

one can imagine that creating outdoor theatre that moves from place to place requires a specific level of detail and planning that may not be equivalent to an indoor process. There is certainly mention of the need and concerns of designing for outdoor, roving theatre, but little mention of how these elements are organized into technical gorilla rehearsals, even though Sanderson does mention that it is not unusual to have only one rehearsal on site prior to opening the production for audiences. So much happens during a tech/dress process; that it is not explored with any depth is a significant oversight, especially if the book is intended to help novice directors. It is possible that Sanderson does not use a tech process in the traditional sense, but this is not made explicit. Another unexpected shortcoming is the number of typographical errors that occur throughout.

By the end of the book, a chapter titled “Spirituality,” readers might feel as if they have spent the better part of an afternoon in Sanderson’s company, perhaps at the local bar or coffee shop. His casual, accessible, and user-friendly approach inspires other artists to build on the work and tradition that he and the other gorillas have started. This book is a welcome resource for those interested in tearing down the walls of conventional theatre practices, and who value a populist aesthetic and approach to artmaking.

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Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out. By Mick Napier. Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2004. pp. xii + 130. \$15.95 paper.

An undeniable modern giant on the Chicago improv scene, Mick Napier adds his distinct no-nonsense voice to the spirited conversation regarding spontaneous play with his *Improvise: Scene From the Inside Out*. A former student and teacher of Second City and the ImprovOlympic, Napier is perhaps best known for his longstanding relationship with Chicago’s Annoyance Theatre, whose irreverent performance philosophy, author Rob Kozlowski notes, can be summed up in two words: fuck it. This thought-provoking notebook is true to that trademark Annoyance uncensored spirit, providing the reader with an ample dose of raw no-holds-barred wisdom.

As is often the case with next-generation practitioners, Napier feels the need to tackle the entrenched paradigms of improvisation in order to make room for his own particular approach. After a brief definition of the theatrical form,

Napier quickly depicts the foundational philosophies of Johnstone, Spolin, and Close in a less-than-favorable light. In particular, he attacks an oft-quoted series of truisms collectively known as the so-called rules of improvisation. His list of ten such statements, including such perennials as “don’t deny” and “don’t ask questions,” will sound familiar to any casual student of the form. Such rules, he contends, can quickly become performance blocks or condition players to “think in a particular way, and that way of thinking is often death to good improvisation” (9). In short, Napier is not fond of rules—at least, *these* rules.

There is a pleasant organic structure to *Improvise* as Napier gradually builds and details his alternative strategies for scene creation. Chapter three outlines a deceptively straightforward approach to starting a scene: do something, check out what you did, and then hold onto it. Sustaining this system is a sense of selfishness that seems, at first, to fly in the face of now “universal” concepts such as groupmind and team spirit; yet, as Napier remarks, such an attitude in performance need not be detrimental to the common good. He observes, “[t]he grand irony is that the times I’ve felt most supported in an improv scene is when my partner took care of herself first” (16). This doctrine of self-reliance finds further balance with an understanding of one’s scene partner as discussed in chapter four, and the importance of a sustained point of view or emotional disposition. The concept of “context”—loosely speaking, Napier’s equivalent of finding the “game” within the scene—emerges in chapter five. Here, Napier also reaffirms his distaste for those persistent aforementioned rules that, in his opinion, plague the creative event. “Good improvisation isn’t thinking about those things,” he declares. “It’s finding your individual deal with another’s individual deal and realizing a common context and surprising from within it” (47).

In chapter six, Napier pauses to describe and diagnose some “common problems” in the improvisatory event. He includes a self-conscious preamble, noting that his observations “are *not* rules” (48). At this stage of his argument, the point may be moot. The distinction between a guideline and a rule seems unimportant, particularly in the light of Napier’s astute offerings. (One might, however, be well advised to consider those who were the object of his initial rant under a similarly sympathetic gaze.) His wisdom largely speaks for itself: Napier’s list of “words and phrases in justification land” provides particular punch, outlining a series of common utterances that often deflate or minimize personal investment in the scene (53–4).

Chapter seven continues to assemble Napier’s scenic building blocks, considering the

nuances of larger group scenes. Common themes recur, such as the importance of a strong point of view, the necessity of context, and the need to quickly identify the dominant energy or game of the scene. Napier then segues into a series of techniques he groups under the heading, “advanced improvisation.” Again, he sheds new light on some common improvisational pitfalls, and provides useful techniques for the improviser seeking to enrich her toolbox. The simplicity of concepts such as opposites, specificity, and curveballs belies their inherent usefulness in the improv endeavor.

Napier’s work culminates with some general suggestions for the novice improviser pursuing a career in the industry, in addition to a sampling of “at home” individual exercises and a brief history of Chicago’s Annoyance. He touches briefly—perhaps too briefly—on the issue of gender that has been a hot topic in improv circles over recent years, although, admittedly, this is not his chosen focus: Amy Seham’s earlier *Whose Improv Is It Anyway* provides much richer food for thought in this area. Seham, in fact, provides helpful context for Napier’s apparent bravado when she notes that he “acts like a feminist even when he denies it” (160), citing that he was responsible for casting the first gender-balanced troupe while directing on the Second City stage. As Napier’s book draws to a close, its earlier intensity and profundity diminish, though his observations still warrant focused attention from the serious improvisational connoisseur.

Overall, Napier presents a compelling model of improvisation freed from exterior rules and internal censorship that strongly complements and complicates the well-established methods of Johnstone, Spolin, and Close. While one might ponder whether or not he has merely devilishly supplanted one established set of guiding principles or rules with another that he personally finds more palatable, the provocative power of his undeniable acumen nonetheless makes Napier’s musings worthy material for the tentative novice improviser and seasoned professional alike. As Napier ironically remarks in his introduction, “when it comes down to it, you can read about it until your teeth fall out, but you’ll only get better by doing it. Doing it. Doing it” (2). This work, however, provides ample strategies for learning how to “do it” well with greater freedom, joy, and effortlessness.

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The Second City Almanac of Improvisation.

By Anne Libera. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004; pp. ix + 196. \$29.95 paper.

The Second City Almanac of Improvisation is not so much a narrative or how-to book as a collection of essays and advice from Second City’s more prestigious alumni. Throughout its seven chapters, author Anne Libera addresses the guidelines and goals of courses taught through Second City’s Training Center, of which she is the artistic director. While this resource may sound invaluable to practitioners of improvisation, Libera has created a book that provides copious information in a less-than-logical sequence. The result is confusing in its progression, but valuable in its content.

Not surprisingly, the book starts with a chapter in which readers are reminded of the invaluable contributions of Viola Spolin, mother of Second City co-founder Paul Sills, and her lasting effect on improvisation around the country today. The chapter then splinters into tangents, first covering the “Big Three” rules for things to avoid (don’t tell stories, don’t ask questions, and don’t deny anyone’s reality); then touching upon Object Work, Environment, and Give and Take. While these elements form the basics of effective improvisation, Libera provides seemingly little to connect the topics; thus, the reader is left beleaguered rather than enlightened.

The next chapter, “Playing the Scene,” is much stronger and offers specific methodologies of creating and transforming relationships, both as characters in scenes and as performance partners. Libera’s discussion of status in this chapter is particularly informative, and echoes the theories of improv pioneers such as Keith Johnstone.

“The Performer Inside the Scene” delves into the creation of character and humor. It is by far the most insightful of the chapters, and explores some real-life challenges, including how to find humor rather than the easy laugh, and how to play characters who are true to their own intelligence. A discussion of race and gender is wisely included, as one of the major problems improv companies face is being staffed with an inordinate percentage of Caucasian males.

The chapter on “Improvisation and Acting” appears most enticing to teachers of Stanislavski-based acting. Unfortunately, this is almost exclusively a discussion by Sheldon Patinkin, artistic consultant to the Company, and grapples mostly with how to build characters through improvisational games and exercises. I had hoped that, based on its title, this section