Spring 2023

Re-Imagining Rehearsals: A Survey of Improvisational Principles and Practices that Foster Ethical Caring

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A Senior Honors Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of Requirements of the Honors Degree Program

April 2022

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Abstract

Theatre has the potential to champion important ideas and compel audiences to reject mistreatment or injustice. Unfortunately, the history of theatre illustrates an industry that has struggled to embody the values it espouses onstage in its offstage practices. While theatre brings together all types of artists from a diversity of backgrounds, it sometimes fails to guarantee those artists a healthy space to collaborate within. Specifically, I analyze the relationship between a director and their actors during the rehearsal process, and how the power disparity of that relationship has led to actors' safety being disregarded, their boundaries being violated, and their willingness to be creative quashed. Because of directors' status as an authority figure within a rehearsal space, I believe it is their responsibility to guarantee better practices that prioritize actors' well-being.

Through an analysis of Nel Noddings' conception of care, I argue that directors must practice ethical caring with their actors by acting as facilitators, strengthening actor agency, and bringing the cast closer together. In order to accomplish these goals, I survey the principles and practices embedded in improvisational theatre, pulling on formative theorists like Viola Spolin, Augusto Boal, Keith Johnstone, and others. Through reflecting on my own use of these principles and practices, I found that they helped prioritize care in the rehearsal space and offer a healthier way for directors to work with actors; however, my application showed areas of concern that caring directors ought to be mindful of in their own use of these ideas. I hope that this survey of improvisational fundamentals encourages directors to look further for more care-based practices, making care the first focus of a rehearsal process at every level of theatre.

Acknowledgements

To my family, friends, and loved ones, thank you for encouraging me to trust my instinct and pursue my passion fully and unquestioningly. To my parents, thank you for your constant love and support through my theatre journey and thesis writing. I am blessed to have a family that shows me every day what real caring looks like. Thank you to my closest friends, Juan and Nicole, whose sense of spontaneity inspires me to be a better friend and ally. Many of the questions I try to answer are because of your dedication to challenging injustice and harm. To my partner Josie, thank you for always yes and-ing me and talking out these ideas. You are where improv and care intersect most incredibly.

To my mentors and fellow artists, thank you for challenging my worldview and constantly remaking the way I approach theatre. Thank you Dr. D for showing me improv has everything to do with honesty, authenticity, and exploring what it means to be human. When I first improvised with you, I had no idea it would come to define the way I act, direct, and go through life, and I am the better for it. Thank you Thomas for taking a chance on me as an inexperienced director. You remind me that so long as I am doing things right, I will never stop learning, growing, and finding fulfillment in this artform we love. Thank you to Patric Madden and my fellow Fubbly Bubbly Theatre Company members. You all are visionaries and breathtaking artists that have opened the door to countless possibilities I hope to explore. This thesis is a testament to what you have taught me and continue to teach me. Thank you to Felichia for believing that change can happen now, that we should ground ourselves with love, care, and kindness, and for reminding me that allyship is active and intentional. Thank you to Dr. Forsythe for the initial spark of an idea that launched this project. Thank you to the companies of *A Doll's House Part Two* and *Gloria* for showing me care can and must be centered in rehearsals.

Introduction

Keith Johnstone, the late teacher, playwright, and improv practitioner, offered an important distinction between 'good' and 'bad' teachers in his book *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*.

> *People think of good and bad teachers as engaged in the same activity, as if education was a substance, and that bad teachers supply a little of the substance, and good teachers supply a lot. This makes it difficult to understand that education can be a destructive process, and that bad teachers are wrecking talent, and that good and bad teachers are engaged in opposite activities. (Johnstone)*

To Johnstone, bad teaching is not the absence of a positive impact. Bad teaching is the product of destructive choices on a teacher's part. How they interact with students, what they teach, the way they teach it, the message they send, and the behavior they encourage are all decisions a teacher must actively make, even if they do not realize the effect they have on their students.

I believe bad directing looks identical to bad teaching. Aesthetically, a bad director might be one whose show is boring or amateurish. But in a moral sense, a bad director is one who causes harm or distress among their performers and cultivates a negative artistic space. Even a bad director might produce work that, to an audience, is entertaining or inspiring; however, art is more than the final product an audience sees. Its value is a product of the process it took to get there. A good process may not result in good art, but a bad process, insofar as it harms its participants, will *always* yield bad art. Like the teacher who has a harmful impact on their students, a director is responsible for each of their choices and the effect they have. If that process was destructive, then that director failed in their fundamental objective.

That is why I believe care is necessary for a successful rehearsal process. Ethical caring compels us to analyze how we ought to tend to the relationships in our lives. Theatre exists at the intersection of several key relationships between actors, spectators, directors, playwrights,

dramaturgs, and designers. As the theatre industry becomes increasingly mindful of how it treats its artists, I believe the language of care can help inform the structure of these relationships and the environments they operate within. One of the most crucial of these relationships is the director-actor relationship. In this paper, I will explore this relationship within the context of the rehearsal process for scripted plays[1]. Specifically, I will analyze the power directors have to create a rehearsal space and how they can do so in a way that centers care.

There are far too many examples in contemporary theatre of directors overstepping their authority or creating an unsafe or unhealthy environment for their actors. Maybe method acting made an actor relive a traumatic experience or poor intimacy choreography placed an actor in a compromising situation - the stories and experiences of actors who navigated troubling rehearsal processes speaks to an industry in need of a common language to govern the relationships between directors and actors. Many of these problems are exacerbated for BIPOC actors. Because theatre has historically ignored or marginalized their voices, there are added pressures and stigmas they face that other performers do not experience to the same extent.

This is the state of theatre in the 21st Century. Though things continue to improve, there is a desperate need to understand how our artistic spaces can tackle outdated, harmful, and unjust practices that risk performers' well-being and contribute to ongoing inequalities. I believe that improv can help us reach that understanding. In 2021, I was accepted into the Yale Summer Session program "A Practical Approach to Directing". While studying alongside a diverse cohort of artists, I was exposed to new tools and principles that I could apply to my own directing work. Instructors Patric Madden and Evan Yiounolis taught us about "experimentation", where actors are given an unscripted situation or problem to explore as their characters. I was amazed at the

[1] While I recognize that theatre does not need to be scripted, the vast majority of productions that are mounted today tend to present plays and musicals that rely on a script.

immediate effect this exercise had on the actors. Actors made bolder choices when they returned to the text and discovered new truths about their character that they got to explore freely. Not only that, but I saw BIPOC actors get to speak truths about their characters' identity that a White director, like me, would not have even thought of. By intentionally giving actors freedom to play and explore, I saw how improv could help reimagine the way we structure our rehearsals.

It is vital to develop a working understanding of what the ideal rehearsal process looks like and what principles ought to guide the artists involved. I argue that rehearsals for scripted theatre are ethically justified insofar as they have a focus on care. By analyzing the experiences and writings of improv practitioners, I show that improvisation naturally lends itself to cultivating positive relationships. Then, I will bring together guiding principles and helpful practices of artists like Viola Spolin, Augusto Boal, Keith Johnstone, Jonathan Fox, and others that can help directors meet the expectations of a caring rehearsal space[2]. As an undergraduate student, I have spent a lot of time involved in improvising, acting, and directing. Though I am still learning about each of these areas, I have found that care is not only possible but vital for creatively fulfilling theatre. Though improvisation is by no means a magical solution for the worst of the theatre industry's ills, it is a helpful practice to analyze as we develop better, healthier approaches to our art.

[2] While my survey of improvisation literature is intended to offer tools that directors at every level of theatre may find helpful, it is not my intention to suggest that these are the only tools that cultivate care. Every rehearsal process is different, and directors need to be adaptable to the needs of their specific production. My hope is that these principles and practices will convince directors to see what other wisdom improvisation has to offer for their own creative practice.

I. Care, Improvisation, and the Needs of Actors

Chapter One: Centering Care in the Rehearsal Process

Directors are the leaders of a collaborative artistic environment, using exercises, tools, and feedback to bring out the best performances in the actors. In order to ensure that those actors feel as though they are stepping into a space that will foster positive experiences, a director needs a moral frame of reference to guide their decision-making. I argue that care should be that frame of reference, given the relationship-based nature of theatre and the lack of attention which is now given to actors' well-being.

Efforts have been made to remedy the power disparity between actors and directors, such as the Chicago Theatre Standards (CTS), leading to a growing culture of empathy and intentionality within the theatre industry. Nonetheless, improvements like the CTS give solutions without offering a comprehensive ethical framework that justifies those solutions. The result is that directors can get away with continuing harmful practices if they can convince themselves they are meeting the technical requirements of these standards. That is why I put forward an explicit defense of ethical caring as the lens through which we should view our interactions within theatre.

In this chapter, I will define the idea of moral caring, grounded in Nel Noddings' conception of reciprocity and caring relationships. I will then analyze the status quo, where the theatre industry has failed to guarantee ethical rehearsal spaces, and why those failures are due to a need for moral caring. Lastly, I will outline the guidelines for what a rehearsal process ought to look like.

Defining Care

When talking about care, it is helpful to begin with an intuitive and familiar understanding of care. That is, the regard, concern, or love we hold for ideas, things, and people. Of course, how someone cares about yoga is different from how they might care about their grandmother. The former kind of care extends unidirectionally and has no effect on the object of care. The latter can be reciprocal and effects the person shown care. While the effect on the person may be good or bad, it will nonetheless shape their relationship with the one who showed them care. This is the care that I am most interested in and which can help change our priorities when leading a rehearsal space.

The idea of reciprocity and there being a multidirectional influence on parties is central to the care ethics framework. In her book *Caring*, philosopher Nel Noddings begins from the premise that relations are "ontologically basic"[3] and that "human encounter and affective response" are defining features of our lives (Noddings, 4). By this she means we cannot escape the fact that we will interact with other people, and that that interaction will affect us in some way.

Everyone is subject to the defining effects of relationships. People born to parents are the product of a previous connection. People raised by a guardian figure had someone who has affected their trajectory. Even people who meet a stranger in passing are affected by someone else, even if for just a moment. Because humans are social creatures, this process continues through our lives as we encounter new people who constantly impact us. Some connections are good while others may have a more negative impact; nonetheless, the totality of these relationships and interactions help define who we are. This emphasis on relationships makes care

[3] Ontologically basic refers to fundamentally realities about the existence of people; a condition which affects everyone insofar as they are human.

an ideal ethical framework for theatre. Possibly no industry or art form is as dependent on human interaction and relationships than theatre. From the rehearsal space to the production meetings to the audience, overlapping relationships constitute the core of theatre as an art form.

What separates a relationship from a caring relationship is when the parties seek to "meet the other morally" (Noddings, 4). Meeting someone 'morally' does not necessarily mean we dispense with them according to certain doctrines or ethical prescriptions, like Kant's categorical imperative. Instead, we consider the needs of those we care for. Psychologist Carol Gilligan, in her book *Gender Difference and Morality*, expands on this idea:

> *From a justice perspective, the self as moral agent stands as the figure against a ground of social relationships, judging the conflicting claims of self and others against a standard of equality or equal respect (the Categorical Imperative, the Golden Rule). From a care perspective, the relationship becomes the figure, defining self and others. Within the context of relationship, the self as a moral agent perceives and responds to the perception of need. The shift in moral perspective is manifest by a change in the moral question from "What is just?" to "How to respond?"*

Care is situational and response based, focused not on abstract right and wrong but on the immediate needs of somebody you want to provide for. Two people can be in a relationship and not be inclined to positively affect the other person. In order for there to be care, there must be the intent of one party, who Noddings calls the "one-caring", to meet the needs of their partner, the "cared-for". This feeling of love, concern, worry, and even pain for someone's well-being and how you might aid them is engrossment of the "one-caring" for the "cared-for". She writes that "all caring involves engrossment" and that it "need not be intense nor need it be pervasive in the life of the one-caring, but it must occur" (Noddings, 17).

If caring requires engrossment, then it might seem surprising that anyone would aspire to it. A state of engrossment seems to promise a state of suffering for the one-caring. After all, they assume the cared-for's well-being as an emotional burden. However, this kind of caring can be

seen in many of our most cherished relationships. Like with parents, siblings, spouses, or friends, we like to think that we would drop anything to help them. We hope they would do the same for us, but, often, there is no ledger or debt that we hold over their head. Instead, we sacrifice or take on extra responsibilities because we care for them. It is this kind of relationship that we instinctively identify as "good". Noddings argues that wherever we enter into relationships, we aspire to these ideal relationships where we are cared-for and supported. In turn, this compels us to moral action. So that we may "remain in the caring relation and…enhance the ideal of ourselves as one-caring" we choose the path of ethical caring (Noddings, 5).

Even if we are compelled to morality out of a desire for good relationships, what makes a director responsible for this kind of caring towards their ensemble? In our day-to-day lives, we do not feel obligated to show an unseen, unfamiliar stranger across the globe the kind of care we show our loved ones. Assuming a director has brought together a group of entirely unfamiliar actors whom they chose by an impersonal audition process, it would seem like they too lack that kind of ethical responsibility. In fact, treating actors like your loved ones (the mentality of "We're just one big family!") might create an even more toxic environment than what we have now.

Ethical caring manifests wherever we have relationships. How we express ourselves as one-caring should be different from relationship to relationship, situation to situation, because there is not a singular way to show care. Because relationships and their ability to affect us is a facet of human life, we generally want to make their effect as positive as possible. In the relation-based world of theatre, directors are not expected to feel an intimate kind of care they reserve for family or friends; they *are* expected to want to have the "initial impulse arising as a feeling" to consider their actor's needs (Noddings, 81). That is, the instinctual response to

remove the source of harm, pain, or concern negatively affecting an actor. If a director lacks that impulse, then technically they have no obligation to ethical caring in the rehearsal space. That being said, recall Johnstone's quote about bad teachers: if a director feels no pang of conscience or concern for the well-being of their actors in a rehearsal space, then I would argue they have no place being a director to begin with. Insofar as someone is a director, they carry an obligation to care[4].

Feeling this way towards another person is only part of what makes up caring. Gilligan explains that moral caring is initiated by a question of "How to respond?". This means there must be "some action in behalf of the cared-for" by the one-caring if they are thought to have fulfilled their moral responsibility (Noddings, 10). This action does not have to be objectively certain to benefit the need of the cared-for; in fact, it may not even be anything external. What matters is whether the one-caring assessed the needs of the cared-for, considered their reality, and acted in a way that they believe satisfies a desire or need of the cared-for, even if at a sacrifice to the one-caring. Because relationships are unique, each defined by distinct factors, there is not a 'right' way to show care or act on someone's behalf. Instead, Noddings offers this about moral action:

> *When I look at and think about how I am when I care, I realize that there is invariably this displacement of interest from my own reality to the reality of the other…To be touched, to have aroused in me something that will disturb my own ethical reality, I must see the other's reality as a possibility for my own…When we see the other's reality as a possibility for us, we must act to eliminate the intolerable, to reduce the pain, to fill the need, to actualize the dream. When I am in this sort of relationship with another, when the other's reality becomes a real possibility for me, I care. Whether the caring is sustained, whether it lasts long enough to be conveyed to the other, whether it becomes visible in the world, depends upon my sustaining the relationship or, at least, acting out of concern for my own ethicality as though it were sustained. (Noddings, 14)*

[4] Noddings briefly considers the case of a person who feels no pang of conscience, guilt, or concern for someone else. She argues that such a person would, functionally, be a psychopath and therefore not worth discussing. Similarly, if a director lacks that instinctive feeling, then they should not be working at an art that engages so heavily in emotions.

This distinction of realities, and considering the cared-for's reality, is vital when it comes to caring. It is the ultimate test of whether we actively understand someone else's well-being or projecting our own onto them. If we think we are acting morally, then our actions need to be grounded in a present and thorough comprehension of the cared-for's needs. There are even times that we think we understand someone's needs and go through great trouble to satisfy them, only to discover that what they wanted was something else entirely. That is why another dimension of care is empathy - the ability to understand and share in another's feelings. Empathy and theatre go hand in hand. Academics have argued that theatre "[serves] to promote respect between individuals" and "tolerance between cultures" (Rabin, 128). By fostering deeper understanding and connection between people of different perspectives, backgrounds, or mindsets, theatre has tools that implicitly encourage this dimension of caring.

Despite this, the need to consider the cared-for's reality can be lost. For example: a problem that arose through the rehearsal process may anger or concern a director, and they act to fix it. As far as moral action goes, they assessed a problem and acted on it. The problem is, they may have only understood the situation from their singular perspective. Empathy "does not first penetrate the other but receives the other", making us try to view the world from our partner's eyes (Noddings, 31). Maybe a director recognizes the need for rehearsals to be safe and deems their space a 'safe space'. But just saying that a rehearsal room is a safe space does not signal to the actors that it is *actually* a safe space. When we later consider what a director can do to infuse care into their rehearsal process, it is important to remember that the completion of a caring act is satisfied "through the apprehension of caring by the cared-for" (Noddings, 65).

It can be difficult, sometimes, for a person to realize they are centering their perspective or comfort. When they do not realize this, it may result in the one-caring taking action that is

helpful, but which falsely leads them to believe they have satisfied their responsibility to the cared-for. This is especially true for White people who engage in moral caring. Because "racial disparities are not merely the product of individual level bias…but in fact are the products of ways that our institutions were originally shaped", White people, who these institutions were designed to benefit, can be oblivious to the ongoing effect of systemic racism on people of color (Crenshaw).

Audrey Thompson (1998) argues that care ethics can promote this kind of unhelpful colorblindness. Speaking to the experiences of Black women, she argues that White moral agency grounded in care often just "[disavows] racism", not realizing that "if structural racism nevertheless continues to serve White interests", then a White moral agent has not gone far enough (Thompson 533). This means that a White person engaged in moral caring must do more than just acknowledge these systems of harm - they must actively work to dismantle them. In the theatre industry, this means White directors, like myself, have a greater responsibility when working with actors of color that other directors do not have - a responsibility to be more intentional and better "prepared to care" for the distinct needs of actors of color (Noddings, 17).

Then what is caring? In a broad sense, it is engrossment by the one-caring in the cared-for. It asks the one-caring to empathize with the cared-for and consider their needs and reality. It is both sentimental and active, requiring the one-caring to take action informed by the cared-for's needs. And the weight of a caring act is completed in the cared-for's apprehension of that act. In a theatrical sense, it subordinates the preparation of a show to the well-being of the artists involved. Since the act of doing theatre affects the actor's emotional and physical well-being, we must first ensure that they are being asked to do the work in a healthy way before considering the quality of that work. As an ethical framework, care fits nicely over the existing web of artists in

collaboration with each other; however, it pushes everyone to consider their peers' needs and actively work to make creative spaces more supportive.

Problems Facing the Rehearsal Process

So far I have spoken generally about the need for care in our rehearsal processes. Now I want to analyze the current state of the rehearsal process and what specific issues need to be addressed. Many of the existing problems stem from abuse or mishandling of the actor/ director relationship and the disregard for BIPOC perspectives in the rehearsal space. I argue that an emphasis on ethical caring can help fix these areas of concern.

The rehearsal process is structured around two basic relationships: the director-actor relationship and the actor-actor relationship. In the former, the director holds more authority and sway over the rehearsal room. Because of that, they are seen as the one-caring, responsible for seeing to the actors' needs. In the latter, actors may, at various times, find themselves in the position of one-caring and at other times be the cared-for. Some performers may need more attention than others, while some performers, on account of their identity or past experiences, may find it more difficult to be at their best in a rehearsal space that they do not feel comfortable in. Both of these relationships fall under the director's responsibility. While they more directly control the quality of the director-actor relationship, they are the first to set the expectations and structure of the rehearsal space that actors operate within. Their ability to relate to each other and connect with the material is determined by those parameters. As we look to where directors need to infuse care into their practices, it is within the scope of these relationships that care is desperately needed.

The modern job of a director is a result of the 'director-auteur' idea of the 20th Century. This is the "empowered director" who has "an uncompromising personal vision and

aesthetic…controls the artistic statement, takes credit for the end result, and is responsible for attracting an audience" (Sidiropoulo, 2-3). During the production process, their say is final. After all, they *are* the artistic vision for the show. This became increasingly popular with the advent of influential directors like Stanislavski, Reinhardt, and Kazan.

The authority of the director also grew because of the overwhelming popularity of Western-based acting methodology. Influential acting teachers like Stella Adler, Sanford Meisner, and Lee Strasberg all served as directors during their teaching careers. This allowed them to directly infuse their practices into the rehearsal process, furthering their popularity and use. Unfortunately, this has contributed to the blurring of lines between directors and actors. After all, if a director's focus is on instructing actors in method acting rather than using what exercises are most helpful for the given production's needs, they turn rehearsals into their personal classroom rather than a collaborative artistic endeavor.

By surrendering so much authority to the director, rehearsals have become subject to harmful power disparities. Directors are given discretion to pursue the means they feel necessary to push actors towards better performances. Where method acting has been misapplied, harm has come to actors. In her survey of method acting's effect on actor's mental health, drama therapist Gabrielle L. Arias found that actors' "bodies could go through [the] actions" of trauma, even if they are only exploring the traumatic experiences of their character (Arias, 9). An exercise gone wrong is not just a mistake that can be undone - it can cause lasting emotional damage. If a director is taking that risk without regard for an actor's well-being, then they are proceeding without care and acting in an unjustifiable manner.

There are even times when 'proper' method acting risks bringing harm to a performer. Strasberg's emphasis on "recalling emotions or sensations from the actor's own life" has

compelled many actors to engage with repressed memories or unearth trauma that they lack the tools to process in the rehearsal space (Simkins). A fully informed actor may still choose to engage with such an activity. But the power disparity of contemporary rehearsals means actors are often pressured to participate in practices that may not be healthy for them.

It is the pressure to say "yes" to the demands of a director. When this pressure results in actors crossing personal boundaries, then the actor has been harmed. The consequences of this power disparity are especially evident when looking at onstage intimacy. Historically, if a script called for intimacy, whether that was a sex scene or nudity onstage, the director would tell the actors what they should do and leave it to them to figure out how to execute it. Inevitably, this led to boundaries being crossed. Unfortunately, there have been several directors who have leveraged their influence to abuse or take advantage of actors. After the MeToo movement's rise to prominence, "allegations of rape and sexual misconduct have continued to plague the industry", from children's community theatre to professional theatre (Fox-Martens).

It is because of this power disparity that intimacy choreographers have become a more familiar part of the rehearsal landscape. In rehearsal spaces, "much of the job is advocacy for actors, what the actors' boundaries are, what they're confident in doing, and then translating" that to the director (Martinko). In turn, they work with the director on what the intimacy should ultimately look like. Intimacy choreographers are an excellent example of how directors can produce great work by subordinating their vision to the boundaries of their actors. That being said, the less intimate parts of a script or production require the same deference to actors' boundaries. When it is just the director and actors working together, directors must be prepared to meet the needs, comfort levels, of their performers.

Leaving space in the process for actor's to have more agency also results in actors having more creative say over the final product. It also means that a director of a privileged background is less likely to project their bias or ignorance onto their actors. As I discussed earlier in this chapter, White directors, like myself, have a greater responsibility to consider the obstacles that actors of color face before they even step into a rehearsal space. Those obstacles include an industry which has historically excluded or ignored BIPOC voices. Artists have often said that theatre is like a mirror held up to society. Actor Austin Scott describes what happens when that mirror reflects only one perspective:

> *In addition to changing the policy, we also have to change the culture… And I think you change the culture partly by changing people's concepts of what's possible. … If you see a predominantly White Broadway season, with very few authentic BIPOC [Black, Indigenous, and People of Color] stories being portrayed onstage, if that's supposed to be a reflection of life, a reflection of the real world, then what does that tell you about the real world if you buy into that? What we need in Broadway and regional theatre and everywhere is more authentic stories being told by people of color that were written by people of color. (Dolan)*

BIPOC actors have been made to think that their stories do not belong onstage or that their experiences are not worth sharing. This is a reality that White actors, insofar as they are White, do not have to endure. Coupled with the fact that "discrimination is positively associated with measures of depression and anxiety symptoms and psychological distress", the obstacles faced by actors of color work against them before they have even stepped into the rehearsal space (Williams). This alone creates an area of concern which directors, especially White directors, need to be intentional about.

Unfortunately, White directors have not, historically, created spaces that respect or prioritize the needs of actors of color. When actors of color enter a space with different training, method, or experiences and make strong choices informed by that background, it can result in "character choices that [are] dismissed because they came from an experience the director didn't

or couldn't recognize" (Brewer). Instead, by respecting the agency of actors as fellow collaborators and not viewing them as conduits for a set vision, directors will better manifest care in the rehearsal process.

When directors are so focused on creating a vibrant production, they can lose sight of what effect their exercises or expectations have on the performers. But if directors are prepared to care about their actors before stepping foot in the rehearsal room, then many of these more harmful practices can be avoided. Though every actor is different and has a unique set of needs, certain needs are true for everyone. To not be harmed, to be respected, to feel like an artistic collaborator, and to enjoy the rehearsal process, I believe, are universal needs that a director should come prepared to address.

Care in the Chicago Theatre Standards

These power disparities remain entrenched in the theatre industry today, even if there are no defining "director-auteurs" in practice today. That is why 21st Century theatre companies, departments, programs, and professionals have moved to address these concerns, often using the language of care, or care inspired practices, to ground their solutions. The Chicago Theatre Standards (CTS) is one of the most influential of those developments and has pushed the theatre industry towards better practices; however, it still fails to give directors the tools they need to make the creative process both healthy and productive during the rehearsal process itself.

In 2015, allegations of widespread sexual misconduct in the Chicago theatre community led to an industry-wide reckoning. When it became evident that this was not unique to Chicago, but something endemic to theaters nationwide, other communities and artists took up the call to action. Inspired by this growing movement, Chicago theatre artists created the CTS, a body of practices and principles to guide theatre-makers in every aspect of theatre, on and offstage.

The CTS was designed to make theatre spaces safer. While language about safety does not necessarily equate to language about care, it is clear from reading their standards that care is, at least implicitly, intertwined with their approach. Take this paragraph from their Declaration of Purpose:

> *When creative environments are unsafe, both the artist and the art can become compromised. Spaces that prize "raw," "violent," and otherwise high-risk material can veer into unsafe territory if there are no procedures for prevention, communication, and when necessary, response. Too often, artists have been afraid to respond to abusive or unsafe practices, particularly where there is a power differential between the people involved. …having pathways for response to unsafe conditions and harassment help to maintain the integrity of the work, its participants, and the organization. (Chicago Theatre Standards)*

The strong language about safety and the consequences of unsafe work (i.e. abuse) presume that the reader does not want to see this abuse continued. It assumes that they want to see fellow artists work in an environment free from harm. This alone does not suggest care, but when coupled with the relation-based language of the standards, it becomes more evident. By emphasizing "communication" between theatre leadership and the artists involved, the standards help foster positive interactions between individuals. This relationship-based language is even stronger when considering the "power differential between the people involved" (3). By recognizing that many relationships within the theatre industry are the product of power disparities which could easily be manipulated to harm an actor, the CTS grounds its guidelines, in part, with a desire for ethical caring.

The CTS shows that caring is not a new idea when it comes to theatre artists and protecting the well-being of actors. However, the lack of specific care-centered language means this document offers a list of prescriptions that theatre practitioners are not fully equipped to execute. Instead, the standards' value safety without "compromising a visceral and authentic experience for artists and audiences" and promotion of "[nurturing] environments that allow us

to challenge ourselves, our audiences, and our communities" (3-4). These descriptions are not broad musings about art - they are the moral frame of reference which guides decision-makers when these guidelines do not offer a clear path forward. Inevitably, there will be problems that the CTS does not clearly cover. A situation may call for a trade-off between executing a creative vision and ensuring the safety of artists, and because the CTS seem to put both objectives on an equal footing, a director may think they are justified in pursuing their creative vision. Of course, this is only a supposition. It would not be in the nature of care ethics to argue that this situation will definitely happen, that those would be the only options, or that choosing execution of a creative vision is undoubtedly wrong. All of these factors would depend on the specific problem and the people involved; however, it does speak to a very real concern about the CTS's stated priorities and flexibility.

Another issue with the CTS is its lack of guidelines for the rehearsal process itself. The standards are very thorough when it comes to reassessing the role of stage manager, choosing a company deputy, recommending concern resolution pathways, and addressing concerns from auditions up through the end of rehearsals. They even suggest having a conversation about these guidelines and a theatre company's defined method for conflict resolution on Day One of every rehearsal process. However, the standards devote less than a couple pages to guidelines for rehearsals themselves; even then their suggestions have more to do with safe processes for intimacy, physicality, and choreography than they do with bridging the power disparity between directors and actors. While they try to give more agency to the actor and to create conditions that prevent abuse or harm later, it is still the actor's responsibility to voice their concerns (19). When it comes to diversity, equity, and inclusion in the rehearsal space, they reiterate that actors should voice their concerns and that "[potential] participants have the right to decline casting offers" if

they feel uncomfortable (25). Actors should always feel empowered to speak up when something is uncomfortable or wrong in their eyes; however, the problem is encouraging actors to feel comfortable. Implementing these guidelines without offering tools and language to explicitly shift the culture of rehearsals towards caring will continue to leave actors at risk.

Care is an implicit pillar of the Chicago Theatre Standards. It is a value and way of structuring healthy relationships that underlies the CST's commitments to "communication, safety, respect, and accountability" (3). As the CST grows in popularity, so too are theaters nationwide becoming more amenable to the idea of centering care in their rehearsal processes. However, the CST lacks guidelines for restructuring the culture of rehearsals and is susceptible to reinforcing harmful power disparities. That is why I want to offer a set of ideas that can guide proactive directors who want to make their rehearsals places where healthy creativity can shine.

How to Structure the Rehearsal Space

I believe that care is the value by which we can ameliorate many of the harms and problems which face contemporary rehearsals. Theatre is conducted at all levels, from community and school productions to national, professional shows. The content and style of shows change, and the needs of one artistic community can be vastly different from those of another. Nonetheless, every actor has certain needs they expect to be met when stepping into a rehearsal, and certain expectations be prescribed for every rehearsal space. In the spirit of care ethics, these expectations are subject to variations based on the artists' needs. Each director, ensemble, and theatre community ought to decide what they look like in practice, so long as they do so with respect to ethical caring. This also means that it is up to each director and company to build on these ideas in the pursuit of aesthetically pleasing art. I do not disagree that the point of an artistic process is to create the best art possible; however, unless there is an intentional

consideration for care, I believe that process may fall short of creating art that is morally just and worthy of praise. Care is how directors and theatre companies can pursue meaningful art.

These suggestions for care-based practices are based on Noddings' belief that "efforts must, then, be directed to the maintenance of conditions that will permit caring to flourish" (Noddings, 5). As previously discussed, the director-actor and actor-actor relationships define the rehearsal space. If rehearsals are to be healthy and constructive, then the ideal conditions to rehearse under ought to make those relationships as strong as possible. With that in mind, I offer the following needs of actors and the ways a director can structure their rehearsal process to meet those needs.

1. Directors as Facilitators

Actors need to feel respected. When it comes to putting up a show, every artist plays a role. Like designers and directors work together to realize a common vision, so too do actors and directors work together to make a show come to life. Actors need to feel valued and respected as fellow artists and humans. Should they decide to be vulnerable or take a risk, they need to trust that it will not be met with disrespect or mockery. They also need to feel as though they have permission to make mistakes and be less than perfect. While we need to be careful of blurring the boundary between work and personal life, theatre is an inherently personal art form, dealing with the exploration of intense emotions. We cannot expect people to be unaffected by the work, and caring directors need to be attuned to how the material affects an actor or an actor's well-being during the rehearsal.

That is why directors should consider themselves facilitators of a collaborative, creative environment where everyone has the opportunity to share ideas and offer input as to the final product. Directors do not have all the answers and, as humans, have a limited perspective and

background they bring with them into rehearsal. If a director wants the most dynamic and engaging final product, they ought to engage the actors as fellow collaborators and encourage them to explore and discuss their ideas. As a facilitator, directors create moments for discussion, ask hard questions, and challenge their own preconceptions of the script. Being a facilitator does not mean they are availed of having to do their homework; rather, their preparation helps them to build on the actors' ideas and help create a cohesive product. Further, a director that successfully facilitates actors' input will also create a space for actors to open up about their emotional, physical, or mental well-being. A director cannot expect an actor to bring their best and delve into a character's psychology if they themselves are struggling to process complex emotions they cannot leave behind.

2. Actor Agency

Actors need to have freedom to develop their characters. When directors hold auditions, they are not looking for the most obedient performers, but the performers who will bring something exciting to a role. This means that, in return, actors need liberty to explore their roles. It is unfair to then treat them as though they were pawns on a chessboard. Besides, even the most controlling of directors cannot control *every* moment onstage. At some point, the actor will make their own decision. By encouraging actors' agency, directors can encourage actors' flexibility and willingness to try bold new choices, strengthening the production.

By reinforcing the agency of actors in a rehearsal space, directors may also find actors' more willing to explore the parts of their background or identity they bring to their character. Identifying parts of yourself in a character can lead to unhealthy attachments with that character's story or emotional journey. While I do not espouse a certain approach to acting or developing a character, I believe it is important to acknowledge that an actor's process is a

function of their experiences and ideas. In a caring rehearsal process, directors will encourage actors to explore what of their experience, background, or perspective they bring to their character and avoid pressuring them into vulnerability.

3. Cohesive Ensemble

Actors need to work together. A rehearsal often brings together strangers who are then expected to create an intensive, performance-based final product, sometimes in a matter of weeks. Actors need to feel like they can work with each other and have healthy enough relationships that can see them through the closing night. Directors are responsible for helping them become a well-connected ensemble that works well together, navigates problems effectively, and treats each other with respect.

Ensemble-building will help foster listening, respect, and better communication amongst the actors. This can act as a springboard for them to better understand what choices their peers are making and to play off those choices. A strong ensemble is also more likely to better talk through interpersonal problems, concerns, or disagreements offstage, should those situations arise, keeping the rehearsal space conducive for acting.

These guidelines may have some overlap but offer distinct areas which a director may turn their attention towards in order to create the most productive rehearsal process. A good director acting as a facilitator will encourage a stronger sense of community. A stronger ensemble will feel free to make strong choices with each other. Those strong choices encourage other actors to engage even more with their decision-making capacities. By meeting the actors' needs, directors will be better positioned to make praiseworthy art. And I believe that directors can meet those needs by embedding improvisation principles and practices into their rehearsal process.

Chapter Two: Improvisation and its Potential

In our effort to make rehearsal spaces better and healthier for actors, improvisation is an ideal artistic practice to consult. It has a rich legacy as a part of the theatre tradition, and a more recent, yet still influential, history removed from theatre. Improv has been used in productions, corporate settings, performances, and even therapy. The diversity of its application speaks to its potential to transform the way we structure our rehearsals. It is my experience with these diverse applications of improvisation that has led me to espouse its usefulness for a caring and creative rehearsal process.

I will define improvisation, offer a brief history of the art form, and look to theatre and non-theatre settings to see how improv has interacted with actors as well as serving the well-being of various communities. Contained within my conception of improv is its innate ability to encourage creativity, bring people together, and offer tools for compassion, self-awareness, and confidence.

What is improvisation?

> *MARY: Can I have a new door?*
> *ROBIN: No.*
> *PAT: Okay, Robin, that's…Don't block, ok?*
> *In improvisation, you say, "Yes and…" Ok?*
> *ROBIN: (nodding) Yes and…no.*
>
> Ghosts, *Season 3 Episode 6*

There tends to be a familiar idea of "improv" in the mind of the general public. Whether it's a local improv show or the hit *Whose Line is it Anyway*, people generally associate improvisation with quick witted performers making up (funny) scenes on the spot. This emphasis on humor and laughs has even affected other theatre practitioners' opinion of the art form with some arguing that it "celebrates fuzziness instead of precision, first drafts over revision, glibness over contemplation, disposability over permanence" (Byrnes). Meanwhile, there can be a

tendency for experienced improvisers to place greater value on live improvised performances over the myriad of games, activities, and exercises that are often never seen before an audience. And yet it is precisely those exercises that can have the biggest effect on players. That is why I believe the essence of improv is that it is spontaneous, both in terms of content and impulse, and in pursuit of an instructive goal. Looking at each of these pillars presents improv as more than just a type of theatre - it is a constant process of self-discovery and learning.

Perhaps the most identifiable trait of all activities that consider themselves improvised is that they are made up in some way. An improvised scene may closely resemble a comedy sketch in structure and comedic timing; however, unlike a sketch, the content of an improvised scene is not the product of previous rehearsals. In improv, there is no memorization of pre-written scripts. Maybe scenes explore a familiar setting or story, but ultimately, their structure and substance is which the actors decide on in the moment. Contemporary improvisers Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson build on this premise in their manual for improvisation, *Truth in Comedy*. They write that "improvisation is making it up as you go along" (Halpern, et al 14). Although this is not *all* there is to improv, I believe this demonstrates part of what makes it a broadly useful tool for rehearsal. Anyone who has spoken their mind, found themselves in an unexpected conversation, or even gone for an aimless walk has engaged with making things up as they go.

But making things up means more than just generating new content. This would mean only improvised scenes or long-form shows could be considered real improv. Instead, spontaneity manifests in other ways that capture the spirit of improvisation. Take for instance the game "Categories". Players line up onstage and are made to name objects and ideas from various categories quickly with no hesitation or repetition. My college improv troupe likes to use this

game as a warm-up for our short form shows; however, nothing about its content is necessarily 'made-up'. In fact, you would actually be penalized for saying something not distinctly a part of the given category. Yet watching players sweat and struggle to quickly think of a valid answer matches much of the same stress and joy that players feel while making up a scene. Something about their impulsiveness feels like improvisation and to discount it is to neglect an important piece of improv's essence.

This is the other half of spontaneity. It is about generating unplanned impulses and acting on them. This impulsiveness is not unhinged or frantic. It is about past experiences, instinct, and a performer's ability to follow that instinct. The value of experience and its formation of our instincts or "gut feelings" forms a key part of many improv doctrines. Viola Spolin wrote that what we call talent is "simply a greater individual capacity for experiencing" (3). In other words, the most talented improvisers are those that are most connected to the way in which they experience and relate to the world around them. The key to unlocking that talent comes from training one to understand their experiences, how they have shaped the person and performer they are, and channeling them into action. Counterintuitively, this meant that performers have to stop being their own obstacles and allow themselves to experience and feel honestly. This process, which Spolin called responding to experiences at the "intuitive level", involves testing your body and mind under a wide variety of circumstances to better understand your reactions and responses. She writes:

> *Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings. Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression. (Spolin 4)*

That is why games like “Categories”, which do not generate new content but spontaneous impulses, count as “creative expression”. Through the act of playing, our ability to pre-plan and guard ourselves against feeling unprepared or without an answer is disrupted, and we are left having to trust ourselves to listen to and voice our instinct. Augusto Boal makes a similar defense for experience and what he calls the “primacy of emotion” (Boal). He found that actors had become “mechanised…and hardened by habit into a certain set of actions and reactions” (Boal, 29). Instead, they needed to be empowered to let their emotions flow and follow impulses as they naturally arose in response to stimuli. He believed that emotion “should be given a free reign” to guide the actor (Boal, 29).

However, the kind of spontaneity that Spolin praises or the free reign Boal advocates would be useless if it was unstructured. A set of guidelines or form needs to be transposed onto that spontaneity in order for it to be improvisation. This is partly what Spolin called the ‘point of concentration’ of an exercise, or the “chosen agreed object (or event) on which to focus” (Spolin, 388). Having a point of concentration allows players, whether they are polished performers or first-time actors, to focus their awareness on specific skills or objectives to accomplish. This allows performers to feel and process the nuance of their mental and/ or physical behavior in real time, “[acting] as a springboard to the intuitive” (Spolin, 22). For our purposes, its meaning extends more broadly to the intent of an improvised activity.

An activity that encourages spontaneity and *awareness* of that spontaneity becomes improv when the improviser chooses to act on their impulses to develop a skill, follow a rule, or satisfy an objective. Broadly speaking, spontaneity, awareness of that spontaneity, and adherence to an active goal is what constitutes improvisation. When watching performers improvise a

scene, we see that they generate original content, know that they want to make choices and "yes and" each other, and are united by a common performance objective. Similarly, when a group of people stand in a circle to play "Zip Zap Zop", they are having to think quickly and follow impulses, *know* that they must make quickly timed decisions, and make sure they follow the basic rules of the game. However, take, for instance, a person at a farmer's market, haggling over a better price. They may be making up their choice of words as they go and be in pursuit of a primary objective but are likely not aware of their own spontaneity or process for following their impulses.

It is this combination of spontaneity and structure that is the essence of improvisation. Improv can be a sold-out performance and it can be a simple group bonding exercise. It can be based on made up characters or real-life experiences. It can be well-structured games or loosely formatted long-form. It can be funny, serious, unique, and repetitive. The "form" of improv is malleable, based on the needs of those who engage with it. It is not a blank canvas. There are ideas, principles, and practices embedded in its nature that ought to be embraced if we want to move towards a more caring theatre.

Improvisation and the Advent of Scripted Drama

The potential for improv to transform our rehearsal spaces is even more apparent when we see examples of its application in the real world. More than just a performance practice, improv is an educational tool that has helped performers develop important skills since the earliest days of live theatre. Today, we see that improv continues to be used in a variety of communal spaces, working to benefit the well-being of performers and non-performers alike. It is because of this capacity to educate and develop that I believe we must turn our attention to what best practices can be gleaned from improv for our rehearsal spaces.

In some ways, the history of theatre begins with improvisation. Before the advent of scripted drama, storytelling was oral and poets learned their tales by listening to their predecessors. Even after the advent of writing, in storytelling cultures like Ancient Greece, they found that "the spoken word was a living thing and infinitely preferable to the dead symbols of a written language" (Bahn and Bahn). This meant that the same story could be told any number of ways depending on the person telling it. Change, creativity, and originality were welcome traits of these poetic performances.

Though this storytelling tradition is no longer prominent, there remains some cultures where it continues. In a conversation with linguist Dr. A. B. Lord, a 1950s Yugoslavian singer-storyteller explained that "when he learned a new song he made no attempt at word-for-word memorization but learned only the 'plan' of the song" (Baugh, X). By learning this 'plan', early storytellers were really learning the basics of storytelling structure. To make that story compelling for audiences, storytellers found their own unique ways of filling in that basic structure. Later, as scripted dramas began to evolve from epic poems, they built on the same narrative basics that oral storytellers had laid out. When we look at the legacy of ancient Greek theatre, we see that famous dramas often stemmed from Homeric poems. Author A. G. Yalouris writes that:

> *Homer's epic poems have been a considerable source of inspiration as well as a reference point during the whole period of prosperity of ancient Drama in the Athens democracy. The relationship between Aeschylus and Homer must have been especially close since, according to information given by Atheneus, the tragic himself used to describe his dramas as 'particles of Homer's great meals' (Yalouris 1)*

Improvisation and the freedom of early poets to make their stories unique and compelling excited the imaginations of later dramatists, influencing the development of early drama. As a performance practice, improv is exciting and engaging. But just as important as its potential for

entertainment is its potential to teach and develop important skills. It is this capacity that has helped scripted theatre become the enduring art form it is today.

Improvisation and Contemporary Acting Practice

Improvisation has been central to the development of contemporary acting practice. Its capacity to ignite creativity and spontaneity has become a focal point of acting methodology. In some ways, its use as a teaching tool in acting classes and rehearsal rooms surmounts its importance as a performance practice in the last hundred years.

In the late 19th Century, playwrights like Henrik Ibsen and Anton Chekhov wrote realistic dramas, attempting to honestly depict human nature and society onstage. Inspired by advancements in science, technology, and industry, realistic plays tried to make sense of the natural laws that were believed to rigidly determine behavior and change. Laying out the defining characteristics of this new style, Dr. W. B. Worthen writes:

> *That project is what I mean by "realism,"... to naturalize a particular relationship between the dramatic fiction and the offstage world of the audience. Unlike earlier modes of theater, realism not only asserts a reality that is natural or unconstructed, it argues that such a reality can only be shown on the stage by effacing the medium—literary style, acting, mise-en-scène—that discloses it. (Worthen)*

Worthen argues that it is through making audiences less aware that they are in the act of watching a dramatized story that makes realism a distinct style. It begs for the essential characteristics of contemporary theatre - script, performance, and technical elements - to disguise their presence before an audience. This shift towards realistic plays necessitated more realistic performances. Ibsen himself insisted that actors must “[express] every mood in a manner that will seem credible and natural” (Kuritz, 316). This is the ‘effacing’ of the medium that Worthen describes - the responsibility of actors to fully become their character in the mind of a viewing

audience. Actors, who had historically been focused on external choices, needed to turn their attention inward.

Enter Constantin Stanislavski, the mid-19th Century Russian director who created his 'System' as a response to the growing need for realistic performances. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood, translator for Stanislavski's *An Actor Prepares*, writes that his Moscow Art Theatre helped to stamp out "artificial" acting and "prepare the actor to present the externals of life and their inner repercussions with convincing psychological truthfulness" (Hapgood, vii). While much of Stanislavski's early methodology was focused on table work, analytical discussion, and emotional probing, it is clear his approach was deeply informed by improvisation. Theatre artist and educator Paul Gray wrote that in 1911, "Sulerzhitski", a close artistic influence on Stanislavski, "introduced the use of improvisational exercises, which soon became the rage of the studio" (Gray, 25). We can see the influence of this early exposure to improv in Stanislavski's teaching techniques, especially when he discusses "imagination". In *An Actor Prepares*, the unnamed Teacher convinces his students of the importance of imagination. In Chapter 4, aptly titled "Imagination", the teacher admonishes a student for not exploring their imagination more deeply in an activity:

> *In the first place, you forced your imagination, instead of coaxing it. Then, you tried to think without having any interesting subject. Your third mistake was that your thoughts were passive. Activity in imagination is of utmost importance. First comes internal, and afterwards external action. (Stanislavski 63)*

Stanislavski knew how improv could be a tool for developing the instincts and imagination of his actors. He recognized that imagination is something spontaneous and cannot be forced or planned. That being said, it can still be trained and worked, almost like a muscle. This training requires a structure or goal that channels the imagination into something focused, like Spolin's points of concentration. Working your imagination does not stop at just saying

something original; he argues that action starts with an "internal" process where we listen and engage with our own creativity. Put these elements together and they look just like the tenets of improvisation I laid out earlier.

Stanislavski's use of improvisation would only grow stronger later in his life, as his belief in a "connection between internal experiences and their physical expression" would lead to a more improvised, playful, and dynamic training approach he called the Method of Physical Action (Sawowski, 4). Realizing that actors needed to step away from table work and connect more with their bodies, he used a variety of exercises and techniques to engage an actor's emotion and trigger organic physical reactions. Because these emotions were "unconscious" and could not arise on demand, his later System sought to offer the "conscious means to the unconscious" (Sarowski, 5). This emphasis on organic impulses, which lie at the heart of improv, was taken up by later acting instructors like Sanford Meisner. A student of Stanislavski's, Meisner believed that "[emotion]…works best when it is permitted to come into play spontaneously, and has a perverse inclination to slither away when wooed" (Meisner 144).

Meisner would build on this premise, putting forth acting exercises that focused on training actor's ability to observe, trust their impulses, and to find honest spontaneity. While Stanislavski and Meisner are by no means the only acting method instructors, they are part of an acting tradition that has come to dominate contemporary theatre practice. The popularity of these impulses-grounded approaches was made possible by the effectiveness of improv pedagogy. By teaching the basic tenets of improv, employing improvised exercises, and encouraging structured spontaneity, acting teachers and directors have helped develop important skills in developing and professional actors alike.

Some may argue it is counterintuitive for me to explore the effect of improvisation on method acting if I feel there is a pressing need to rethink the ethos of rehearsals. After all, it would seem that method acting and its history of abuse has helped contribute to that need. However, my paper is only made possible because artists and academics throughout history saw a potential for improv practices to develop stronger performance skills. The issue is that the process for developing skills became harmful in some cases; the theatre industry lost sight of the actor's well-being. Actors were increasingly expected to improve by any means necessary, with instructors, directors, and authority figures pushing them to extremes. Acting instructor Larry Silverberg, a student of Meisner, denounced teachers that "instigate or push the student to 'get emotional'" leaving them "open and raw…damaged by this kind of work" (Silverberg, 4). When the focus is solely on making 'good art', the art suffers when the artist suffers.

As Silverberg illustrates, the problem is less with what principles or practices are taught than how they are taught. There needs to be an intention or focus when working with actors that is missing in many professional and amateur theatre spaces. By introducing care as a value to ground the rehearsal process, a director can more easily channel their intention towards cultivating positive relationships with their actors. Care encourages a more productive environment for healthy creativity. By shifting our focus to care, we do not have to lose the positive traits that has made method acting or improv-based rehearsal exercises so popular; rather, we can make those principles more effective by putting empathy and actor welfare first.

Improvisation Outside of Theatre

Improvisation's potential is also seen in how it helps build stronger communities. Though improvisation has been an integral part of the development of theatre, contemporary improv is the product of artists and activists concerned about improving the lives of people around them.

When improvisational principles and practices were used in non-theatre spaces, the result was art that affected people's emotional well-being and ability to form empathetic relationships with each other.

Two of the improv theorists I have discussed, Viola Spolin and Augusto Boal, are the product of improv's intersection with social responsibility. Spolin first learned of improvised games through Neva Boyd, a Chicago social worker, sociologist, and founder of the Recreational Training School at Hull House. She believed that playing certain kinds of collective games could help children "develop individual potential" by exploring "how we all function in groups" (Jones). However, her belief in the power of games did not stop at reforming the education of young people. In 1918, she brought her students to the Chicago State Hospital to initiate an "alternative treatment…for the mentally ill", marking "one of the earliest known efforts to utilize social group treatment in institutional environments" (Umerkajeff 28). She was a firm believer in the power of games to rethink social services and the way institutions like education and health are structured. It was her advocacy for games and their ability to foster healthy relationships that would later inspire Spolin's theory of play.

Like Neva Boyd, Augusto Boal's approach was informed by a desire to rethink the ways we interact with society and in communities with each other. Unlike Boyd, who saw her ideas later applied to theatre, Boal began with theatre and used it as a means to affect change in other areas. He saw theatre as a "rehearsal space for people who want to learn ways of fighting against oppression in their daily lives" (Klenk). He created his body of theatre practice, called Theatre of the Oppressed, partly as a way to advocate for social change, embody better practices within the theatre industry, and give non-theatre people tools to combat injustices. As an umbrella term, Theatre of the Oppressed refers to a series of different forms, principles, and activities that

encourage honest and authentic play, whether a player identifies as an actor or not. Reflecting on this versatility, Boal wrote:

> *In Madhyagram, India – working with the poor among the poorest peasants of the world – we did Rainbow of Desire techniques, the same work we did with the wonderful professional actors of RSC, the same work we did with psychotherapists in Längensbruck, Switzerland, and political activists in New York, USA. We simply did theatre! (Boal 2)*

This general applicability of his ideas to a diversity of communities is due in large part to his emphasis on game-based play. Many of the exercises that Boal uses in Theatre of the Oppressed are improvised. Like Spolin, he believes that to unlock the potential of one's person, there needs to be some focus on "relations between people and people" (Boal 16). The use of improv-based exercises outside of theatre suggests a wide applicability of improvisation to situations in need of relationship-building and community-strengthening initiatives. Because the rehearsal space is defined by the intersection of various relationships in pursuit of a unified artistic vision, improvisation is useful for theatre practitioners. More than just a performance practice, it can teach directors to think more collaboratively and empathetically.

II. A Director's Guide to Improv-Based Rehearsal Practices

As I have argued, the ideal rehearsal process is one which meets the needs of actors in a caring and intentional manner. By asking directors to act as facilitators of a collaborative creative experience, by strengthening actors' autonomy and giving them room to develop their character, and fostering positive relationships between castmates, rehearsal processes will be more likely to navigate problems and prevent harm. Having established improvisation as more than just a performance art but a way to develop important skills and strengthen relationships, I will now pull on improvisational principles and practices that can help us realize that rehearsal process.

By improvisational principles and practices I mean more than just games and exercises. I mean the wisdom and approach which informs an artists' use of improv. Like Spolin's points of concentration or Johnstone's game objectives, embedded in the use of improv are lessons, focuses, and ideas which improvisers learn about, and activities which help them develop useful skills. For each characteristic of a healthy rehearsal space, I will identify what needs of the actor are being met, the principle(s) of improvisation directors should consult to inform their approach and practices that directors can incorporate to address those needs. Pulling from the words of various artists who engaged in and reflected on their use of improvisation, I hope to offer actionable ways for directors to meet the expectations of a care-centered rehearsal process (see table 1).

I acknowledge that many of my suggestions for what should be incorporated into the rehearsal process may already look familiar to some directors. It would be disingenuous of me to argue that I am taking a novel approach by using these ideas and games in rehearsal. However, what I hope to add to this tradition is an emphasis on those ideas and exercises most suited towards care. I also acknowledge that some of these exercises have no clear origin and are pulled

from my experiences as a student, actor, improviser, and director. Though they had a point of origin, the nature of improvisation as a chiefly oral and temporal practice means tracking the development of certain practices and ideas is difficult.

Centering care does not mean directors should ignore their obligation to stage a show worth watching. However, it would be unfair to suggest that choosing care requires directors to not choose creativity. Directors that first tend to care in their rehearsal room will find it easier to cultivate creativity and collaboration. Further, this survey of principles and practices shows that care-centered exercises and tools often amplify the creative process of director and actors alike.

Table 1

Tools for a healthy rehearsal space that address fundamental needs of the actors

Actor Need	***Rehearsal Expectation***	***Improv Principle***	***Useful Practices and Exercises***
Valued as fellow collaborator	Directors are facilitators	Spontaneity	Check-In
		Acceptance	Discussions
			Rhythmic Movement
			Change the Story
Freedom to develop character	Actors have agency	Making Choices	Word Association
			Noise and Action Circle
			Changing Places
		Playing from Honesty	Silent Scream
			Abstract Emotion
			Phonebank
Able to work with peers	Ensemble is well connected	Trust	Go
			Improvisation w/ Actionable Objectives
		Assume Good Faith	Ick Check
			Breaking the Oppression

Chapter 3: Directors as Facilitators

"Tell me and I forget. Teach me and I remember. Involve me and I learn."
-Benjamin Franklin

Spolin believed that environments could transform the willingness and playfulness of actors. She wrote that "[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" (Spolin, 3). This holds true in the case of scripted theatre. If the rehearsal environment permits healthy creativity, then any artist can engage with it. If an actor is open to the rehearsal process, then they will go as far as the process can take them. A good rehearsal process will support them from the first read through to the final bow; a bad rehearsal process will leave them feeling stranded and lost.

What's more, a director can *think* they set up a healthy space; however, it is not up to them to decide if they succeeded. As Noddings argues, an act of "caring is completed in all relationships through the apprehension of caring by the cared-for" (Noddings, 65). In other words, a director's attempt at caring is successful by the discretion of the actors. This is a reminder that an ensemble, though subject to the director's leadership, holds considerable power. Actors "choose" to trust the process and "permit" the rehearsal to affect their acting approach.

Directors can respond to the ensemble's influence in one of three ways: dismiss it by pushing through their ideas, cede all power to the ensemble, or act as facilitators of a collaborative artistic experience. Dismissing the group's autonomy risks alienating them and stifling creative impulses; ceding all power risks plunging the production into anarchy. Ideally, directors should aspire to be facilitators. Being a facilitator means wielding authority when appropriate. It also means leaving room to make meaningful connections with actors while keeping enough distance to keep the rehearsal moving.

When directors act as facilitators, they are able to meet these needs in a way which fosters trust and understanding between them and the cast. Facilitating does not just mean having discussions – it means creating a space for people to voice their ideas and thoughts and navigating that feedback in a productive and respectful way so that actors feel heard and valued. By meeting these needs, directors not only create the conditions requisite for actors to feel like they can give their best, but directors may find that something an actor offers ends up altering their vision or understanding of the play. The following improvisational principles can help directors become more intentional, caring, and effective facilitators.

Spontaneity and "Spontaneous Leadership"

One of the core features of improvisation is spontaneity. The ability to recognize an impulse and follow it to its natural conclusion is necessary for improvisers to generate unique content. Spolin tells us it is "the moment when we are freed to relate and act" (Spolin, 4). Because it can encourage artists to better connect with each other, spontaneity is also vital for an effective director. In order to make sure actors feel valued and respected, acting spontaneously in an unexpected moment could be the difference between their frustration and excitement.

To a director whose responsibility is to set an expectation for rehearsal and stick to it, it may seem contradictory to suggest that they should actively seek moments to part with that plan. But when it comes to care, sometimes a director needs to be adaptable. This is especially true in a rehearsal process where the unexpected is almost guaranteed to happen. For instance, imagine a situation where an actor arrives late to rehearsal and seems to be in distress. While being late may seem like it wastes time and possibly holds up rehearsal, ethical caring compels us to take action of some kind to help the individual in distress. This response is spontaneous, the result of the director's impulse to care for the actor.

By prioritizing care, a director's intent should not be to fix the actor's problem so they can get back to rehearsing. Instead, the director ought "to protect or enhance the welfare of the cared-for" and, once that has been achieved, assess whether the actor can move on with rehearsal (Noddings, 24). While this may be time-consuming or upend that rehearsal's plan, putting the actor's needs first sends a message to the company that their well-being is a priority. In this kind of environment, they are more likely to want to give their best than if the director put their rehearsal plan first.

This is the fine line that directors ought to walk between their rehearsal plan and the atmosphere of rehearsal, according to director and improviser Jonathan Fox. A director who embraces "spontaneous leadership" gives over leadership "when a creative possibility comes from a nonleader group member" (Fox, 112). Creative possibilities can be anything - they could be ideas for blocking, questions about the script's meaning, or checking in with someone who seems agitated. While a director may be reticent to diverge from their plan, an unexpected moment of collaboration can help encourage performers to voice their thoughts more frequently and trust in the director as both a collaborator and head facilitator.

A company of actors may be unaccustomed to voicing their thoughts or may not feel comfortable yet with the director. This is especially a problem in rehearsal spaces subject to privilege disparities, like with BIPOC actors who have been discouraged from questioning a White director or showing vulnerability for fear of losing out on future opportunities. This makes it all the more important for a director to seize on spontaneity, giving space to the actors to voice their thoughts and influence the trajectory of that rehearsal. Even if a director observes an unspoken moment of worry, confusion, or frustration, checking in with that performer and giving

space for them to suggest what ought to happen next in the rehearsal can help improve how the director has structured the creative environment.

Something that can help directors navigate the spontaneous moments in which actors respond to the rehearsal environment or external factors is having a check-in at the top of every rehearsal. A deeper understanding of who someone is and the background they bring with them can help bridge cultural or personal divides and foster deeper empathy between director and actors. If problems arise in rehearsal, knowing more about someone can offer language and strategies to better support them. Spolin reinforces this idea, arguing that reasons for why an actor has not fulfilled their responsibility "have value to us only when they are an integral part of and help us to understand the present situation" (Spolin, 46). There are times that an actor will not do the work they need to do and the director may need to hold them responsible for their actions and compel them to do better. However, the reason for their present behavior may be rooted in personal problems or life experiences that the director is not aware of or has never felt, in which case reprimanding the actor may only complicate the situation further.

That is why I believe directors should practice having a check-in at the top of rehearsal. They are a useful tool for directors to better understand the challenges an actor may face before entering rehearsal and help transition from the challenges of their personal lives to the rehearsal space. A form of check-in I use in my own work is to ask everyone to stand in a circle and share one thing they would like to take with them from their day and one thing they would like to leave behind upon starting rehearsal. If it is someone's turn to share, they say "Check-in" and proceed to list what they are taking with them and what they are leaving behind. When they are finished, they say "Check-out". If they are uncomfortable sharing, then they can simply say "Check-in, check-out", ensuring that no one feels pressured to speak. To reinforce that everyone is each

other's collaborator, directors ought to also participate in this activity. Check-ins like this can sometimes run long; however, I find this to be preferable than the case where no one feels comfortable sharing. If a director feels like they are becoming too meandering, asking everyone to share their Check-in in ten or twenty words can help keep the activity moving.

Spontaneity is most productive when the director treats the ensemble as peers and partners in their shared artistic endeavor. If a director impulsively denies or cuts off an actor while they open up or offer an idea, the director has signaled to the cast that their contributions are not respected. Instead, when an actor expresses an idea or feeling, a good director acting spontaneously should listen and let that affect their process or mindset. This idea is also central to the improvisational principle of acceptance.

Acceptance and Inviting Collaboration

Related to spontaneity and "spontaneous leadership" is a director's ability to accept the actors' ideas and create a space that welcomes those contributions. Acceptance, known colloquially as saying "Yes, and…", is often seen between improvisers when one puts forward an idea that the other accepts and adds onto. While it is useful for creating dynamic and coherent scenework, it is also a helpful tool for building relationships between individuals. In her book *Improv Wisdom*, Patricia Madsen writes that acceptance "allows players who have no history with one another to create a scene effortlessly, telepathically" (Madsen). Acceptance is about more than saying yes: it demands that improvisers actively embrace each other's offers and encourage each other to continue suggesting ideas. When performers reach that synergy, the product is likely to be more exciting than what either performer could have done on their own. Acceptance breeds support and demonstrates to the person with an idea that they will be supported.

Directors who wish to care for their actors should embody this principle. By accepting actors' ideas and exploring them with excitement, they may see the production from a perspective they had not yet considered or face a possibility they had not yet explored. Directors who say yes are likely to be "rewarded by the adventures they have" while those who reject choices may find themselves with a less dynamic, less vibrant rehearsal room (Johnstone). As facilitators of a collaborative, creative space, their responsibility is to actively seek out those ideas, creating conditions where people want to speak up and contribute to the overall vision of the piece. This forces directors who prefer to "brace the door and allow only one idea at a time" to prioritize other voices and find creative ways to generate those ideas (Izzo, 144).

Discussion is a valuable tool in improv pedagogy to generate ideas from an ensemble and analyze distinct takeaways from a common activity. In Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theatre*, she would often include space for discussion after group exercises. This was especially true for exercises that were less familiar to students and may have left them with a mix of emotions. In her description for an exercise called "Exposure", she suggested a teacher or director should bring everyone together, ask what experiences they had or discoveries they made, and to make sure the teacher or director does not "put words into their mouths" (Spolin, 51-52). Discussion is a valuable tool at every step of the rehearsal process. Table work creates an opportunity for actors to offer their response to the play, their analysis of it, and how it affected them. While a director should be actively analyzing the play from a variety of viewpoints, they are only one person. Fielding reactions and ideas from actors can help inform a director's perspective on the work and what they believe the play to be about.

Discussion is also an opportunity for a director to acknowledge the implications of actors' identities in their respective roles. When it comes to a White director leading a rehearsal

space with actors of color in the cast, they may avoid conversation of race. However, even plays that do not seem to espouse a certain cultural viewpoint or address race in their text are subject to the forces or race, ethnicity, and privilege. Director Justin Emeka suggests that the response to this reality is to encourage BIPOC actors to "take full advantage of the genius that lies within" (Emeka). Starting a conversation with the cast about the intersection of identity and privilege may be uncomfortable at first, but so long as it does not put a responsibility on actors of color to teach others or relive trauma, then a caring director ought to initiate the discussion. When it comes to ethical caring, the one-caring cannot hide behind inaction for fear of failure. But this also means that they must do their research, consider the effect of their words and action, and educate themselves before acting with care.

Depending on how much time is in the rehearsal process, group exercises can be a helpful way to create opportunities for actors to open up, explore their characters, and generate feedback or ideas. Spolin's Rhythmic Movement can be an effective tool to get actors to embody their character's physicality (Spolin, 153). Actors move through the space as themselves until the director calls out an object, at which point they must manipulate their movement to be like the object in some way. I would offer that, for a scripted play's rehearsal, calling out different parts of the body that someone might lead from could be a helpful way to structure this activity. A director could also call out variations in pace, gait, or weight of the actor's steps to see what physical, mental, or emotional ideas this conjures for them. If this exercise is used later in the rehearsal process, it is also possible to have actors morph into their characters as they are walking, and then call out various environments, settings, or prompts which may affect the physicality of their character (i.e. your character is running late to work, walking through a dark forest, strolling by the beach, is saying hi to everyone they meet, etc). By starting with this

activity, directors can then launch into a discussion to see what changed for the actors, what choices felt more potent, and what ramifications certain choices might have had on their understanding of their character, the setting, or the world of the play.

Another exercise which a director could incorporate is Boal's Change the Story. Because a play "also contains within it the negation of what happens – what doesn't happen", it may be worth exploring the choices a character does not make and the alternate reality that awaits them if they did (Boal, 219). In smaller groups or pairs, actors are given prompts to explore these alternate realities. While it would be most effective to have actors play their own characters, the focus of the activity is on exploring these mysterious possibilities. This gives actors a chance to see how well they know their character's psychology and raise interesting points of discussion for the company in their effort to create a cohesive, compelling production.

If a director chooses to engage in any exercises, leaving space for feedback and actively encouraging honest thoughts and opinions may help them understand what progress is being made, where growth is still needed, and where the actors may be unclear or uncomfortable with the work. Because of the potential for these exercises to lead to discussion and helpful feedback, directors ought to at least incorporate them in initial rehearsals, if not throughout the entirety of the rehearsal process. While directors that embrace spontaneity may approach the unexpected with greater flexibility and empathy, directors who practice acceptance will find they have more material and ideas to facilitate and explore. A director who acts as a facilitator is not giving up their responsibility to shepherd a show to completion. They are making room for their fellow collaborators and encouraging their structured creativity. If the moment calls for it, the director should be willing to temporarily cede their status to the actor or actors who have an exciting or

influential offer, “giving over a thousand times” because “creativity belongs to no one all the time, but wafts about us all” (Fox, 114).

Chapter 4: Actor Agency

"Control leads to compliance; autonomy leads to engagement."
-Daniel H. Pink

Part of what makes theatre so dynamic is the ways that performers pull inspiration from their fellow performers, from the stage, and from an audience. All around a performer are stimuli that help them make honest, organic choices as their character. A good director should not tell them what the most inspired choice is; instead, a good director should offer the actor powerful stimuli and helpful tools for making the strongest choices. This is the essence of protecting actor agency. Actors are the physical embodiment of a stage; theatre "cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, 'live' communion" (Grotowski, 19). Recall that actors need the freedom to explore and develop their characters. By creating conditions for actors to make strong choices and be honest, directors can meet this need and still shepherd a play to completion.

Thus, a care-based approach suggests that guiding actors through their process of character creation is healthier and more artistically satisfying than giving commands and telling them what choices to make. This relationship in the rehearsal room can also be seen as a "compact" between an actor and director, where the actor is allowed to "[suspend] a layer of thoughtfulness" that the director then shoulders (Fox, 119). The actor is allowed to freely explore the depths of their character, while directors watch from the outside to offer suggestions, insights, and observations that can then better push the actor. The director still informs the actor's exploration, but a caring director will want to find a way to balance their sense of what is needed with what the actor feels is most potent. Improvisation's ability to develop dynamic, quick-thinking performers can help directors approach their one-on-one work with actors.

Make a Choice, Any Choice

One of the scariest parts of improvising can be figuring out what comes next in a scene. When a scene's success depends on quickly offering up new ideas, improvisers must practice listening to their impulse and acting on it. That is because good improv recognizes "[each] person's imagination is as deep and rich and powerful as another's" (Izzo, 139). No one person has a claim to the right idea or the correct approach. Instead, the best way forward in improv is often the way that everyone agrees to explore.

Of course, improvisation does not have the benefit of rehearsing a story with a given character repeatedly. Instead, the performance is a first draft, being polished and edited by performers in real time. This means that rehearsals for scripted theatre have even more room to explore choices to their natural conclusion, reflecting on the effectiveness of a choice before settling on it. However, if a script is written and offers the information a character needs, it may seem like these kinds of improvised choices have no place. Nonetheless, a script is not an exhaustive list of details for an actor to embody; plays are only part of what makes up the final performance product. What the world physically looks like, specifics of someone's background and where they are from, and even what happens when a character exits are often left unwritten and "must be made fuller and deeper by the actor" through their "imagination" (Stanislavski, 61). Even the subtext and deeper meaning of a written line is often left to the discretion of an actor. Saying "I'm happy for you" genuinely conveys a far different meaning than if it were said bitterly.

Making strong choices is also about a performer's ability to trust themselves. In an improv scene, when no offer has been made and the stage remains bare, there is a tendency for performers to wait on making a choice until they have a "good" idea. While this is may come

from a generous place, it unfortunately runs the risk of wasting time and losing audience attention. That is why improv teaches performers to trust that their "first thought is a reasonable starting place" and to follow that impulse (Madsen, 34). While a rehearsal does not possess some of the stressors of a live improv performance, it can still be intimidating for actors to quickly make interesting choices. Because actor autonomy should be protected, directors need to make sure they have prepared their actors with tools and stimuli that can help them in their effort to portray their character authentically and organically.

Having a set warm-up time at the top of rehearsal is an excellent opportunity for a director to work a certain skill or lay "the groundwork in relationships and attitudes" that might be explored in that day's scenework (Spolin, 329). Whether the plan is to improvise character exercises or to stick mainly to the script, it is clear that an actor will have to make an unscripted choice at some point in the rehearsal. If you feel as though your company of actors feels a bit nervous or concerned about making strong choices, warm-ups like Word Association and Noise-and-Action Circle can help get people out of their minds and trusting their impulses more.

In Word Association, everyone stands in a circle and decides on a theme word or concept to inspire the round. In this version, one person will begin by sending that central word to someone else in the circle with a clear hand gesture or point; this individual should be across the circle, and does not have to follow a set order. The person who receives focus will then have to word associate with the word they are given, passing the focus onto the next person in the circle as they share their word. This pattern of receiving a word and then sending what immediately comes to mind with the next person in the circle continues for a while. Anyone is able to return to the theme word or concept if they feel the round has strayed considerably from that idea or if they are at a loss for what to say. The goal of Word Association is to think quickly and honestly,

saying the first thing that comes to mind without apologizing or waiting until a better word is thought up. Even if a performer gives an entire phrase or makes an utterance, choices that *are* made are generally preferable to choices that are *never* made.

Noise-and-Action Circle is like Word Association in that everyone needs to make quick choices. In this game, one person will make a big gesture and a sound to go with it. The next person in the circle makes the same gesture and sound, as does the person after them, until that gesture and sound makes it all the way back to the person who created it. The next person in the circle then makes their own, and this continues until everyone goes. Ideally, each person is prepared to repeat the action and sound as soon as it gets to them, so that the activity builds pace and energy as it goes on. This exercise helps actors engage more with the full range of their voices and bodies, opening up the range of possibilities that they can explore onstage. By making a big and goofy choice during a warm-up, that actor has pushed the boundary of what they thought they could do with their movement. While games like these may seem silly, when actors are made aware of the purpose they serve, it can help them break down unconscious barriers to their creative process.

Even the way a director stages the play should encourage actors to make choices. Spolin found that directors who only communicated "the mechanics of stage movement" without offering the relational or emotional justification resulted in actors that were "unable to move naturally" (Spolin, 332). Some directors prefer to give clear blocking while others may ask actors to experiment and see what they discover. One is not better than the other; what matters is whether the director's approach tends to the actor's needs. When freedom to make choices is one of their needs, I believe that regardless of their approach, a director should help actors build a strong understanding of their characters, their relationships, and how they interact with the world

around them. When performers are acting honestly and in the moment, they may make discoveries about their motivation or physicality that they can explore further.

To that end, directors should consider strengthening actors' spatial awareness and relationship to the set and their fellow actors. In Spolin's Changing Places exercise, actors are asked to improvise a scene, making sure not to occupy the same area of the stage. If an actor moves into their partner's space (i.e. moves upstage from downstage, crosses to stage left from stage right), then their partner must counter to a different area. One focus of this activity is on justifying movement, and making crosses and counter-crosses feel organic. While this activity alone may be enough to strengthen an actor's spatial awareness, a director may find it more useful for their rehearsal to base this activity around a scene or exchange of lines from the script. Further, directors should consider having actors perform this exercise on the set's actual layout, even if do-fers, fake furniture, and boxes are used to approximate what the set will eventually look like. In doing so, directors may discover interesting staging choices that even they had not considered; however, this exercise is not meant to take the place of blocking the scene, but to ensure a director approach blocking from a place of care and deference to actors' needs.

Pull From What You Know

For an actor to make strong choices, they must feel as though they have a foundation to build on. A detailed understanding of the script and its meaning is vital for developing that foundation; however, actors should also be attuned to who they are and what they bring to their role. Their artistic process is a function of their experiences, perspective, and identity, and directors ought to encourage performers to embrace who they are in a productive and caring environment.

Because of this, performers in scripted theatre are often told to pull from experiences that they can map onto their character. Boal[5] argues that actors should reflect on emotions they have felt and potent memories "which must [then] be transferred and modified in order to match the character's emotions" (Boal, 34). As I discussed in Chapter 2, this tool has sometimes been misapplied, causing actors to relive trauma or endure psychological distress. A director can help prevent this harm by considering the actor's needs, emotional state, and willingness to jump into a transference activity before they conduct it. They can also prevent this harm by looking to improvisational practices.

By studying improvisation, directors are likely to find they are more equipped to help actors realize authentic characters in a healthy rehearsal space. That is because, without a script, improvisers can *only* use what they know and who they are to generate content and respond to their partner's choices. Pulling from one's own life and bringing that to a performance is a central principle of improvisation, and one which informs most improvised scenes, characters, and shows. In their book *Truth in Comedy: The manual of improvisation*, improvisers Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson argue that "Honest discovery, observation, and reaction is better than contrived invention" (Halpern, et al., 15). When an improviser struggles to justify or embody an experience that they are unconnected to, they are less focused on storytelling and character building. Their attention shifts from actively listening to their partner or their environment, and they risk missing stimuli that may generate new impulses for them to follow.

However, the fast-moving pace of improvisation means a choice may be missed if too much time is taken for transference. Instead, improvisers react to stimuli in their environment (whether that is to a partner's choice or to something in the space) and allow the organic impulse

[5] Boal's conception of "transference" is derived from Stanislavski's System

or reaction that comes from registering that stimuli to infuse their next choice. Spolin calls this intuition. It is the part of our minds which respond immediately to the present moment, sometimes in ways we do not consciously register. When we act according to our intuition, we are freed from "handed-down frames of reference" and feel the "bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole" (Spolin, 4). Instead of drawing on "old emotions," she wants performers to approach each scene as though they are a "fresh experience" (Spolin, 239).

She suggests having performers partake in activities that put them into situations where they bring on intense emotions without living or embodying a painful situation. In one activity, called "Silent Scream", the director asks the ensemble to scream without making a verbal sound; however, they should still have the physicality of an intense scream, with the director instructing them to use every bit of their physicality as though they were actually screaming. Then, when the director feels the group is ready and screaming authentically, they instruct the actors to scream with their voices, creating a deafening noise. Through the act of engaging wholeheartedly with a strong physical choice, actors can better connect with the idea of organic choices and leave behind their tendency to overthink.

Boal's Abstract Emotion exercise extends this idea further. Actors walk through the space and engage one another. They start out finding the good in each other, interacting warmly and friendly with their peers. As the exercise proceeds, individuals start varying the degree of niceness they show each other, gradually letting their interactions morph into whatever emotion the group is working towards. While Boal suggests the group should move towards spite, hate, and the natural climax of violence[6], I would suggest letting the group naturally find their own emotional extreme that they move towards. Not only does this encourage the group to practice

[6] Boal does not endorse actual violence; rather, he means the emotional intensity of violence that proceeds hate.

listening to their peers' nuanced choices and changes in behavior, but it also frees the group from exploring something like hate or anger on a day that no one feels emotionally prepared to embrace that feeling. As everyone continues to walk and interact, they approach that emotional extreme, manifesting it in their physicality, voices, and interactions. After reaching the climax of that emotion, they begin to morph back into the initial friendliness they began the exercise with. It is important to note that instead of speaking words to each other, people are only allowed to communicate with random, unconnected numbers in no discernible order, so as to prevent conveying of meaning through language. Because there is no singular right way to feel sadness or frustration or joy, by asking actors to explore exercises that bring those emotions on, directors will encourage them to better understand who they are and how they experience the world. Improvisation's commitment to honoring impulse lends itself to a rehearsal space that prioritizes actors' honest emotions. Improv compels directors to respect and uplift that honesty rather than defer to their own preconception of what the character or scene needs.

One of the most challenging blocks to intuitive and honest acting is the fear of approval or disapproval. When we are "Categorized 'good' or 'bad' from birth…we become so enmeshed with the tenuous treads of approval/disapproval that we are creatively paralyzed", making it difficult, if not impossible, to be spontaneous or organic (Spolin, 7). This problem is made even more potent for actors of color who have been led to believe that who they are and how they act is not welcome unless they conform to certain expectations or assimilate to the "White" standard. Where colorblind casting[7] has been the norm, this reality has been reinforced. As the theatre industry leaves colorblind casting behind, there is a need for directors, especially White

[7] Colorblind casting is when directors cast actors without consideration for their racial/ ethnic identity. The problem is that colorblind casting assumes race or ethnicity can be ignored, a privilege that actors of color do not have. For more about colorblind and color conscious casting, see Teresa Eyring's article "Standing Up for Playwrights and Against 'Colorblind' Casting"

directors, to "execute an in-depth evaluation of the cultural connotations of requesting an actor insert themselves into a narrative that is not their own", ensuring actors of color are not "burdened by their racial transcendence" (Cummings). However, color consciousness does not stop at the casting process – it must continue through the entire rehearsal process. In addition to having intentional discussions, a White director should be mindful that actors of color can "become absorbed in a strange sort of imitation of… 'whiteness' because they don't have permission to bring their full self to the process" (Emeka). That is why a caring director should empower their actors to explore their lived experiences to the extent they feel comfortable doing so. That way, actors can self-nominate themselves to explore certain material without pressure from the director.

One exercise that can help performers generate original content for their characters is "Phonebank"[8]. Four performers stand together, each with a unique person they are about to call. Sometimes I ask actors to choose the first person their character would go to with good news; however, what matters most is that they choose someone of emotional significance to their character. The actors are then given a prompt, whether it is sharing good news, bad news, checking in after an extended period of time, etc. When the exercise starts, one actor begins speaking on the phone to their individual, improvising a conversation. After the first actor has gotten through a couple sentences, the next actor should begin speaking and start their own conversation while the first actor pulls back. This process repeats with the third and then the fourth actors until everyone has been activated and spoken at least once. In no particular order, actors can choose to reactivate to continue their conversation. If multiple people speak at once, that is more than okay, just so long as they speak with a purpose. After some time of sporadic

[8] While I do not know the origin of Phonebank, it is one I am familiar with from learning improvisation.

interrupting, actors should feel a growing need to say what they want to say. As this need bubbles up, they can begin speaking at the same time[9], no longer ceding the new voices until all four actors are activated and speaking over each other. As they compete to be heard, both over each other and by their invisible partner, their reason for calling should become increasingly embodied by the actors. Eventually the director can call down the exercise or make a hand motion for everyone to wrap up their conversations.

By letting actors improvise as their characters, they can fill in the gaps that the script leaves missing. As they fill those gaps, actors are free to explore as much of or as little of themselves as they would like to bring to their character. Further, because intuition is the response to stimuli and an actor's environment, an actor that improvises as their character can generate their own stimulus. If they offer up information about their character's history, background, or identity that was not covered by the playwright, then they can pull on that detail in their actual performance.

If a director wants to set an actor up for success, then they should want to create an environment where actors feel comfortable exploring who they are and what of themselves they want to consciously bring to their role. Through games and structured exercises, improv theorists like Spolin and Boal believe actors can be released from the pressure to make the "right" choice and, instead, make the honest choice. By prioritizing empowerment of actors to make their own choices, I am not suggesting that directors are never allowed to offer their own choices or make suggestions. Rather, improv shows that the most exciting choices are often those that a performer arrives at on their own through an exciting process of discovery.

[9] I recognize that this is not typically how Phonebank is played; however, because my goal is to help actors generate stimulating content, I believe this format better accomplishes that goal.

Chapter 5: Cohesive Ensemble

"Coming together is a beginning; keeping together is progress; working together is success"
-Edward Everett Hale

I want to now turn my attention to the effect a director has on the relationships *between* actors. Because a caring director wants to prevent their actors from experiencing pain or harm, they have a vested interest in creating a rehearsal space that fosters strong, positive connections between performers that last through the end of the show's run. The expectation is not that everyone will become best friends, but that they are able to work together, have meaningful conversations, and treat each other with respect. If those things are not present, then an actor cannot reasonably expect to do their best in a rehearsal space.

Creating a cohesive ensemble is not an exact science. Every production brings together a unique group of people, each with different life experiences and ways of viewing the world. It is likely that an ensemble will, at some point face tensions, and it would be unrealistic to suggest that a director could fully avoid that reality. However, a director can, at the very least, prepare their actors with tools to communicate effectively and put their best foot forward. Improvisation offers a variety of ways for a director to build trust and encourage actors to assume good faith while working together.

Building Trust

Whether it is two strangers improvising or a troupe of longtime friends, improvisation breeds trust between individuals and helps foster healthy collaboration. Trust, or "faith or reliance on another", is a necessary part of a successful improvisational experience (Izzo, 141). It assures performers that that they will be treated with respect and that their choices will be embraced with open arms. An environment devoid of trust will prevent creativity from flourishing.

This idea is not unique to improvisation. In scripted theatre, where sensitive material is often explored, actors may not immediately feel comfortable being vulnerable or taking risks with one another if they have yet to develop a sense of mutual trust. Even when the material is light-hearted or comedic in nature, if a company does not feel like they can work together, conflict, disrespect, or misunderstandings between actors becomes more likely. Therefore, it is a director's responsibility, insofar as they care for their actors, to help them build trusting relationships.

One important aspect of trust is that it is an active idea. It does not just ask performers to refrain from disrespect or mistreatment. Trust in improvisation pushes improvisers to go out of their way to make the space welcoming for everyone, especially people they do not know. It is when someone goes out of their way to reach across a divide that builds mutual faith in a relationship. If this idea sounds similar at all to my discussion of care ethics, it is because "This attitude of warm acceptance and trust is important in all caring relationships" (Noddings, 65). Directors are not just trying to get actors to trust each other – directors are trying to get actors to *care* about each other.

A performer that asks for trust must also offer something of themselves. In improvisation, when an improviser makes a choice, it is implied that their partner will also make a choice so that, together, they share the burden of fleshing out the scene. Johnstone illustrates the need, and power, of mutual trust:

> *I remember a girl who always played high status in improvisations, and who had never experienced safety and warmth as a performer… I asked her to play low status with an expert low-status improviser, but she held on to herself tightly with her arms and crossed her legs as if refusing to let her partner 'invade' her. I asked her to unfold and then to tilt her head and suddenly she was transformed—we wouldn't have recognized her. She became soft and yielding and really seemed to enjoy the feelings that flooded into her, and she acted with feeling and rapport for the first time. (Johnstone)*

Vulnerability ought to go both ways between performers if they are to trust each other. The performer that struggles to let their guard down will inadvertently lead other actors to keep theirs up. However, a performer that puts faith in their peers will likely find they can make stronger, more exciting choices. That is because they allow themselves to make honest choices without fear of "obstruction, resistance, protection, or control" (Izzo, 141).

A director can cultivate active, mutual trust in their rehearsal by finding ways to habitually model that behavior themselves. Starting each rehearsal with a warm-up is one-way directors can accomplish this. Warm-ups are a moment for a cast to come together with a singular purpose, connecting with each other in a low stakes creative space that invites fun and spontaneity. Spolin argues that "This combination of individuals mutually focusing and mutually involved creates a true relationship" between performers and forms the foundation of trust (Spolin, 24). Thus, setting aside a regular warm-up time with the entire company, where the director also plays along, will help actors identify more strongly with each other. I believe games and exercises that ask everyone to perform the same movement or vocalization are especially helpful for building an ensemble, as the similarity in action promotes a unified group identity.

A favorite warm-up of mine is Go[10]. Actors and director stand in a circle, able to clearly see each other and with enough room to walk across the circle. One actor will begin and point at someone else in the circle, not to their immediate left or right. The person they point at must then say "Go," giving them permission to cross the space and take the latter person's place. The person who was pointed at must then point towards someone else and seek permission to take their place. When the group finds harmony, there should be a constant but calm flow of movement. In the second round of the game, a player will nod their head instead of saying "Go,"

[10] I first learned of Go through my college improv troupe, Rollins Improv Players.

while in the third round the pointing is dropped entirely in favor of making strong eye contact. In this game, performers must concentrate on how well they pay attention to each other. In a successful round, everybody will wait for permission to move, constantly look around for who may try to acknowledge them and consider who may not have been selected for some time. By intentionally considering how to work with other people in service of the game's goal, connections are made, and performers may find it easier to care for each other in the rehearsal space.

Another warm-up exercise that directors may find useful in pursuit of trust is counting to ten as a group. Everyone closes their eyes, and without planning or self-nominating, they must collectively count up to ten, with one person saying one number at a time and no individual saying two numbers in a row. If anyone overlaps or says the wrong number, then the group must start back at one. Some variations make the threshold higher, or just see how high the group can count; either variation works here. Though it seems straightforward, the focus of the game is deeply tied to ensemble building. Performers' must listen to each other and trust that someone will say the number that the group needs (or, conversely, trusting that the group needs someone to step up to say the next number and deciding to be that person). Both exercises flex many of the emotional muscles required for trust. If an ensemble can execute these warm-ups with ease, then they are well on their way to developing caring relationships with one another.

Trust, as a subset of care, also demands that we consider each other's needs. An effective way to direct the intention of an actor to the emotional needs of their peers is by performing an improvised scene. Boal simply calls this Improvisation and labels it as one of many "Rehearsal Exercises for Any Kind of Play" (Boal, 217). In this exercise, performers are paired together to improvise a scene. There ought to be a central, driving conflict that exhibits "a struggle

between…one will and one counter-will" (Boal, 217). This means that actors ought to have clearly defined, actionable, and oppositional goals that they seek to complete over the course of the scene.

To make sure that these care-centered practices continue to target the creative needs of a rehearsal process, I would suggest asking actors to perform these scenes as their characters. Directors pair actors together, considering their characters and how they might appear in the same time and place together. The director can then assign the actionable objective for each character, allowing actors to focus only on the improvising of the scene rather than the set-up. Oftentimes, this objective should be completed through or made possible by the actor's partner. I would also suggest giving a clear location to the actors, even going so far as to outline a bit about what the space looks like, so that the actors can live more in the moment[11]. The actors will then perform the improvised scene together, hopefully making discoveries about their characters and practicing the improvisational principles outlined in previous chapters, such as spontaneity, acceptance, making choices, and pulling from what they know. By improvising together, actors can "reach a state of collective imagination", identifying themselves as a unit in pursuit of a shared objective rather than as separate, disconnected individuals (Izzo, 141). Thus, directors can use this exercise to explore the creative context of the material as well as forge stronger relationships between their performers.

Making Mistakes and Assuming Good Faith

Unfortunately, not every choice has a positive outcome. Sometimes, risk-taking actors can make choices that lead to discomfort, frustration, or even harm. In a cohesive ensemble, it is helpful for actors to assume good faith in their relationships with each other. When we assume

[11] I was introduced to this variation of the exercise by Patric Madden, one of our instructors at the Yale Summer Session program "A Practical Approach to Directing"

good faith, we assume that a choice was made from a place of love and risk, not from spite or contempt. While this does not excuse the consequences of a decision and may warrant further discussion or examination, assuming good faith helps prevent lasting harm to actors' relationships and their sense of mutual trust.

Improvisers know that mistakes are bound to happen and that they are "our friends, our partners in the game" (Madsen). Mistakes are an opportunity to learn what material was unsuccessful. That is why mistakes are often the product of actors "Doing something risky or challenging, something out of [their] comfort zone" in the hopes that it pays off with an audience (Madsen). But an unsuccessful choice is not just about something that did not land well with an audience; an unsuccessful choice might be one that did not set a partner up for success or make them feel supported. While improv is based on principles that lend themselves towards collaborative, engaging work, improvisers are only human. Maybe one improviser thought they were accepting a choice, but to their partner it was clearly a block[12]. Because this was meant as a good faith attempt to advance the scene, to punish them for blocking may hinder their future willingness to take risks or make a choice. Instead, by having a discussion with that performer about their choice and the effect it had on their partner, they can learn not to do that again.

While rehearsals for scripted drama are not improvised, they still embody the idea of making bold choices in the hopes that they pay off. These can be staging choices, physicality, or giving a line a certain intention or subtext. By assuming good faith, a performer can take a risk in rehearsal and then, if it lands poorly, discuss it with their fellow performers. In a world where mistakes are almost guaranteed, "admitting them freely demonstrates courage and character" and reminds performers that they can trust each other (Madsen). Mistakes can also be the result of an

[12] A block is like saying "No" to a choice; it is a rejection that does not build on a partner's offer

actors' offstage actions in a rehearsal. Someone could have made a well-meaning joke that was perceived as hurtful, or somebody could have pushed past a fellow actor in a dismissive or aggressive manner without intending to seem disrespectful. These situations should also be addressed in the rehearsal to maintain strong connections between performers.

Trust does not mean an expectation of perfection, but an expectation of mutual commitment to a healthy rehearsal space. Because directors are constantly observing the rehearsal process, they will often be the first to witness a mistake. Sometimes, though, they may miss a mistake that negatively affected a fellow performer; in fact, a director may have been responsible for one of those mistakes. In a caring rehearsal process, that performer should be encouraged to voice their concerns and speak up about what they experienced without retribution. By holding space in a rehearsal for actors to voice their feelings and by affirming the value of their contribution, a director can create a productive forum for a company to communicate and check in with each other.

As a member of my college's improvisational troupe, I frequently perform in shows with my fellow improvisers. Because of the variety of content we explore and our effort to engage sensitive subjects as they arise, we recognize the fact that sometimes choices may be made that sit poorly with a fellow troupe member or which cause distress, discomfort, or even harm. For this reason, we hold space at the end of every show for an "ick check" (ImprovDr.com). An ick is any choice or subject matter which negatively affected a troupe member in an emotional, mental, or physical way. It should not be something that a performer feels *could* offend somebody. Further, an ick check is not a space to comment on the quality or success of a fellow performer's choice; instead, the moment is meant to build understanding between performers. Directors should explore incorporating a check-in like this, whether it is after an exercise, after

running a scene, or at the end of rehearsal. By guaranteeing a space for performers to speak honestly, this can help a director prevent tensions from growing out of control. I would like to stress that this should not be the *only* time in a rehearsal process for a director to check in with the cast, nor should it be the only time that the cast feels as though they can speak up. I offer this as a practice from my own improv experience that has yielded positive results and helped to cultivate open dialogue between performers.

Like the Chicago Theatre Standards Ouch/ Oops policy[13], it does not tend to invite discussion unless the person expressing an ick chooses to have further discussion. This is especially important for actors of color who share an ick. Ick checks offer an opportunity for a cast to better understand the lived experiences of their fellow performers. Like how the ethical value of an action is determined by whether the cared-for received it well, ick checks imply that choices are unproductive insofar as a fellow actor feels harmed or hurt as a result. Because of the inherent privilege of White artists, like myself, we may not recognize when a choice unintentionally reinforced inequality, stereotype, or discomfort in the rehearsal. Audrey Thompson explains that this privilege-based ignorance is a function of society's inequalities, since "What White children (not to mention adults) can afford to ignore, children of color may be forced to learn" (Thompson, 535).

Therefore, a caring rehearsal process will not force or pressure an actor of color to teach a White actor about why their choice was inappropriate or harmful. The nature of discussion is that both parties get to share and push back on each other's ideas. While there are many points in rehearsal where this is welcome, when an actor feels a familiar oppression or harm that they have

[13] The ouch/ oops policy is a way to communicate that an action or choice by a performer, on or offstage, harmed or negatively affected a fellow performer. The individual who was affected says "Ouch" to that action, to which the other individual says "Oops", acknowledging that they caused their peer harm or distress. It is up to the person who was affected to ask for further discussion.

experienced outside of rehearsal, they should not have to delve even deeper into that pain to defend themselves or explain why a certain choice was wrong. An ethic of care suggests that they get to voice what they need to make the space healthy and conducive for creativity again. When we assume good faith, like with care, we look to uplift our fellow actors' needs and make sure they feel valued as both an artist, a collaborator, and a human, especially when they go through the effort of voicing a reaction or concern.

Directors can help performers develop an assumption of good faith by having them work more closely together. One exercise that may be especially useful for any director, especially one working with a diverse cast, would be Boal's Breaking the Oppression. In this exercise, an actor recalls a moment that they, or in this case their character, experienced oppression. The protagonist actor performs a scene based on that experience, performing it with a partner or partners exactly as it happened. In the next phase, the protagonist acts the scene again, this time refusing to accept the oppression and resist it. In the last phase, the performers switch roles, so that the protagonist is now in the role of oppressor. Not only does this exercise give an actor the choice to map a relevant personal experience onto their character and their character's identity, but it also gives other actors a chance to walk in another person's shoes and explore a situation they may never have had the chance to experience by virtue of their identity or privilege.

While this exercise is typically done with actors as themselves, I worry that asking actors, especially actors of color, to openly share an experience of oppression in an environment they may not be comfortable in yet would be unproductive. Because the intention is to explore how an actor's identity informs their character's depiction, I believe asking actors to perform this exercise as their characters would be a helpful layer of abstraction. An actor may still tie their character to their own identity, but so long as they do not feel pressured to relive an oppressive

or painful moment from their own life, then I believe this exercise can build mutual understanding and empathy between performers.

Final Thoughts

These principles and practices, though helpful, sometimes lack clear delineations. A spontaneous director may accept an actor's choice in the moment, thus affirming that actor's agency. A space where actors feel less judged and more excited to play is likely a space that fosters stronger connections between actors. Improv is a discipline that builds on itself and is often self-referential. Ultimately, directors should not strive to embody each of these ideas independently of each other; directors should be an artist in whom these ideas are unified.

While some of these games or exercises may seem tangential to the work a director is expected to do, I believe they reinforce the first objective of a morally conscious director: center care in the rehearsal process. If they are going to structure their space around care, then they must be willing to take time to honestly consider the needs of their ensemble. Not all of these exercises, if any, will be needed in rehearsal. But even if every practice is not used, these improvisational principles should still guide a director through each moment of rehearsal. In doing so, a director will center care in a way that also invites creativity and collaborative play.

Chapter 6: My Reflection on These Ideas in Practice

It is difficult to analyze theatre in a purely scientific way. The success of an artistic choice depends on aesthetic and moral factors which are not easily quantified. However, if theatre and performing arts practices are left unexamined, they will invite unchecked ideas and questionable methods which may imperil the artists involved. As artists, we must constantly critique, analyze, and challenge our approach to theatre to ensure we are not causing harm or perpetuating destructive standards.

As a student at Rollins College's Department of Theatre and Dance, I served as the associate director of *A Doll's House Part 2* and the director of *Gloria*[14]. While working on these productions, I had the opportunity to apply these care-based improv concepts. Unlike a scientific experiment, I did not apply these principles and practices with an intent to study their outcome. An experiment explores a hypothesis, recognizing it may yield the exact opposite of the desired outcome. A care-based approach would insist that I start from the needs of my actors and proceed from there; risking their emotional well-being to test an idea would serve my needs but possibly endanger theirs. Instead, I structured my rehearsals around these ideas because my experience as an actor, director, and improviser has demonstrated improvisation's ability to prioritize healthy relationships and foster mutual understanding. These principles and practices were what I believed to be the most effective way to meet my actor's needs and ground empathy, understanding, and creativity. Because many of the ideas I have written were a part of my approach as a director on these productions, I decided to offer a reflection on their effectiveness.

As a student still learning his craft, my experiences are not meant to be a perfect reflection of these ideas in practice. I offer this reflection as a personal assessment of what

[14] *A Doll's House Part 2*, written by Lucas Hnath, was produced for Rollins College's mainstage season. *Gloria,* written by Branden Jacob-Jenkins, was produced for Rollins College's student-led second stage season.

worked well, what I should have done differently, and what merit care had as the guiding ethos of a rehearsal process. While I aim to impartially critique my approach, I recognize that no assessment I make is fully unbiased. Further, while I will discuss feedback I received from the cast, I recognize that this too is not fully impartial. Even though this reflection speaks to one kind of theatre community, I hope it may help other directors apply these ideas and refine their own care-based approach.

How Rehearsals Were Structured

I applied the principles I surveyed to both my approach as a director and to the plans I would make for each rehearsal. Sometimes I would evoke a principle in an implicit way; for example, an actor offered when they thought their character came out to their parents, and I accepted this idea as it was provocative and more interesting than any alternative I thought to offer. Other times, I would conduct an exercise with an explicit focus on developing an important skill or introducing an improv principle. In one exercise with the *ADHP2* cast, I had them perform improvised scenes about how their characters first met with an explicit focus on making strong emotional choices.

For *A Doll's House Part 2 (ADHP2)*, director Thomas Ouellette set aside 15-20 minutes at the top of every rehearsal for me to conduct a check-in, warm-up, and improv-based exercise. He let me decide on what warm-ups and exercises were conducted, allowing me to structure our time as a group around certain skills or areas in need of focus. He would also ask me to work one on one with actors on their lines, pacing, and delivery. Later in the process, I was given the chance to stage a scene in the show, letting me communicate with actors about staging and physicality.

As the director of *Gloria*, I had more freedom to structure the rehearsal space. This also means I had a greater responsibility to set the expectations and atmosphere for rehearsal. Generally, I would begin every rehearsal with a check-in and warm-up. Depending on the plan for that day, we would typically move into an exercise, although sometimes we would move directly into staging. We also began the rehearsal process with table work, which we revisited intermittently throughout the next several weeks. This would often involve us reading through scenes and subsections of the script, discussing major moments, character motivations, and thoughts about the world of the play.

Where I Found Success

One of my biggest concerns with both productions was creating strong relationships between actors. *ADHP2* and *Gloria* are both contemporary comedy-dramas that deal with emotionally charged and sensitive subject matters. Not only that, but when student actors work closely together, it can be difficult to separate rehearsal from their personal connections outside of the rehearsal space. However, both productions had strong companies who got along very well, and I believe this was due in part to the introduction of improv-based exercises.

One actor from *ADHP2* said that creating close connections with their fellow actors helped make rehearsals more productive and enjoyable. Using warm-up games helped them "with getting out of [their] head and feeling comfortable with the space and those around [them]", leading to a better overall experience. Another actor even suggested that, in addition to just activities, improv-based rehearsal techniques made them feel "close and comfortable with [their] fellow actors and actresses".

In both productions, there was just under four weeks from the first rehearsal to opening night. When staging, I relied on giving actors their movements for the sake of time; however, I

told them to trust their impulse. If a movement did not feel right or there was something they wanted to try, I encouraged them to make that choice and see how it landed. This approach was well-received and produced dynamic blocking where actors discovered motivated movements and physicality that I did not anticipate.

I was nervous about how each company would react to my improv games and exercises. As a general observation, I found that the more comfortable actors were with each other, the more comfortable they would be participating in the improv practices I outlined. Not long after the start of each rehearsal process, all actors were very willing to embrace these exercises. Overall, I saw both casts make increasingly stronger choices throughout the process as well as grow closer together. While this is not necessarily due to the use of improv principles and practices, I believe they contributed to this atmosphere.

Several actors expressed how helpful improvised activities were for developing their character and working with the director. The following are some reflections by actors about the effect of these principles and practices on their process as artists:

> *"Every time we began warmups, I instantly felt more grounded as a character of the play as well as in my acting. The improvisational aspects of the warmups made me feel more like I was truly entering the shoes of my character."*

> *"I feel those exercises helped me most with getting out of my head and feeling comfortable with the space and those around me. It also allowed me to think more about how my character would act based on finding the background story of my character of unscripted moments and physicalizing my character."*

> *"I'd never done a lot of those exercises before, and I specifically loved working the unscripted scenes between characters. This is saying a lot since I really don't like improv-ing because it makes me anxious. I felt much more prepared. It gave me a chance to get some laughs in, get into character, and start thinking critically before the director starts working with me. I felt less nervous when he would ask me questions about my character because the warm up exercises had prompted me to think more about my character, so I already had answers."*

> *"The support I felt from my cast and creative team when I was personally struggling with lines and external/internal pressure truly helped me give my best by the time opening night came…I was putting a lot of pressure on myself to get everything right, but instead of being met with extra negativity as I have in past rehearsal processes, I was met with patience and encouragement."*

While these reflections should not be taken as universally applicable assessments of these ideas, I believe they confirm that it is possible for prioritizing care to result in a healthier and more engaging creative process. In the case of *ADHP2*, a lot of the exercises built on expectations that the director set at the top of the rehearsal process. The director emphasized the importance of communication, assuming good faith, and getting to know each other as people from day one. Before letting me run warm-ups and exercises with the cast, he would take five minutes at the top of rehearsal to have an actor light a candle, pull a card and ask the introspective question on it to a fellow actor. In the words of one actor, this emphasis on developing strong relationships helped create "a very supportive environment where we all cared for each other."

When it came to *Gloria*, I wanted to set helpful expectations for our company like I saw with *ADHP2*. Instead of a ritual, I created a set of "Guidelines for Play" that I shared with the cast and asked them to embody (Appendix A). Guidelines included ideas like respecting one another, playing with love, asking questions, taking risks, etc. After introducing them to the company, I asked everyone to go around and share one word to describe the kind of rehearsal space they wanted to cultivate (i.e. "I want a rehearsal space that is *challenging*"). Not only did this discussion set the expectation that ideas were welcomed and would be respected, but it allowed me to better understand the kinds of unique performers everybody was and how to meet their individual needs. Coupled with our daily check-ins, I felt much more connected to the cast and aware of their readiness to play on a given day.

I also found these guidelines helped to set us up for honest conversations about the text. For *Gloria,* I worked with a cast of mostly BIPOC actors and I was nervous about how to approach conversations about race, privilege, and identity in the script. In our first week of rehearsals, while we were still doing table work, I planned to introduce those topics after a couple rehearsals. However, while we set reading through the script on day one, the actors' curiosity led to them bringing those subjects up on their own. Instead of holding off on those conversations, I decided to embrace this spontaneous development and encourage discussion. While the subject matter was sensitive and invited actors of color to share their experiences with racial trauma and oppression, the conversation was supportive, positive, and did not appear to be triggering. I believe that the actors' excitement to share their experiences and explore these ideas is a product of grounding the rehearsal process in care, trust, and empathy.

Applying these principles and practices did not prevent me from fulfilling my creative responsibility as a director. I was still able to give instruction, comment on choices, suggest new actions to try, and craft the overall vision of the show. However, I also felt that this approach was grounded in an awareness of my actors' creativity and an appreciation for their unique talents and abilities. Often, it was their own ideas which led to the most exciting work. One actor in *Gloria* found verbiage like "Can I offer something?" and "I feel…" to be particularly helpful for feeling like they could collaborate with me.

Where I Faced Challenges

Each rehearsal process resulted in well-connected ensembles and tried to value the contributions of actors. However, they were not without their difficulties. I was reminded that just applying these principles and practices does not necessarily equate to care; rather, it is the adoption of these ideas through a care-based approach that helps improve rehearsal spaces.

While I am proud of centering and welcoming a diversity of perspectives in these rehearsals, I felt my discomfort hold me back from engaging with important conversations. When casting *ADHP2*, Black actors were cast in multiple roles. Since Hnath did not include race, ethnic, or cultural identities under any of the character descriptions, it was up to our directing team to consider the implications of asking a black actor to play these parts. While much of this work was done in advance, it was not until much later in the process that we started having conversations with the actors about the intersection of race and gender identity in the play. This was prompted by our Department's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Consultant, Felichia Chivaughn, who saw that we were not meeting the needs of our BIPOC actors. When we did start having discussions about actors' identities in these roles, I personally felt unequipped to answer some of the questions which came up and was unsure what the actors needed of me as part of their directing team. Care asks us to act informed by our understanding of the cared-for's needs, even if we are unsure it will guarantee their well-being. In this case, I froze up and should have taken more proactive and concrete steps to care for our BIPOC actors.

In terms of respecting actors' autonomy and needs throughout the rehearsal process, several actors expressed that their time was not always respected. In *ADHP2*, one actor expressed some frustration with being asked last minute to stay longer for a rehearsal to run a scene with understudies. While they would have been more receptive had it been communicated in advance that they have been needed, with it being last second, they felt "pressured to say yes because of the theatre culture of 'say yes to everything, especially if the director is asking'." An actor that is treated as a fellow collaborator should not feel as though they must acquiesce to whatever a director asks. In a culture of care, directors should not only communicate in advance about their expectations for a given rehearsal but consider the emotional needs of an actor before

making a decision that affects them. A director that has not planned more effectively should not pass that off to an actor.

This happened in *ADHP2* and then again in *Gloria*. An actor from the cast suggested that "confusion on call times or what [they] were working on" for a given rehearsal did not meet their needs. While I take this as constructive criticism of where I need to do better as a director, I also think it is somewhat indicative of the industry's culture of "The show must go on", even if it means an actor must sacrifice their well-being. One actor shard that whenever she or her peers "[expressed] concerns, mental or medical" with other directors, "they would be met with apathy, a 'suck it up' mentality." Care would ask us to consider that sometimes, the show does not have to go on and that holding space to understand someone's emotional state or lived experience is just the right thing to do.

Some directors may argue that plans change, and if I suggest that directors should exhibit spontaneous leadership, then this might suggest that actors should be receptive to last minute changes. However, spontaneous leadership is meant to care for the actors and their needs. A director who does their homework should have a rough idea of what they want to accomplish in a rehearsal; if they think there is a strong possibility that they will need to work with an actor later, then they ought to say that.

Actor's Needs

While I have spoken broadly to the needs of actors in the rehearsal process, I decided to follow up with the actors directly to see what needs they felt should be met in a rehearsal. One actor said that "Patience, care, time and love" were what they looked for in their rehearsal process. Others expressed that they need to "be open to what [they] will discover in the rehearsal space towards [their] character", "feel warmed up physically, vocally, and mentally", "settle into

a focused mindset…bringing as little negative energy…into the space." While each of these needs are unique and ought to be met in a caring rehearsal space, they speak broadly to the need for direction that treats them with humanity, kindness, and understanding. A director that effectively communicates these values and asks their company to embrace in each of their interactions will minimize the potential for harm.

Conclusion

By following these principles, utilizing these practices, and playing these games, a director is more likely to ground care in their rehearsal process. However, these concepts are not a blueprint for success. Care depends on a director's apprehension of the actors' needs; not the actors they have worked with before or what they assume their needs to be, but their present actors and their present needs. Noddings reminds us that "Those entrusted with caring may focus on satisfying the formulated requirements for caretaking and fail to be present in their interactions with the cared-for. Thus, caring disappears and only its illusion remains." (Noddings, 26). A director who cares about their actors will adapt these ideas as needed, explore new ways to approach care, and always be listening to the spoken and unspoken needs of their cast. Otherwise, their rote actions will fail to meet the threshold of moral caring.

Undoubtedly, mistakes will be made; however, so long as those mistakes are made from an honest attempt to care for an actor, then a director is still fulfilling their moral obligation. By using the language of care to inform our relationships, appreciating the potential of improvisation to transform theatre and non-theatre communities, and surveying the most helpful principles and practices, I hope I have offered a guide for any director of scripted theatre to enhance the quality of their rehearsal process.

Because improvisation is constantly evolving and adapting, it is vital for improvisers to know how to approach any situation they encounter. They may not know exactly what to do or how to perform, but by having a common artistic language, improvisers can often find familiarity in the unfamiliar and honesty in the imaginative. The theatre industry *as a whole* needs a common language, one which can guide artists facing moral questions. Instead of telling them exactly how to act, which will only vary with each context, this common language should inform

their approach every time they make a decision that can affect the well-being of a fellow artist. That is why I do not believe care stops at the rehearsal process. It should be present in production meetings, scenic construction, dramaturgy, audience interactions, hiring practices, and anywhere that people come together to make theatre possible. I hope this project is one step, among the many others that have already been taken, towards re-imagining the way we do theatre and centering care in everything we do.

Appendix A

Guidelines for Play

Theatre is exciting! We get to explore new perspectives, live different lives, and work with amazing people. But we want to make sure our work creates a positive space that everyone feels able to contribute freely to. I think it's important for our company to have some guidelines we can all refer to and keep in mind when we do our work.

Respect. Respect. Respect. Show one another the utmost respect.

Play with love. Beyond respect, playing with love means we want to actively make each other shine, and to pursue choices that uplift each other.

Listen to each other. Maybe someone has a certain life experience that they want to share or a perspective on a situation that is different from yours. Hear each other out in full and with intention.

Play fearlessly! What we're going to create is a collaborative effort. So if you have an idea, say it; if you think of a choice, make it; if you see a risk, take it.

Ask questions. There are no dumb questions. If there is something you're curious about, want to know more of, or aren't quite clear on, ask away!

Embrace the mistakes. So long as we are making good faith mistakes and learning from them, then we shouldn't beat ourselves up.

Assume good faith. If someone does something that sits with you the wrong way and you want to address it, always feel like you can do so. But if possible, don't assume that their actions came from a place of malice.

Ouch/ Oops. If someone brings an action of yours to your attention that sat with them weird or upset them, don't be defensive. Hear them out, acknowledge where they are coming from, and then reflect. There may still need to be a conversation later, but try not to come from a place of "I'm offended!"

Bring your best effort. We all lead different lives and have different lived experiences, responsibilities, bodies, and environments that affect our day to day well-being. Today may be a harder day than yesterday. All I ask is that you bring your best effort that day, whatever it is.

We have these guidelines to refer to. But what do you think our space should be like?

I want our space to be…

I want our space to be…

I want our space to be…

NOTE: include as many of these as there are artists sitting at the table (i.e. actors, directors, stage managers, etc)

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