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RETRO-REVIEW CLASSIC

Impro, by Keith Johnstone, London, Methuen Drama, 2007, 208 pp., £10.99 (paperback), ISBN 13: 978-0878301171

This book was first published 36 years ago (in 1981) and to my knowledge still remains a classic in the field. Throughout there is a commentary on how education shuts down our spontaneity, and suggestions as to how to recover it through trusting ourselves and therefore being able to combine more easily. As well as being a hugely enjoyable read, we can learn a lot about ourselves through trying the exercises that are suggested.

Why am I reviewing an old improvisation drama book (very different from psychodrama and dramatherapy) in a psychotherapy journal? Quite simply, the tools and philosophy Johnstone describes are useful for all relationships. To make an improvisation scene work well, there has to be a willingness to be in the moment, to surrender, to combine, and to focus on supporting the other to look good, which means being very attuned to them. Scenes where offers are rejected (i.e. the actors are not combining) or which are too cerebral (clever) do not work. Vulnerability, taking risks and trusting the other are vital.

Johnstone starts with a brief review of his life, and particularly education and how it shuts children down. If that were true in the 1980s, it is even more true now. He looks at the power of the group and how teachers have a responsibility to harness it. (Why is a course in group dynamics not part of teacher training?) He then looks at why co-operation works for everyone.

> Normal schooling is intensively competitive, and the students are supposed to try and outdo each other. If I explain to a group that they're to work for other members, that each individual is to be interested in the progress of the other members, they're amazed, yet obviously if a group supports its own members strongly, it'll be a better group to work in … Instead of seeing people as untalented, we can see them as phobic, and this completely changes the teacher's relationship with them. (p. 29)

After the introduction and a bit about his personal life, the next chapter is on status. It is quite an eye opener. In describing how he started working with actors on status, he writes about how his students saw much more clearly the dynamics that were happening between people. He describes a group conversation in Bion's book *Experiences in Groups* (1961), showing us all the subtle status manoeuvrings under the guise of friendliness in which the group engages. Bion writes that he felt the group would never do good work, but Johnstone says:

> If he taught them to play status transactions as games then the feeling in the group would improve. A lot of laughter would have been released, and the group might have flipped over from acting as a competitive group into acting as a co-operative one. It's worth noting how much talent is locked away inside these apparently banal people. (p. 35)

He writes about three teachers: one who could not keep discipline, another who just had it without explicit threats but was intensely disliked, and one who kept discipline and was very liked. Johnstone realized that the first was a low status player – he would get flustered easily, blush etc. The second was a compulsive high status player – fixing you with a glare – and the last he describes as a status expert, raising it and lowering it as the situation demanded. People who are easy to get on with are, I think, status experts, not attached to playing one status.

I enjoyed this example, where A is asked to lower his status (pp. 36–37):

A: What are you reading?
B: *War and Peace*
A: Ah! That's my favourite book

The class laughs, and A doesn't realize he hasn't lowered his status (he is claiming higher status by having read the book). He is asked to try again and fed the last line:

A: What are you reading?
B: *War and Peace*
A: I've always wanted to read that.

A gets it. Why I found it amusing is I know a real-life A who claims superiority in this way. If he were my client I would encourage him to consciously play high status and ask him to lower it. Contrast this with low status players, who Johnstone says save up little tit-bits involving their own discomfiture with which to amuse and placate other people. I have sometimes done that with a high status player, I realize. You don't have to do impro to notice this, but understanding the dynamics of impro alert you to the status games we all play.

In the world of supervision, Kadushin has described games people play, such as 'If you knew Dostoevsky like I know Dostoevsky' (a variant of the *War and Peace* example above), and of course Eric Berne in *Games People Play* (1964) describes numerous status games. Impro turns the unconscious games into conscious ones where everyone can enjoy co-operating to move their statuses up and down.

Numerous scenes are described where just focusing on status in unexpected ways (a servant playing high status, for example) makes for fascinating reading.

The next chapter is on spontaneity. The reason for this order is that Johnstone argues convincingly that if we know our status, the spontaneity is much more likely to flow. I like this quote from Schiller:

> Uncreative people are ashamed of the momentary passing madness that is found in all real creators. (p. 79)

And referring back to education:

> Imagination is as effortless as perception, unless we think it might be 'wrong' which is what our education encourages us to believe. Then we experience ourselves as 'imagining', as 'thinking up an idea', but what we are really doing is faking up the sort of imagination we think we ought to have. (p. 80)

There are sections on obscenity and psychotic thought (fear of revealing, which can stifle creativity) and Johnstone normalizes both, which in itself makes the book and the work therapeutic.

Around accepting offers, he writes:

> There are people who prefer to say 'Yes' and there are people who prefer to say 'No'. Those who prefer to say 'Yes' are rewarded by the adventures they have, and those that say 'No' are rewarded by the safety they attain … The high status player will block any action unless they feel they can control it. The high status player is obviously afraid of being humiliated in front of the audience, but to block your partner's ideas is to be like the drowning man who drags down his rescuer. … The motto of scared improvisers is when in doubt, say NO. (p. 92)

This is a useful reminder for couples, families or other relationships where we see how much blocking occurs. Improvisation sensitizes us to some of the blocking strategies that we all use at times. Looking at the opposite, i.e. saying yes, he writes:

> The improviser needs to understand that the first skill lies in releasing his partner's imagination … Good improvisers seem telepathic; everything looks prearranged. That is because they accept all offers made. (p. 99)

The next chapter is on narrative skills. Johnstone describes an exercise where every person gives a word at a time, one after the other, and a group narrative is composed. Doing this several times, he noticed the stages these narratives go through. First, they are cautious and non-sensical and full of concealed sexual references. Second, obscene and psychotic. Third, full of religious feeling. Finally, they express vulnerability and loneliness. This again normalizes some of the stuff we might hide from each other, which can potentially make for excellent impro.

> If you stop reading for a moment and think of something you wouldn't want to have happen to you, or to someone you love, then you'll have thought of something worth staging or filming. (p. 95)

Potentially this is a way of rehearsing around fear and shame.

The last chapter is on masks and trance. I won't say too much about this, except that the idea of allowing oneself to be taken over by the mask is an important theme here as in all impro work. In the section on trance, Johnstone quotes the great hypnotist Milton Erickson whose work is not as known in therapeutic circles as I think it could be. In fact, what I enjoyed throughout the book is that even as he writes on impro, Johnstone has a very astute sense of psychology and the way humans interact. If we are willing to improvise together – whether for performance or not – we cannot *not* learn about ourselves and increase our ability to release imagination and combine with others. I have found this book inspirational and would recommend it not only for those wanting to learn about improvisation, but as a resource to understand more about human nature and how we interact.

Note on contributor

Robin Shohet is co-author with Peter Hawkins of *Supervision in the Helping Professions* (4th ed. 2012) and editor of *Passionate Supervision* (Jessica Kingsley, London, 2007), *Supervision as Transformation* (Jessica Kingsley, London, 2011) and *Clinical Supervision in the Medical Profession* (with Dr David Owen, McGraw Hill, 2012). He has started two improvisation drama peer groups, which he has enjoyed immensely.

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Robin Shohet
Supervisor and consultant
robin.shohet@cstd.co.uk

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