Unscripted

by Chris Wiebe

IT'S MONDAY NIGHT AT EDMONTON'S Varscona Theatre and onstage many of the city's best actors and playwrights are creating a piece of "spontaneous theatre"—an improvised Arthurian romance. King Bud Weiser (Chris Craddock) has talked himself into drinking Lady Finger's secret potion. His decision may have grave consequences for the Prince (Jeff Haslam) and the leather-jerkined Duke of Hazard (David Belke). Director Dana Anderson, down in the front row, will make some sort of sense of it all when he calls the actors for the next scene.

It's the 14th season of the improvised soap opera *Die-Nasty* and the uninitiated might honestly wonder why some of the city's best known actors and writers have been creating this unpaid performance every Monday night for over a decade. Or why, for that matter, many of the 20- and 30-something audience-members purchase season's tickets. The answers lie in how the strange yet compelling force of "improv" (or spontaneous theatre) has, over the past 30 years, captured the imaginations of Alberta's performers and audiences alike.

"You're building from the ground up every time," says founding *Die-Nasty* cast member David Belke. "It's hugely exciting to be right there in the creative moment. Improv is one of the only art forms where the audience is present at the moment of discovery." Performers, it seems, come for the rush of the drag-racing, crash-at-any-moment feel of improv, and stay for the creative stimulation and collaborative dynamic. Audiences are drawn to the intimacy, and the exhilaration of participating. Both share in the rollercoaster of risk, failure and hilarious "triumph" that develops on stage.

Alberta is where it all began. Beginning in 1976, an improv revolution in the form of "theatresports" was fomented by University of Calgary drama professor Keith Johnstone. By 1981 his style of improv had spread across Canada, mutating as it went, and it is now played in 21 countries—from Australia to Denmark. Back at home, the most visible face of improv these days is the professional improv companies giving regular performances in Calgary and Edmonton, and occasionally in Lethbridge and Red Deer, even perhaps improv's long-time presence on Alberta's high-school drama curriculum. But much of improv's work is hidden. It is a practice and way of thinking as much as a form, transforming the province's cultural fabric in subtle and practical ways. Improv has become a major generator of the province's creative talent. It has profoundly and indelibly shaped a generation of Alberta actors, playwrights, comedy writers and filmmakers, helping them develop unique voices and distinctive modes of expression.

And yet, for all this, most Albertans know nothing about improv and its role as an important catalyst in the province's cultural vitality. Even now at the Alberta centennial, when we as a province are gazing back over our history and holding up those things that supposedly express our uniqueness, improv has escaped significant acknowledgement in spite

Deborah Iozzi

Improv has played a pivotal, if little known, role in building Alberta's theatre community

of the fact that improv's populist roots dovetail with Alberta's long history of community theatre, and even its maverick mythology.

The unacknowledged influence of improv was apparent in Alberta Scene, the centennial extravaganza of Alberta performing arts mounted at the National Arts Centre in Ottawa this past spring. *Die-Nasty* cast members were there in a Stewart Lemoine play, a Chris Craddock play was mounted and Mark Meer's improv-derived variety show *Oh Susanna* had a two-night run. But improv wasn't mentioned. The official programming for Alberta Scene did not reveal this wellspring of artistic creativity and community. This may not be a bad thing. Maybe the art form's low profile is vital to its long-term health, outside of the commercial mainstream, where spontaneity, originality and imagination can truly have free rein.

It was precisely this desire to cast aside convention that led to the origin of theatresports 30 years ago. When Johnstone arrived in Calgary from England in 1975, he brought with him the sense that traditional repertory theatre was stuffy and lifeless—"a theatre of taxidermy." He felt it needed a new popular form that generated the energetic, participatory dynamic between performer and audience he had witnessed at sporting events like pro wrestling.

Johnstone had experimented in England with improvisation as an acting training tool. "I had seen that actors were terrified of going onstage," recalls Johnstone. "I wanted to restore the feeling of playfulness and naturalness, and found that improv helped actors get rid of their anxiety and build relationships onstage."

Out of this desire, Johnstone developed theatresports in 1976 with his University of Calgary students. He heightened the drama by breaking his improvisers into teams and having them square off in short "games" with a few simple rules. The "competitive" structure included the audience in the process by encouraging them to call out what they wanted the actors to do. "It took down the wall between audience and performer," in Johnstone's words. Another crucial innovation was the introduction of judges who "scored" each team's performance. These capricious authority figures became the objects of the audience's displeasure, thereby taking pressure off the performers.

It was a brilliant format for improv in which even if you are "bad" there is still a way to look "good." To Johnstone's mind, it was all about finding the necessary joy in failure. "If you're worried about failure, you'll be paralyzed," he says. "People want to see actors who are vulnerable. If you fail with good nature, people will love you all the more. Besides not every scene should be good; there needs to be contrast and variety. Like sports, it is the struggle for success that audiences want, even if they don't recognize it."

Johnstone's ideas struck a chord. Theatresports quickly developed a large student following at the U of C. While Johnstone continued to refine theatresports, he and Mel Tonken founded Loose Moose Theatre in 1977, playing at the

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Pumphouse Theatre before finding a home in an old auction house near the Calgary airport in 1981. Johnstone wanted to take theatresports out of academia to the wider community. But Loose Moose continued to have an educational dimension. People could take improv training for free if they volunteered to sell popcorn and tickets. According to founding Loose Moose member Dennis Cahill, the company has always attracted "the misfits and exhibitionists," who don't necessarily fit into university drama programs. Some newcomers "had it" right off the bat; others took time to blossom. For many, explains Cahill, improv led to creative self-discovery: like the AGT telephone installer who became a television director, or the geologist who became a visual artist. Two of Loose Moose's most famous early sons, Mark McKinney and Bruce McCullough, went on to form the renowned sketch-comedy troupe Kids in the Hall.

Theatresports was a format but also a philosophy—a new way of thinking about the stage and about the relationship between performers and audiences. Johnstone never allowed his improvisers to get self-satisfied or fall back on a bag of tricks. The company would debrief after each performance to understand what had worked and what hadn't and to hypothesize why. Johnstone regularly found that improvisers wanted to "drive a scene," to showboat and be better than those around them. He therefore worked to break down the notions of status that could creep in, fostering instead the notion of group work.

Johnstone understood that improvisers block the full power of their imaginations with their fear of being unoriginal, forcing things rather than allowing them to unfold naturally on stage. "Be more boring!" was his constant, if counter intuitive, advice to improvisers. "The inspired improviser is the one being obvious," says Johnstone, "the one who accepts their first thoughts, not weighing one idea against another."

The gospel of theatresports spread around the province. It was a demonstration sport at the 1981 Alberta Summer Games. People were quick to recognize its virtues.

Stephen Heatley liked the "collective creation" of theatresports, and when he became director of Edmonton's Theatre Network, he began running it as Dark Mondays in fall 1982. As in Calgary, theatresports drew young people, many of whom had never thought of themselves as performers. Many, such as playwright and actor Cathleen Rootsaert, were introduced to theatresports by their high school drama teachers. "Theatresports taught people to think on their feet," says Rootsaert, "but it also taught them how to write." Writer/actor Wes Borg came to Dark Mondays as a 15-year-old in 1983, and later enticed Paul Mather (now a writer on the television series *Rick Mercer's Monday Report* and *Corner Gas*). A whole generation of Edmonton performers met at the early improv venue.

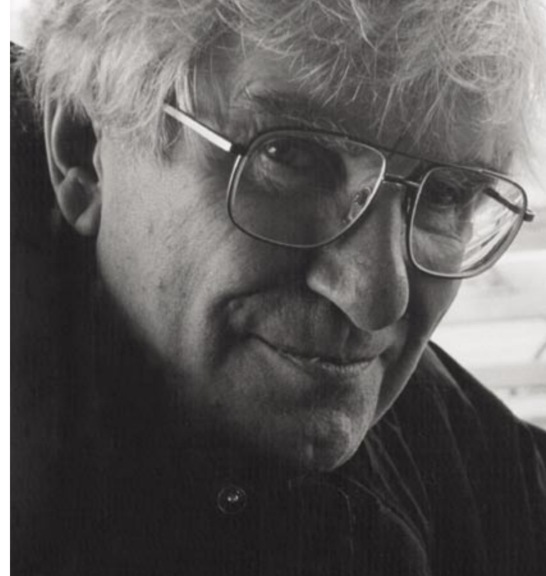
Part of what made improv so attractive to these young performers was its strong social dimension—actors built and created stories onstage, together. Johnstone encouraged actors to live in the present with their partners, listening and responding to what was given instead of thinking about what to do next. "Improv truly is a team art form," says playwright and founding Loose Moose member Clem Martini. "It's very rare that you can sustain an audience for even a few minutes on your own. Most of the time you are taking ideas from your partner, and there is this kind of magical exchange above and below words."

Theatresports requires no auditioning and opens the stage to anyone, regardless of training. Johnstone's philosophy was to "learn through doing," which involved getting onstage as quickly as possible. Loose Moose continues to this day to be a sort of community theatre training centre, welcoming anyone and everyone to participate. In 1988, Rebecca Northan, who had done a bit of improv in high school, came to Loose Moose on an off-chance with a friend and briefly found herself onstage that very night. "It was terrifying, irresistible and inspiring," says Northan, currently an actor at Second City in Toronto. "I knew I wanted to be a performer and here was a group that could let me onstage immediately. This proceeds from Keith's philosophy that people need to try things. He would say 'If you're are afraid to lose, then why are you involved?' "

Andy Curtis of One Yellow Rabbit says his high-school teachers made "the theatre" seem remote and unattainable. After he joined Loose Moose in 1982, he began to see the "ubiquity of creativity" he had read about in books. "Improv's added value," he says, "is that it is a jumpstart for the imagination, opening up parts of you that you didn't know existed." Up in Edmonton, something similar happened to David Belke in 1983. In his first year of a BFA in stage design at the U of A, he went to Dark Mondays with a friend and was hooked on theatresports immediately. "I definitely wouldn't have discovered I was a playwright if I hadn't dived into improv," he says. "My theatrical career is very much grounded in my skills as an improviser. If you're paying attention, it shows you how to structure a scene—it's a great laboratory."

Increasingly sophisticated audiences drive innovation in improv as much as the performers themselves. At Loose Moose, Johnstone devised Gorilla Theatre and Micetro, which featured improv direc-

Opening page (left to right): Mark McKinney, Bill Gemmil, Norm Hiscock, Frank Van Keekan and Gary Campbell being pied after losing a theatresports match at Loose Moose in 1981. **Right (top to bottom):** Professor Keith Johnstone, once the intellectual centre of the improv community; Veena Sood and Ingrid Von Darl playing the "King Game," an invention of Keith Johnstone's to train people how to play servants; Graeme Davies and Bruce McCullough compete in theatresports at Loose Moose in 1980. **Next page:** Mark Meer and Chris Craddock from Edmonton, and Matt Horgan and René Delafont from Atlanta compete in Rapid Fire Theatre's 2005 Improvaganza, an annual international improv event.



Top: Lars Asak Bottom two: Deborah Iozzi

tors battling to get what they want from teams of improvisers. Edmonton's Rapid Fire Theatre responded to the brevity of theatresports games by developing a long form called "chimprov" that allows for sustained stories and character-building. Restless expansion of improv groups continues with Calgary's Curiously Canadian Improv Guild, and in Edmonton with the international festival Improvaganza, the largest improv event in Canada.

Johnstone has been a guiding, uncompromising influence on the shape of Calgary improv. He was the intellectual and pedagogical centre of the improv community until stepping back in recent years. Edmonton hasn't had a central figure like Johnstone. What it did have in the 1980s was a vigorous small-theatre community, including the Fringe Festival after 1982, that could absorb the talents of its improvisers. The first significant cross-pollination between improv and traditional theatre was the spontaneous, hybrid creation of the improv soap operas in the mid-1980s. They were a response to the audience's desire for story, characters and relationships with a raw-edged whimsy, and have proven to be particularly popular.

The seeds of the soaps were sown by the artistic director of Edmonton's Citadel Theatre, Bob Baker. Following Johnstone's workshops in Vancouver in 1980, Baker and others at Langara College had experimented with improv soaps as a way of building theatresports-derived characters into longer narratives. When he came to Edmonton in 1985 as founding artistic director of the Phoenix Theatre, he created *Soap on the Rocks* as a way to draw a younger crowd to his theatre and generate a buzz, but also to hone an acting ensemble he could confidently use in his main stage productions.

Baker and his actors embarked on the soap by doing little more than roughly sketching out a group of characters, the wild and diverse residents of Edmonton's Arlington Apartments. "Scenographers" Baker, Stewart Lemoine and Larry Fischbach would work out a loose narrative arc before each evening performance and then try to hold improvised action on stage to it as closely as possible when they called out scenes: say, "X and Y have a testy altercation on the stairs about Z." Unpredictable "revelations" required the scenographers to be fast on their feet. *Soap on the Rocks*, with its character-driven and interactive style, quickly gathered a cult following. Hundreds of young people lined up for tickets throughout the summer. A new soap was mounted the following year.

What Baker couldn't anticipate was that the soaps experience gave many performers profound and lasting insights into the nature of theatre and their own creativity. Cast member and playwright Raymond Storey says that Baker applied the existing improv vocabulary to the overall craft of theatre, with the aim of creating immediacy and authenticity on stage. "Improv was seminal for almost all of us in that ensemble," says Storey, pointing to others like Murray McCune and Marianne Copithorne. "I certainly became more aware of the architecture of drama, what was playable, the mechanics of acting, how to get the most out of a scene. Whether I'm working in drama or comedy, it comes from the same authentic source and my ability to tap into that source was developed by improv."

The soaps were revived in 1991 and quickly took on the form of *Die-Nasty*, its cast drawn from both improv and theatre people. Unlike *Soap on the Rocks*, *Die-Nasty* has gradually abandoned the idea of holding to a predetermined narrative, instead letting the story and characters emerge from the free flow of whatever happens on stage.

"You make discoveries in the soaps," says cast member Belke. "You make choices that will have far-reaching consequences. It's a very rich space. There are inherent liabilities in theatresports, where you are creating disposable characters—it

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eventually wears you out." Some soaps characters have found an afterlife in sketch comedy and video projects, including those in Mark Meer's talk show format comedy *Oh Susanna*. Stewart Lemoine thinks traditional actors are drawn to *Die-Nasty* because, he says, "It is quite freeing for them. It shows them what they are capable of. After theatre school, actors don't get many opportunities to choose characters and stretch themselves."

Die-Nasty has inspired other improv soaps around the province, the earliest being *Pulp Friction*, directed by Tom Usher in Red Deer in 1994. *Exposed* began running at Loose Moose in 1997, but decamped to the Studio Café in 1999 and renamed itself *Dirty Laundry*. Its current cast is made up almost entirely of theatre actors.

The unique, indigenous hybrid that is the Alberta improv soap demonstrates how the boundaries between improv and theatre have become permeable in the last two decades—in a way that benefits both. Belying the notion of the solitary artistic genius, the soaps draw into relief how creativity doesn't happen in a vacuum, or even necessarily in rigidly defined disciplines. Rather, it grows out of messy social interactions that can never be engineered or premeditated.

Soap on the Rocks began drawing improv and theatre together by effectively legitimizing improv in the eyes of its many skeptics. Improvisers increasingly found space in theatrical venues. Beginning in 1986, troupes such as Three Dead Trolls in a Baggie (Borg, Mather and Rootsaert) began regularly performing rehearsed, though improv-inspired, sketch comedy and full-length dramas in Edmonton and eventually the Western Canadian Fringe Festival. Theatre companies commissioned plays from improv groups, and in 1993 Catalyst Theatre inaugurated

an annual improv-inspired fundraiser, 4 Play. In a few short years the distinctions between the improv and the theatre communities had blurred.

The spirit and "lessons" of improv have seeped into the very fabric of contemporary Alberta drama. Anne Nothof, a drama professor at Athabasca University, has observed that the style and form of many of Lemoine's and Chris Craddock's plays bear improv's fingerprints. Improv in all its forms has helped to build not just talent but a spirit of community and interconnectivity, particularly in Edmonton. Playwright Marty Chan says that in recent years, "Improv has moved from the children's table to eat with the rest of the theatre community. Fifteen years ago, admitting I was an improviser generated the same reactions as if I had told people I play Dungeons and Dragons." Outside Alberta, improv might not be so well understood. In Toronto, Rebecca Northan says she now keeps an improv-free CV for theatre auditions. "There is a real stigma against improv here. Theatre people think you will freak out and go off script. So now I'm an actor with a dirty little secret."

In addition to writers and performers, the tremendous youth appeal of interactive, participatory improv has arguably reshaped the theatre audience in Alberta. "Improv has expanded the entry points to theatre," says Martini. "The audience doesn't have to come prepared for the rituals and conventions of traditional theatre. Likewise, the participants are the kind who would run away and join the circus. They're not the people going for the 'culture' or 'art.' They're going for the thrill, the risk, the immediate connection with an audience."

For performers, it is a terrifying feeling to get on stage with nothing, to be bound by nothing. In this risk, however, lies immense creative potential. Johnstone's improv philosophy stressed the importance of risk in public performance, and also the need to risk one's notions of one's own creativity. U of C drama professor—and early Loose Moose member—Kathleen Foreman says improv has helped to produce a generation of artists in Alberta who are creative risk-takers and problem solvers, artists who have the creative confidence to play, fail and learn from mistakes. "It's a tremendously useful set of skills and understandings for creative and collaborative group endeavours," says Foreman.

Improv has proven to be a significant driver of Alberta's performing arts scene. If you poke about in the CVs of many Alberta performers, you are likely to find improv had a role in their creative development. And yet, improv remains something of an open secret, a treasure hiding in plain view. "Part of improv's value is that it is not very celebrated in the drama world," says Curtis. "It's a subtle, beautiful experiment in playfulness that never promises a big payoff or a great gig."

BACK AT THE VARSCONA THEATRE, THE cast bows to enthusiastic applause and the house lights go up. Another evening of *Die-Nasty* has come to a delightfully inconclusive end. Improv, the utterly unique interaction between performer and audience, is about sharing something in a particular moment in time. Its fragile and evanescent quality may add up to airy nothing. Or, just possibly, everything.

Chris Wiebe lives in Ottawa and is completing a degree in heritage conservation at Carleton University.

Improv Venues

A number of venues host occasional improv shows and annual events such as Edmonton's Improvaganza. Several theatres around the province are home to weekly improv and theatresports shows.

Die-Nasty
This improv soap opera runs every Monday night at 8 at the Varscona Theatre, 10329–83 Ave., Edmonton. 780 433 3399.

Late Night Comedy at the Plaza
Saturday nights at 11:30, the Curiously Canadian Improv Guild brings live improv comedy to the Plaza Theatre, at 1133 Kensington Rd. NW, Calgary. 403 283 2222.

Loose Moose Theatre
The Loose Moose is moving to a new location at the Crossroads Market at 1235 – 26th Ave. SE, Calgary. In addition to improv workshops, children's shows and mainstage productions, Loose Moose presents two weekly improv events. Micetro, an elimination comedy performance where only the best survive, is on stage Fridays at 8 p.m. Gorilla Theatre has top performers taking turns directing each other's scenes, and is featured every Saturday at 8 p.m. 403 265 5682.

Rapid Fire Theatre
Organizer of Edmonton's annual Improvaganza and Nose Bowl events, Rapid Fire also produces two weekly improv performances at the Varscona Theatre. chimprov, comedy for "a sophisticated palate," is served up each Saturday at 11 p.m. (except for the last Saturday of the month). And on Fridays at 11 p.m., theatresports, the competitive improv form developed in Alberta, takes to the stage. 780 433 3399.