"Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theatre and learn to become stage-worthy." Viola Spolin

Name:

Form:

Drama Teacher:

Homework day:
A Potted History of Improvisation
Edited from The National Theatre website - https://www.nationaltheatre.org.uk/blog/potted-history-improvisation

All references to theatre, American or otherwise have been changed to the RE spelling of theatRE.

HOMEWORK 1 – Highlight the main points in this section and complete the self-assessment grid at the bottom of page 3

The earliest recorded example of improvisation comes from the fourth century BC. Atellan. (of, relating to, or having the characteristics of a Roman genre of farce developed from impromptu rustic plays of country life and adopted for interludes and afterpieces during the Republic and up to the time of Tiberius). Farces were comic improvisations by stock characters that were popular in Rome and contemporary Italy. A few hundred years later, commedia dell’arte (known as the first form of professional theatre) productions of the 16th century were based on stock characters and heavy on the improvisation. In fact, the art form is sometimes called commedia dell’arte all’improvviso.

Therefore, improvisation was important in the advent of professional theatre. However, in the early 20th century, improvisation mostly referred to jazz musicians. In a theatrical context, its earliest applications were to unscripted comedy and in particular to the work of Dudley Riggs, a comic, vaudevillian performer born in 1932. His style developed as a way of dealing with hostile audiences: when they booed, Riggs and his Brave New Workshop troupe asked for suggestions and took them on board. Riggs himself preferred the term ‘instant theatre’ to improvisation; critics who saw its parallels with the music scene referred to it as ‘word jazz’.

The Compass Players cabaret troupe, set up by Paul Sills in 1958 is a very important theatre company in the development of improvisation in theatre. Sills’ mother, Viola Spolin who has arguably become the most important figure in 20th-century improvisation, influenced the company and the development of improvisation as a theatre form.

In the 1940s, 50s and 60s, Spolin invented the ‘Theatre Games’, a set of improvisational exercises that allow performers to create spontaneity and have formed the backbone of improvisational theatre since. Some examples include:

EXPLORING VIOLA SPOLIN’S IMPROVISATION THEATRE GAMES

‘Gibberish Interpreters’, in which one performer speaks in gibberish and another translates into English

‘Building a Story’, in which actors improvise a story relay-style based on audience suggestions

‘What’s Beyond?’ in which three performers improvise a scene, one leaves and the other two invent a secret that the third person must figure out when they return.
Spolin formalised the games in her book Improvisation for the Theatre, in whose introduction she wrote:

“Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theatre and learn to become “stage-worthy.”

“We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches anyone anything. This is as true for the infant moving from kicking and crawling to walking as it is for the scientist with his equations.”

“If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he chooses to learn; and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach him everything it has to teach. “Talent” or “lack of talent” have little to do with it”.

Spolin’s work did not just inspire comedians. Towards the latter half of the 20th century, improvisational theatre took on brand new, non-comic forms. San Francisco’s Diggers, for example, were a radical group of ‘community anarchists’ who also made improvisational theatre in the late 1960s, while New York City’s Open Theatre used improvisational elements to devise full-length productions. Its director, Joseph Chaikin, used improvisational techniques to respond to traditional acting, which he said ‘has become a blend of that same kind of synthetic “feeling” and sentimentality. Meanwhile in the UK, scripts had to be legally approved by the Lord Chamberlain’s Office until 1968 and actors could be prosecuted for improvising during a performance. It did not stop them, though; Joan Littlewood, for example, faced legal action more than once.

Improvisation, as you might expect, continues to develop and shift with the times. Social media has brought new opportunities and the possibility to interact with audiences outside of a specific space. Offline, improvised performances make up a huge part of Edinburgh Festival Fringe and dozens of professional improv troupes practise in the UK. Among the foremost of these is Improbable, who improvise ‘Lost without Words’ each night on stage. Improbable’s mission statement gives an insight into what makes improvisation such an enduring art:

“We see improvisation in all its forms as a tool for social change. It is a deeply democratic art form that fosters a sense of community and empowerment amongst its participants and audiences alike and, in an age of increasing digital complexity, is determinedly live.”

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<tr>
<th>Skills development and self-assessment</th>
<th>START OF PROCESS DATE</th>
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<td>The ability to speak with confidence</td>
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Very confident ***** confident **** quite confident *** lacking confidence ** not confident *
Improvisation - Glossary of terms you will need to know and learn

**Improvisation meaning** - Improvisation in the performing arts is a very spontaneous performance without specific or scripted preparation.

### HOMEWORK 2 – LEARN THE SPELLINGS OF THESE TERMS AND THEIR MEANINGS

1. **abstract**
   - The opposite of a realistic representation is an abstract representation where a character or concept may be symbolised in a poetic rather than literal way.

2. **blackout**
   - No light on the stage. Used for specific dramatic effects or to change scenes.

3. **chronological**
   - The logical order of events from beginning to middle to end.

4. **costume**
   - The clothes worn by an actor should reflect the time, place, society, culture and style of the production and the status, age and personality of the character.

5. **cue sheets**
   - Used to note when specific sound/lighting/special effects should be exacted on stage.

6. **director**
   - The person who supervises the drama and instructs actors.

7. **ensemble**
   - Performers work together in rehearsal/performance to create a moment of action on stage, e.g. Greek Chorus; slapstick sequence or Physical theatre.

8. **feminism**
   - The endeavour towards social, political, sexual and economic equality for women in society.

### HOMEWORK 3 – LEARN THE SPELLINGS OF THESE TERMS AND THEIR MEANINGS

9. **futuristic**
   - Reflects a time in the future. This may be shown through costume, set or the attitudes and values of the characters.

10. **genre**
    - A category or type of something. Fiction and non-fiction are two examples of different genres.

11. **mind-map**
    - A diagram used to represent ideas or information branching out from a central key word or idea.

12. **motif**
    - An obvious key theme or concept that recurs in a work to create emphasis. Used in literature, art, theatre and dance.

13. **naturalistic**
    - A form of theatre designed to create the illusion of reality for an audience. Originated in the late 19th century.

14. **practitioner**
    - Someone who practises or has written theatrical theory and whose theatre may have a definable theatrical form.

15. **stimulus**
    - An inspiration for creative work. You can find a stimulus in an experience, image, emotion, object, text or a combination of stimuli.

16. **stylised**
    - An attempt to enhance a scene using unnatural methods.
Working with a stimulus – a starting point

A stimulus is anything that excites your imagination and sows the seeds of a piece of drama. You are going to work with a specific stimulus over the coming weeks. You will work with a group.

STIMULUS TITLE: ___________________________________________________

DESCRIBE YOUR STIMULUS HERE (NO MORE THAN 50 WORDS) Take pride in your work.

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It is important that you remain open to how it makes you feel and to any ideas that emerge from members of your group, however strange they may seem initially. Record all of your initial responses. This is called a mind map.

Professional actors often find it useful to keep a personal record or diary to record significant moments in the development of the piece and their character. This is particularly important if you are expected to present an outline of how your drama relates to the stimulus. You have to do this in GCSE drama. Reflection on the triumphs and challenges, and how you developed your group and performance skills can really help you reach your potential. Konstantin Stanislavski kept detailed notes on his work as an actor and director. You did some work on this theatre practitioner in Year 7.

TASK – Record your individual ideas and the ideas of your group members here – record FIVE of your ideas at the end of the blue arrows. Create your own arrows to record your group’s ideas.
Discussion and planning – working with discipline and collaborating with others

Once you have recorded your initial responses, discuss the potential of each idea. At this stage, it is not vital that you have all the ideas for a set or a structure or storyline for your piece, but you should identify any themes you would like to focus on, storylines or messages that you feel you and your group would like to explore in more detail in discussion and rehearsal.

As you discuss ideas for plot (the main events of a play), you may find that ideas for characters change. Record your ideas. Exploring these characters through improvisation or hot-seating exercises may help to develop relationships between them and inspire a narrative (story) for your piece. Improvisation is as popular in television and film as it is in the theatre.

The techniques of the theater are the techniques of communicating.

- Viola Spolin -

Purpose, aims and intentions

At the planning stage, it is important to discuss and agree on the aims and intentions of your work. It is not essential that your piece has a message. You may choose to explore a theme and leave the audience to take their own message or meaning away from it. If you do have a message, remember to keep it central to the work that you create, so you have a clear thread running throughout.

QUESTIONS … QUESTIONS … QUESTIONS

TASK - discuss these questions and make notes below:

1. Does your piece have a message?
2. Does your piece explore a theme?
3. How do you want the audience to feel when they watch your performance?

| 1. Does your piece have a message? | 2. Does your piece explore a theme? | 3. How do you want the audience to feel when they watch your performance? |
The audience

Who is your target audience? Every piece of drama you create should keep the audience awareness at the core of the work.

“Without an audience, there is no ‘theatre.’” Theatre director Mohammad Ali Baig

TASK – who is your target audience?

You may already have a clear narrative: a story with a beginning, a middle and an end. Nevertheless, at this stage you must still consider the effect you hope to have on the audience. Do you want them to feel emotional, gripped, questioning or scared? You could always surprise them with a twist in your tale.

TASK – what effect do you want your improvised performance to have on the audience?

Theatre practitioners

You may have decided to devise work in the style of an established theatre practitioner, such as Bertolt Brecht who you studied at the end of Macbeth when you looked at the work of Splendid productions or Konstantin Stanislavski who you studied in Year 7. Stanislavski would not be a good practitioner to use if you are devising a piece that jumps about in time, has several locations and where the actors play more than one role. His approach is entirely based upon naturalistic (truthful) performance. The use of stylised methods to tell your story would be at odds with his methods and ideas.

If you had a clear moral message that you wanted the audience to think about throughout the work, then employing Brechtian techniques and devices might work well. Using Brecht as a practitioner allows you to make the audience think and question, jump about in time, have several locations and multi role-play.

“I regard the theatre as the greatest of all art forms, the most immediate way in which a human being can share with another the sense of what it is to be a human being.” Oscar Wilde – poet and playwright
**Style**

You may have chosen to create work in a particular style or genre such as Physical theatre (Frantic Assembly) or realism (Stanislavski) or epic theatre (Brecht) or musical theatre. Devising theatre is exciting because you can include a mixture of styles, but devising a piece of work can be like cooking a meal. If you have too many flavours or ingredients in one pot, the result might be confused or unsatisfying. Choose the most appropriate style for your work and keep this at its heart.

**TASK – what is your chosen style?**

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**Setting**

You could choose to set your work in a particular historical time or use a futuristic setting. Changing the society, culture or location of the piece of drama is also an option. This can be particularly interesting when working with an existing story.

**TASK – what ideas do you have for where you could set your improvised drama?**

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“There are so many forms, I believe people are bright enough to make their own laws, more subtle ones than we’ve had before.” Joan Littlewood – Founder the Theatre Workshop

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**Practical exploration and response to a stimulus**

**Staging your performance**

Before you begin to set your work and rehearse in detail, you should consider the relationship between performers and audience. There are a variety of stage shapes you can choose from to present your work. Each provides a different experience for the audience.

Thinking carefully about where the characters are placed on the stage can make all the difference. Avoid using too wide a space which will distance the audience. Decide how close to you they should be.

Engaging the audience is very important. You need to think about what you want them to experience during your performance and whether they’ll be actively involved or passive observers. If your piece draws inspiration from Theatre in Education (think back to the puppet work you did last year) or the work of Bertolt Brecht, you might address them and acknowledge them directly.

If you are creating work that is very naturalistic or inspired by the practitioner Stanislavski, there will be a fourth wall between you and the audience. This is an invisible screen, which is never broken between audiences and performers. The audience will be looking in, unnoticed, on the action.
that unfolds. Examine the pros and cons of these various stage shapes and decide which one might work best for you. Discuss it with your group.

**HOMEWORK 4:** Examine the pros and cons of these various stage shapes and decide which one might work best for you. Write a paragraph to explain your decision. Use these sentence starters if you need to

1. My chosen stage shape is …
2. This is my final choice because … and …
3. The improvised piece we have developed is in the style of …
4. For the piece to have impact I want the audience experience to be …
5. The position of the audience to the actors will be … This is because …
6. The challenges of this stage shape will be …

Write your paragraph here or word process it and stick it in this booklet. Take pride in your work.

**Audience awareness and blocking**

**TASK** – discuss the pros and cons of each stage shape with your group. Make notes.
You need to make sure that your audience can see what is going on. If you repeatedly turn your back to some of the audience when addressing another character then your performance is lost.

The pros and cons of stage layouts

### Arena stage

- **Pros:** The audience feel included. Creates an intimate atmosphere.
- **Cons:** Sight lines might be an issue so there needs to be lots of movement around the space.

### Proscenium theatre

- **Pros:** Sight lines are excellent and work is easy to stage.
- **Cons:** The audience can feel quite removed from the action.

### Thrust stage

- **Pros:** The audience feel included and an intimate atmosphere is created. Having one end which is visible to all provides a “back” to the stage.
- **Cons:** Sight lines can still be an issue.
Theatre in the round

• Pros: An intimate and exciting atmosphere. Audience feel included.
  • Cons: Sight lines can be very tricky.

Traverse

• Pros: The audience on either side can clearly see work that happens at two sides. The audience can see each other, creating intimacy.
• Cons: The opposing sides of the audience might see two entirely different shows and sight lines are still an issue.

Promenade staging

The Jumbles – Bromley Cross Train Station Platform – The all-weather pitch – Co-op car park

• Pros: Can work brilliantly when locations suit the work presented. Interesting experience for the audience.
  • Cons: Moving between locations can break the tension of the piece and take some time.

Remember you can also create an informal stage in any location. Plays have been known to be performed in The Jumbles, supermarkets and on the beach to name but a few.

The world is your stage!
Narrative and plot

Your improvised work may have one clear storyline, or narrative, running throughout. If there are two or more storylines in your piece, you will need to decide how you deal with these separate stories when structuring your work.

Transitions and flow

However, you have decided to structure your work, it is important that the scenes flow smoothly. The movement from one scene to another is called a transition. Nothing breaks the tension and flow of work more than messy transitions. If you have to interrupt the action for clumsy costume changes or to rearrange the set, you will lose the attention of your audience.

Rehearsal

This is when the fine-tuning takes place. Once you have created your content, planned its structure and considered your transitions and staging, you will need to rehearse your piece in detail ready for performance.

It is important that you take note of the problems you encounter as an actor or a group. Rehearsal techniques can really help you work through particular challenges. You could also improvise scenes that happen before or after your story in order to reveal more about the characters, relationships and events.

There are several things to consider when rehearsing your work.

Relationships and interaction

Consider how characters react to one another when they are onstage. Little details, such as turning slightly away (orientation) or a brief moment where you step away (proxemics) or a moment of frowning eye contact, can tell the audience a lot about the way one character feels about another. Think about your interaction with the audience. Even if your piece is naturalistic, you need to consider how you draw them into scenes. If all the energy is only shared between the actors without being directed outwards towards the audience, they may feel excluded.

Tension and time

How do you build tension, not just throughout the whole piece, but also in each individual scene? Tension and pace or the ‘dynamics’ of your work are very important. If the pace of your piece is steady throughout and does not change, then it might be rather boring for the audience. Are there dramatic pauses or moments where the pace and energy increase?

Characterisation and communication

What is it about your character and their experiences that you want to communicate to the audience? You should consider whether you are using your voice, movement, body language and gestures to do this effectively. Think carefully about each of these areas so that you are able to accurately embody your character onstage.
Body language – how are you using it?

What do the shapes that you create on the stage say about the character relationships and action? Levels are also important and can be useful in communicating a character’s status or power.

“*The nature of improvisation is you don’t know what’s going to happen*”. Sam Richardson – actor – writer – comedian

Homework 5 – Give an example from your improvisation rehearsal today for each of the following performance terms and write about HOW you explored each technique for the character/s you perform. Write in full sentences. Take pride in your work.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Performance Term</th>
<th>Example</th>
<th>Exploration Details</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Posture</td>
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<td>Proxemics</td>
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<td>Orientation</td>
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<td>Facial expression</td>
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<tr>
<td>Use of a personal prop</td>
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Remember to always consider the pictures you paint onstage with your bodies. They tell a story. Use the space available to you and make sure that the images you create are visually pleasing and memorable for the audience.
Homework 6 – Reflecting on the process of improvising over the past 5 weeks. Write in full sentences.

1. Which of the ideas you suggested to your group were well received? Why do you think this was?
2. Which of the suggestions you made were not well received by the group? How did this make you feel?
3. Who made a consistently positive contribution to the improvisation process work as a whole?
4. Who supported you to develop your creative ideas – characters and staging?
5. Who did you support in improvisation rehearsals? Give an example of how you helped them to develop their work.
6. What have you found challenging and rewarding about the devising process?

HAVE YOU COMPLETED EACH TASK IN THIS WORKBOOK? IF YOU HAVE BEEN ABSENT, IT IS YOUR RESPONSIBILITY TO COMPLETE THE TASKS SET.