic and logical scenes be created, but also captivating and surprising ones. A key point to note is that status is like a relationship - whether between two characters or between a character and their situation (space, time, conflict, etc.). It can only exist when all the improvisers participating in a scene or story define and accept it equally.

By mentioning acceptance, we arrive at another fundamental principle in Johnstone's method: the principle of “Yes, and...” For many, this principle is the number one rule in the mindset of improvisers everywhere. This approach encourages actors to accept and logically build upon their scene partners' ideas. If properly understood and applied, this principle could be summarized by: in an improv scene, there is no "my idea" or "your idea"; there is only "our idea." I find this principle a brilliant trick that teaches improvisers to love the suggestions made by their partners in a scene. The phrase “Yes, and...” contains the secret to successful improvisation. Improvisers must not only accept offers and suggestions from their partners but also develop them organically, logically, and sometimes, when talent is involved, humorously.

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<sup>6</sup> Johnstone, Keith, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, Ed. Routledge, Abingdon, 2007, p. 35.

<sup>7</sup> Johnstone, Keith, *Impro for Storytellers*, London: Ed. Faber and Faber, London, 1999, p. 23.

All training in Keith Johnstone's improv method focuses on eliminating the blockages that prevent this principle from working. In the world of improv, a blockage refers to rejecting a partner's idea. There are two main ways that this can occur: denial and postponement. "Blocking an offer is an act of control. It shuts down the collaborative process. Advancement keeps the scene alive and moving."<sup>8</sup>

"Keith Johnstone's work has been primarily dedicated to encouraging adults to rediscover childlike imagination and creativity, knowing that traditional, academic education often undermines spontaneity by focusing too much on discipline and imitation. His exercises are aimed at bypassing the intellect that tends to deny and to support manifestations of intuition and the subconscious, thus giving rise to spontaneity."<sup>9</sup>

### III. Viola Spolin Principles

At the beginning of the previous chapter, I mentioned that I chose to start exploring the principles of improv with those of Keith Johnstone because they formed the basis of the first homegrown improvisation performance. However, the concept of improvisational theater was not foreign to Romanian actors. This was possible because, at some point, though no one knows exactly how, during the communist era, Viola Spolin's book made its way into the theater faculty in Bucharest. Given that it was an American book, and before the 1989 Revolution, concepts coming from across the Atlantic were vehemently condemned, the moment this book ended up in the hands of drama teachers was not documented and unofficial. I learned about this event from Professor Adriana Popovici during one of the classes at the theater doctoral school. The exercises and theater games proposed by Spolin were quickly adopted by some teachers at that time, including her, Florin Zamfirescu, and perhaps, above all, Ion Cojar. The latter mentions in his book *O poetica a artei actorului* that "theater and authentic art are games, just as, in the same order of ideas, seen from the same angle, all professions and

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<sup>8</sup> Johnstone, Keith, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, Ed. Routledge, Abingdon, 2007, p. 48.

<sup>9</sup> Muscalu, Dragoș, *Incursiune în Teatrul de Improvizație*, UNATC Press, București, 2019, p. 148.

functions considered honorable are also games, with specific rules and functions".<sup>10</sup>

As for Viola Spolin, she is nicknamed "the mother of modern improvisational theater." The main difference between her method and that of the British Keith Johnstone is that, with Spolin, "there are almost no references to it, partly due to the fact that American society at that time tried not to emphasize this notion."<sup>11</sup> In her book *Improvisation for the Theatre*, published in 1963, Spolin focuses on the concept of play, believing that this innate human activity can stimulate creativity and spontaneity at any age. She also emphasized that play helps actors release self-censorship, and from this, authentic actions and interactions on stage can emerge. The joy and belief with which a child plays should also be found in the artistic act of an improviser. Furthermore, play, which often involves taking risks, exploration, and curiosity, should be a reward in itself. The actors and/or the improvisers should be happy simply because they are playing the game. This joy is not only contagious among the participants but can quickly reach even the last rows of the audience.

The state of play should never be confused with a lack of discipline. A game has rules, whether we are talking about sports, gambling, or theater games. How many times did it happen when we were young, playing in front of our apartment blocks, that we lost track of time? Time only became relevant again when we heard the voice of one of our parents calling us for dinner in the evening. This meant that the joy of play made us fully present, body and soul, in that game. Nothing else mattered. Spolin also emphasized the importance of an improviser being fully anchored in the present moment. She argued that true creativity arises when improvisers are completely engaged in the "here and now." "The here and now is the only reality; otherwise, we are in a dream world."<sup>12</sup> The improviser's ability to function solely in the present helps them escape preconceived ideas and trust their instincts.

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<sup>10</sup> Cojar, Ion, *O Poetica a Artei Actorului*, Ed. Paideia, Bucuresti, 1996, p. 74.

<sup>11</sup> Muscalu, Dragoș, *Incursiune în Teatrul de Improvizație*, UNATC Press, București, 2019, p. 147.

<sup>12</sup> Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*, Ed. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1999, p. 45.

The American author also emphasized an element common to children's play and theatre. "Tension, like competition, must be a natural part of the activity between actors, without every scene ending in conflict (relaxation can come after a prior understanding). This is not easy to grasp. A rope can create opposing objectives and conflicts between players, but a rope given to the players can also help them climb a mountain, creating a shared tension to achieve the same goal. Tension and relaxation are implicit in the act of problem-solving."<sup>13</sup>

One of Spolin's significant insights was her understanding of the actor-audience relationship. Often, for an actor, the audience can represent an inhibiting element. In the case of improvisers, they must be aware that without an audience, an improvisation performance cannot exist. In such a performance, the audience is not just invited to participate in its creation; the audience is a component of the show itself. Viola Spolin herself said that "the audience is not a judge but a partner in the experience."<sup>14</sup>

I cannot move away from Viola Spolin's theater games without mentioning that she encouraged her improvisers to experiment and take certain risks by interacting with the environment. The latter can radically change the evolution of a scene. The relationship between the two characters can change drastically if they start the scene on a luxurious cruise ship and end stranded on a deserted island.

To create a scene, a story, or even a song, an improviser must be able to quickly create a context and answer the questions *Who?*, *What?*, *Where?*. However, I will end this chapter by saying that Keith Johnstone believed this limited the actor. "I didn't like the 'Who? What? Where?' approach, which my actors urged on me, and which I suppose was American in origin (it's described in Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theatre*, Northwestern University Press, 1963; fortunately, I didn't know about this book until 1966, when a member of the audience lent it to me)."<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Gilea, Marius, *Despre Improvizatie*, UNATC Press, București, 2018, p. 121.

<sup>14</sup> Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*, Ed. Northwestern University Press, Evanston, 1999, p. 102.

<sup>15</sup> Johnstone, Keith, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, Ed. Routledge, Abingdon, 2007, p. 27.

#### IV. An Honorable Mention: Del Close

The first festival dedicated 100% to improv took place in Romania in September 2013. In my humble opinion, two good things resulted from this event. First, the collaboration between members of different improv groups; although there were relatively few at that time, the existing ones were working only in closed circles. The second thing was that, in the following editions of the festival, trainers from other countries came to work with Romanian improvisers. Around that time, for me and my colleagues, the name Del Close joined those of Keith Johnstone and Viola Spolin in the Improv Pantheon. Del Close, together with Charna Halpern and Kim "Howard" Johnson, in their book *Truth in Comedy*, published in 1994, laid down a series of principles that forever changed the landscape of modern improvisation. Their emphasis was on shifting improvisation from an easy way to get laughs to a more sophisticated and collaborative art form.

Close's concept of "Group Mind" refers to a collective consciousness that forms within an ensemble. The authors write, "A group mind forms" when a team is "fully engaged and connected"<sup>16</sup>. This idea suggests that the ensemble, when working in unison, can produce more creative and spontaneous outcomes than the sum of its individual parts. In essence, "the group intelligence is much more than the sum of its parts," allowing improvisers to reach new heights in their performance"<sup>17</sup>. The "Group Mind" fosters an environment of trust and collaboration where every performer contributes to the collective creativity.

Del Close also advocates for improvisers to "play to the top of (their) intelligence," urging them to avoid easy laughs and obvious punchlines. According to the authors, "real humor does not come from sacrificing the reality of a moment in order to crack a cheap joke, but in finding the joke in the reality of the moment"<sup>18</sup>. This challenges improvisers to be honest in their

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<sup>16</sup> Close, Del; Halpern, Charna; Johnson, "Howard" Kim, *Truth in Comedy*, Meriwether Publishing Ltd., Colorado Springs, 1994, p. 56.

<sup>17</sup> Idem 16

<sup>18</sup> Close, Del; Halpern, Charna; Johnson, "Howard" Kim, *Truth in Comedy*, Meriwether Publishing Ltd., Colorado Springs, 1994, p. 9.

reactions and to derive humor from authenticity rather than pre-planned gags or stereotypes. This approach to comedy demands that performers engage thoughtfully with their characters and situations, seeking the inherently humorous truth.

Another significant tenet in Close's philosophy is the idea of "Follow the Fear." Close encourages improvisers to embrace their fears on stage, as these moments of discomfort often lead to the most creative discoveries. As the authors note, Chris Farley, a former student of Close, learned to "step off the cliff and take a risk,"<sup>19</sup> a principle that Close himself emphasized. This principle promotes the idea that pushing through fear can lead to unexpected, yet rewarding, improvisational choices.

## **V. Conclusions**

As an improviser looking ahead to future performances, it is crucial to embrace the core principles laid out by the pioneers of improvisational theatre - Keith Johnstone, Viola Spolin, and Del Close - while continuously evolving the art form. The journey of improvisation is not merely about adhering to established techniques but rather about reimagining these foundations in fresh, innovative ways. The principle of "Yes, and..." should be internalized not just as a technique but as a mindset, fostering deeper collaboration and the courage to follow unexpected paths. The idea of "Follow the Fear," as advocated by Close, serves as a reminder to embrace discomfort and challenge in the creative process, leading to authentic and compelling performances. Furthermore, engaging with the audience as active participants, as Spolin suggests, can transform the dynamic of every show, making each performance a unique, shared experience.

From an improviser's perspective, theatre becomes a living, breathing entity when infused with the spontaneity and unpredictability of improv. Traditional scripted performances, while valuable, can sometimes become rigid and repetitive. Improv, on the other hand, brings a sense of immediacy and vulnerability that keeps both the performers and the audience on the edge of

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<sup>19</sup> Close, Del; Halpern, Charna; Johnson, "Howard" Kim, *Truth in Comedy*, Meriwether Publishing Ltd., Colorado Springs, 1994, p. 24.

their seats. This raw, unfiltered form of expression allows actors to tap into their most genuine emotions and instincts, creating moments that are strikingly real and powerful. It encourages actors to be present, to listen actively, and to respond truthfully, skills that are invaluable in any form of acting.

For actors, engaging in improvisation is not just a supplemental practice but a foundational one. It teaches them to trust their instincts, to think on their feet, and to embrace uncertainty - all qualities that enrich their performances in scripted roles. Improvisation enhances an actor's ability to adapt to new directions and unexpected developments on stage, making them more versatile and resilient performers. Moreover, the principles of status play, deep listening, and collaboration cultivated in improv training foster a deeper understanding of character dynamics and human behavior, which are essential in building compelling narratives. Moving forward, the focus should be on deepening the understanding of these principles, exploring the nuances of character relationships, and harnessing the "Group Mind" to create rich, layered narratives that reflect the complexity of human interactions. By doing so, improvisers can ensure that their work remains vibrant, resonant, and continuously relevant, pushing the boundaries of what contemporary improv theatre can achieve.

This conclusion captures the improviser's perspective on the transformative power of theatre through improv and encourages actors to incorporate improv into their practice to enhance their skills and creative expression.

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