

## **Improvisation in the Theatrical Performance: Means of Creativity and Expression**

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**Abstract:** Improvisation, as a training tool for the actor, contributes to the development of his creativity and spontaneity. In relation to the stage partner and the audience, the actor's ability to improvise contributes to a good communication with the audience and stage partners. Through improvisation, the actor can develop his characters starting from particular situations to the most absurd, thus discovering new nuances in interpretation, new ways of reaction and communication, the interpretation becoming natural, much more personal and believable. Jazz plays a fundamental role in musical improvisation, where improvising skills contribute to the melodic and rhythmic development of the piece, but also favor good communication within the team. In the context of musical theatre performance, whose structure is better defined than dramatic theatre performance, improvisation is a fundamental element in the discovery of the character, the possibilities of vocal interpretation and stage situations, going into the depth of the text, following the meticulousness imposed by this form of performance. The development of different means of expression, such as emotion, creativity, spontaneity are some qualities that can be developed through improvisation exercises.

**Keywords:** improvisation, musical theatre, creativity, jazz

Musical theatre encompasses several art forms, such as music, theatre and dance, often accompanied by visual, multimedia components, with the main purpose of illustrating stories and conveying emotions.

It comes in various forms, from spectacular Broadway productions to smaller productions performed in a more intimate setting.<sup>1</sup>

In the context of musical theatre performance, the integration of improv techniques can create distinct elements of spontaneity. In this case, it is the

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nyfa.edu/student-resources/difference-broadway-off-off-broadway/>

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performers who develop both the script, as well as their musical or dance moments, in real time, instead of relying on an existing script.

This approach ensures the uniqueness of each performance, the actors having to constantly adapt to their dynamic and to the energy of the audience. By means of to the freedom offered by improvisation to the actors, the connection is direct, and the audience witnesses an honest, vivid, deeply personal performance. Authenticity and spontaneity are the elements that make the audience to appreciate the improvised moments, seeing them as a result of the artists' creativity and virtuosity.

The purpose of this study is to research the role of improvisation, as a way of training the actor, applied in dramatic and musical theatre. Will be analyzed the role of improvisation in this artistic context, specific techniques applied in improv, not least the benefits of this practice. Particularly, improvisation will be analyzed regarding how it stimulates artists' creativity, enriching their artistic experience by gaining new ways of expression.

“Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theatre and learn to become stageworthy.”<sup>2</sup>

In theatrical art, improvisation is that artistic form that is based on spontaneity, creativity, direct communication between actors, actors and their script, actors and the audience. In opposition to dramatic theatre, where performances are based on already written texts and the guidance of a director, through improvisation the actors have the opportunity to invent create a stage situation in real time, constantly reacting and adapting to unforeseen situations.

Although the term improv, as a way of artistic expression, dates back to antiquity, it gained recognition with the appearance of *commedia dell'Arte*, during the Renaissance period of the Italian theatre, in the 16th century. Within *commedia dell'Arte*, the actors improvised in a pre-established framework both the script and the situations, often improvising musical sections that made an important contribution to the development of the plot. The forerunner to modern improvisation is *commedia dell'Arte*, a style that gave actors great freedom of expression and creativity.

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<sup>2</sup> Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, translated by Mihaela Bețiu, UNATC Press, Bucharest, 2008, page 49

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With the emergence of mentors and directors such as Konstantin Stanislavski, Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone, improvisation techniques were integrated into the training of actors, becoming a fundamental, necessary practice.

Therefore, starting with the 20th century, improv becomes a fundamental tool of training actors, encouraging them to be organic, authentic and last but not least, to react naturally to their stage partners, at the same time developing their adapting abilities, creativity and empathy.

Currently, improvisation is not only used as a measure of training the actors, but is present in performances or in rehearsals, in order to explore and develop the script. Through improvisation, actors discover the freedom to experiment, develop an original language, a spontaneity and uniqueness that amazes and attracts the audience.

“Improvisation is the privileged theatrical means to simultaneously discover and represent a character. But it takes place within a system of restrictive rules.”<sup>3</sup>

The act of improv is the honest evidence of an actor's ability to connect with their scene partners as well as their own character. Observing how a character reacts in various improvised situations helps the actor in developing a much more complex character, by discovering various nuances of interpretation. This aspect can lead to a more personal, natural and believable interpretation.

In the context of a performance in which, to some extent, all actors are improvising, the result is a coherent performance, based on a fluid interpretation, in which the audience can connect more easily.

Improv within an artistic team stimulates their collaboration, developing the performers' ability to actively listen, communicate and synchronize with other team members, thus not only creating a much stronger connection within the team, but also developing a sense of unity and mutual support. To the same extent, the dynamics resulting from the interaction within the team contribute to a unique, captivating performance, by developing skills of quick thinking, communication and solving unexpected situations.

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<sup>3</sup> Marius Gilea, *About improvisation*, UNATC Press, Bucharest, 2018, page 87

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These skills are valuable and indispensable not only on stage but also in everyday life, contributing to the formation of versatile performers, ready to face any challenge.

Improvisation is one of the fundamental techniques in cultivating other stage skills of the developing-actor. As a study method, it contributes to the fundamental evolution of the developing-actor's artistic skills, stimulating his capacities, imagination, empathy, facilitating the acquisition of the actor's craft.

An essential quality in the actor's art is the attention to details, a quality that can be developed through various improv. Maintaining attention for a determined period on some objects, spaces, ongoing situations, involves a specific level of concentration.

The ability to focus on a concrete situation, space, object, goal, makes the developing - actor, a future professional, distracted as little as possible by what happens outside of the performing space.

Exploring various situations by using different improvisation themes, challenges the imagination, the developing-actor thus expanding his creative spirit and the ability to react. Thus, the future professional actor will learn how to distance himself from any form of reality, having the freedom to imagine even the impossible. Their imagination is in a continuous process of development, and exercising by improvising contributes to maintaining their creative spirit engaged.

The ability to be able to focus one's attention and to transpose oneself into different imagined situations, naturally attracts the development of a good spirit of observation.

Improvisation supports the development of originality, versatility in the face of unforeseen situations, being a valuable technique that enriches the performance experience. An extra layer of spontaneity, energy and authenticity is added to each performance, whether using vocal, choreographic or interactive improvisation techniques.

Musical improvisation contributes to the development of such skills as hearing, rhythm and the ability to respond quickly to internal and external impulses.

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The most well-known technique of vocal improvisation comes from jazz, it is called scat singing<sup>4</sup> and contributes to the development of fluidity in interpretation.

The exploration of new forms of expression contributes to the creation of unique moments, influenced by the interaction with the audience and its energy. Thus, each show turns into a special experience that transcends the limits of a classic, traditional show, being much more personal, dynamic, impressive.

An important role in the development of the relationship between the characters in *commedia dell'Arte* is played by improvisation. The development of the interaction between actors, the ability to continuously adapt according to the energy of the audience as well as the possibility to create and develop a stage situation, is the result of improvisation.

The tradition of improvisation in *commedia dell'Arte* is the source of inspiration for musical improvisations, as, within a show, the performers had to improvise different songs, rhythms, as a method of building characters and to facilitate communication with the audience. This type of training, both on dialogues and songs<sup>5</sup>, was aimed at training the ability to respond instantly to stage impulses.

Each character in this Italian Renaissance playing style is assigned a specific musical instrument, rhythm and characteristic musical style. For example, *Arlecchino*<sup>6</sup> is associated with happy songs accompanied by the sound of the guitar or mandolin.

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<sup>4</sup> Vocal style used in jazz, whereby the performer replaces the text of the song with different syllables, trying to imitate the improvisation of various instruments.

<sup>5</sup> For this reason, *commedia dell'Arte* actors had to know a varied traditional specific repertoire of songs.

<sup>6</sup> Servant, naive, cheerful and hungry.

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Pantalone<sup>7</sup>'s trademark is the solemn songs performed on the viola da gamba<sup>8</sup>. The servants, Zanni<sup>9</sup>, are defined by the sounds of whistles and drum beats.

Musical improvisation was developed within the comic moments, called "lazzi", often accompanied by musical phrases and sound effects. The musical structures were simple, harmonic, repetitive, mostly coming from traditional musical folklore. Moments of dance and tumbling were disjointed by a specific rhythm marked by musical instruments.



Musical instruments used in commedia<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Arlecchino's master, old, rich and stingy.

<sup>8</sup> Viola da gamba – stringed musical instrument, the forerunner of the violin.

<sup>9</sup> Lazy servant with a not very developed intellect.

<sup>10</sup> Photo source [https://www.facebook.com/centrulcultural.reduta/?locale=bs\\_BA](https://www.facebook.com/centrulcultural.reduta/?locale=bs_BA)

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Musical instruments used in commedia dell'Arte<sup>11</sup>

The next theatrical genre that involved the interaction with the audience to the same extent, as commedia dell'Arte, as well as improvisation, is represented by Cabaret<sup>12</sup>.

Cabaret develops and evolves within the variety theatrical style of the 20th century, where comedy moments spontaneously intertwine with musical ones, in order to build a distinct and interactive atmosphere. The performer's abilities to improvise are crucial in creating a dynamic and exciting flow for the cabaret performance.

The training of cabaret actors in the use of physical, vocal means of expression in moments of improv contributes to the ability to adapt to the various stage requirements.

Following numerous trials and developments of improv exercises in different contexts, Viola Spolin alongside with Paul Sills<sup>13</sup> discovered that improvisation works better in a cabaret show with comic accents<sup>14</sup>.

In the circumstance of contemporary theatre, a revealing impact in the evolution of improvisation in musical theatre is made by comedy theatres, such as The Second City<sup>15</sup>, where moments of improv are introduced in the

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<sup>11</sup> Photo source <https://www.google.ro>

<sup>12</sup> Entertainment performance where live musical instruments, songs and dance moments are used, supported by the use of comic means of expression for entertainment.

<sup>13</sup> Viola Spolin's son.

<sup>14</sup> The Compass Players ensemble from Chicago, directed by Viola Spolin and Paul Sills, tried to recreate the commedia dell'Arte style of performance, based on a flexible structure where the text could be improvised every night.

<sup>15</sup> <https://www.seconcity.com/chicago>

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context of musicals, creating a mixture of comedy with musical improv that gives performers the freedom to play with the lines and the melodies in a manner that serves the stage dynamics.

In a performance, the character is not built solely from the actions and lines that the author has assigned to him. A significant role in the development and intensity of stage conflicts, adding a layer of depth to the creative process, is played by improvisation, which facilitates not only shaping relationships between characters, but also the nuance and shift of the perception of one's own character<sup>16</sup>.

By improvising, actors have the chance to explore a vast palette of emotional intensities, moods, interpretive vocal qualities, the physical availabilities related to each mood, thus proving how each approach can mark and transform the perception of the role.

This process can turn into a research laboratory where actors can experience circumstances of intense dramatic force or deep vulnerability, with the possibility to manage the intensity of their emotions according to the energy in the scene and the reactions of their partners.

Following this process, the interpretation of the character becomes more believable – both for the actor and the audience – by customizing each performance. The flexibility acquired following the development of the improvisation methods allows continuous adaptation to the unfolding of stage actions, giving the actors the freedom to bring changes within the stage atmosphere in real time.

Improvisation is not only a subterfuge, the purpose of which is to add a genuine aspect to the interpretation within a performance, but it represents a dynamic process of researching the multiple meanings of the character and its inner conflicts. Improvisation adds a layer of originality and emotional maturity to each performance, turning each performance into an opportunity to reveal and experience new dimensions of the character as it evolves on stage.

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<sup>16</sup> In this way, a genuine connection develops between the actor and his character.



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Applied in the creative process of a musical theatre show, improvisation opens up new ways of knowing towards a theatrical style with a well-defined structure<sup>17</sup>.

In this context, in a musical theatre show, the entire creative team must adapt to an already established script and scores, discovering that through improvisation they can surprise their own selves through accents of spontaneity and creativity.

The improvisation itself allows for the adjustment and refinement of the relationships between the characters, the approach the performer has in relation to his character, the discovery of a vocal and choreographic spontaneity, which adds a distinct touch to the final product. During rehearsals, different vocal and choreographic techniques can be tested, since in the musical theatre actors communicate verbally, musically, choreographically, unlike classical theatre, where communication is mostly spoken. Only in this way can they learn how to adjust their movements, rhythm and tone in accordance to the atmosphere of the performance and the audience's energy.

A major impact on improv in musical theatre is jazz, a musical style which emerged in the 20th century. Jazz is characterized by instrumental and vocal improvisations – scat singing<sup>18</sup>, represented by different spontaneous combinations of vowels and consonants, which add uniqueness to the interpretation. A jazz performer is distinguished by the special ability to paraphrase, to make changes to the melodic line in a spontaneous way.

Musical improvisation in jazz contributed to the creation of unique, improvised moments in cabaret performances, through the way in which the actors were outstanding during each performance.

Among the different ways of musical improvisation in jazz, scat singing stands out, representing the contribution that the performer brings to the song. As a language, scat can be compared to the gibberish<sup>19</sup> language developed in Viola Spolin's exercises, as different vowels and consonants are used in such a way that the performer either changes the melodic line, using

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<sup>17</sup> Unlike dramatic theatre shows performances, characterized by performances in the structure of which the director has control over the script, the stage movement and the interpretation of the characters.

<sup>18</sup> Ibidem 5.

<sup>19</sup> Intelligible speech or gibberish, technique used by Viola Spolin in her exercises.

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different musical modes<sup>20</sup>, or keeps it unchanged, but the words are replaced by these scat syllables. Musical phrases are created on the spot, within the parameters that the music imposes, but a regular practice favors freedom in the interpretation of such moments. Scat singing transforms singing into a free form of self-expression, and the moments created in such a context are unique, irrepeatably and impressive.

As a consequence of jazz, which appeared in the first part of the 20th century, simultaneously with the development of modern comedy, theatre groups begin to integrate moments of improv into performances.

In this context, the group called The Second City<sup>21</sup> from Chicago stands apart from the rest of the theatre groups because of the unique performances they bring to the audience, where the participants witness unique moments of musical improvisation.

The activity of this group inspires and influences contemporary musical theatre performances, where improv is being used to create live, one of a kind musical sequences, different from one performance to another, through which the actors have the freedom to change lines and melodies, contributing to the authenticity of each moment, constantly adapting to the audience's energy.

An outstanding model for this improvised musical theatre performance is represented by "The Improvised Broadway Musical"<sup>22</sup> who bring a musical premiere every night. One critic refers to their shows as a "love letter" to everything that makes Broadway special, adding to its charm the uniqueness of improv<sup>23</sup>.

Few companies have the courage to approach this type of show, but another group that falls into this category is "Les Improvisé"<sup>24</sup>, which offers

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<sup>20</sup>In Jazz, different modes applied in improvisation are distinguished – Ionian, Dorian, Phrygian, Lydian, Mixolydian, Aeolian, Locrian, blues scale, pentatonic scale.

<sup>21</sup> Ibidem 19

<sup>22</sup> <https://theimprovisedbroadwaymusical.com>

<sup>23</sup> The company was invited to various festivals such as the Edinburgh Fringe Festival and the New York Comedy Festival.

<sup>24</sup> <https://improvconspiracy.com/shows/les-improvise-an-improvised-musical>

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improvised musicals, and other significant examples can be found in countries such as Australia and Great Britain<sup>25</sup>.

"Improvisation and the unexpected are the best stimulants of creation"<sup>26</sup>

The development of personal and interpretation skills, through improvisation exercises, favors the enrichment of the creative spirit, the development of expressiveness, within a structure favorable to exploration and experimentation.

Another gain from exploring improvisation techniques is the emotional development of the performers and the different means of expression, since, by the nature of the exercises, the performers are put in the position to express themselves in as many different ways as possible. For example, non-verbal language develops gestural, physical, facial expression skills, developing an extensive series of expressive tools, all contributing to a better connection between the actors and the audience.

The development of the characters, through improv, contributes to the bonding of the artistic team, amplifying the skills of sudden reaction and listening, favoring a dynamic that will reflect in the quality of the performance.

The fear of the unknown or the ridiculous is overcome through improvisation. This favors the evolution of the theatre performance, as actors not being afraid of the unknown, can experiment with different styles and techniques of interpretation. The independence acquired through the study of innovative expression techniques strengthens confidence in oneself and in partners, facilitates new artistic fusions, favorable to contemporary theatre. The impact of improvisation contributes to the development of artists, thus endowed with skills favorable to the development of unique, emotional, live theatrical experiences.

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<sup>25</sup> <https://www.visitlondon.com/things-to-do/event/49277813-showstopper-the-improvised-musical>

<sup>26</sup> Konstantin Stanislavski, *An actor's work*, Translation by Raluca Rădulescu, Nemira Publishing House, Bucharest, 2021 p. 430

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As performance techniques and technological means continue to evolve, improvisation can play a fundamental role in the development of contemporary theatre.

In the academic field, improvisation will be recognized as an essential element in the development of creativity, flexibility, expressiveness, and emotional capacity.

Flexibility and the competence to react quickly to stage stimuli can favor the justification of the use of interactive projections, modern stage setups and interactive dialogue between actors and audience. The possibility to adapt each performance in real time, to the reactions and preferences of the audience, results in a unique, matchless and uncommon show.

In the near future, improvisation can have a significant role in the development of modern performance through the integration of technology, the development of performances in digital spaces and the fusion of different ways of artistic expression such as music, dance, visual arts and last but not least, theatre.

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