

HOOT PAPER ON PA AND IMPRO

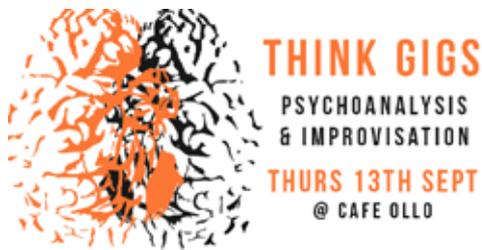
INTRODUCTION

I've been thinking about PsychoA and Impro in the same moment for a little time now, but not that long. I am not an expert in PA nor in improvisation, tho' I have personal experience of both. I've been in psychoanalytic psychotherapy for about a quarter of my adult life (not long in psychoanalytic terms but long enough to know something of the experience, I hope) and have been a performer in various guises professionally for about twenty-five years. Laterly I was an academic teaching and practicing performance for about 17 years and have been a psychoanalytic/psychodynamic psychotherapist in training and in practice for six years. I work in the NHS and in private practice.

When Phil and I first started to think about this I said something like the psychoanalytic project might be thought of as trying to allow a person freedom to live a creative life; performance improvisation requires this sense of freedom too. Both processes might be thought of as including the attempt to ease the severity of an internal critical voice. I have half or maybe more than half a notion that performance improvisation can be thought of as a process in which the performer has to act as part analysand, part analyst.

I'm not sure I'm going to address the notion of the internal critical voice or superego straight on, but I am going to try to think with you about what conditions might need to be in place or what we might need to do to have the possibility to live freer lives. And to do that I've tried to think how the theoretical concepts and the practices of Performance Improvisation and Psychoanalysis overlap. Both require creative acts, the conditions for the condition of creativity to be present.

Sigmund Freud thought that 'the explanation of artistic genius was beyond the reach of psychoanalysis'. (2016, p.1.). But, while I do not presume that I can



explain artistic genius, I do believe that developments in psychoanalytic thinking and theorisation since Freud allow us to better understand and investigate the nature and process of creativity or the creative action, and the environment, both psychical and material, needed to facilitate and foster the possibility of its birth: Melanie Klein's description of the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions (1997, p.241), Wilfrid R. Bion's conception of container and contained (1962, p.90), alpha and beta elements (1962, p.35), and D.W. Winnicott's development of the usefully and necessarily paradoxical idea of 'transitional phenomena' (2005, p.70) provide conflicting and complementary thinking structures through which to begin to develop further understanding of the of the 'creative process'.

And in understanding something about this maybe we can think about our own creativity in our everyday lives, recognising when we are compliant rather than creatively engaged with our circumstances.

I'm going to borrow some psychoanalysts' ideas to help think about all this. Donald Winnicott, from the British Independent School, Melanie Klein and other noted Kleinian thinkers, Wilfred Bion and Hanna Segal, and Gregorio Kohon, who I think identifies himself coming from a more Freudian tradition.

Transitional Phenomena

First Winnicott. Donald Winnicott closely linked play and creativity, saying that it is only in play that the child or adult finds the freedom, or is free to be creative. Winnicott suggests that psychotherapy takes place or happens in the 'overlap of the two play areas, that of the patient and that of the therapist.' Winnicott thinks of creativity being not to do with creating successful aesthetic objects but being to do with a whole attitude toward external reality. He says the opposite of a creative attitude towards reality is that of compliance, where life is to be fitted in with rather than engaged with in a creative manner.



Winnicott developed the notion of the transitional object and transitional phenomena, stresses that the important aspect of this was the child's use of the object, not the object itself.

Transitional phenomena appear between four and 12 months old. Transitional phenomena might be manifest in an object such as blanket or a piece of cloth, a word or a tune or even a mannerism. These can be used by the child as a kind of defence against anxiety particularly depressive anxiety. Winnicott calls this the original 'not me' possession or transitional object. The object survives being cuddled mutilated, a love hate and aggression of the infant. Over the years it becomes decathected, it loses the child's attention and ends up in the type of limbo. It isn't internalised and it is not mourned or forgotten' it just loses meaning. Winnicott suggests that this is because the transitional phenomena become defuse and spread out between the inner psychic reality of the individual and an external world as perceived by two people in common. Winnicott writes that play is closely connected with and the development of the concept of transitional phenomena. So in Winnicottian terms, play happens and by implication creativity occurs somewhere between the internal psychic reality of the individual and external reality which is located outside that individual's internal psychic space.

He says:

'Transitional objects and transitional phenomena belong to the realm of illusion which is at the basis of initiation of experience. This early stage in development is made possible by the mother's special capacity for making adaptation to the needs of her infant, thus allowing the infant the illusion that what the infant creates really exists.

This intermediate area of experience, unchallenged in respect of its belonging to inner or external (shared) reality, constitutes the greater part of the infant's experience, and throughout life is retained in the intense experiencing that



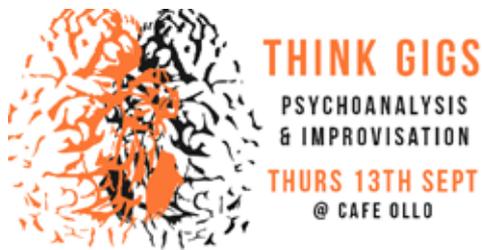
belongs to the arts and to religion and to imaginative living, and to creative scientific work.'

THE UNCANNY

In *Reflections on the Aesthetic Experience*, psychoanalyst and poet Gregorio Kohon explores the nature of aesthetic experience. In the forward to the book Toni Griffiths agrees that parts of this often uncanny experience are akin to that of borderline states mental states and include 'uncertainty, anxiety, aloneness, silence' (2016, xv). Here, Kohon and Griffiths are referring to the states of mind that 'the reception of an artwork may evoke or touch or awaken in ways that may be difficult to understand or even bear' (Ibid). Kohon goes on to suggest that in an aesthetic experience, in watching a performance, listening to music etc, our conscious experience of the here and now is mixed with the reactivation of our imagination, and material from unconscious phantasy, including phantasies, needs and desires that belong to another scene, another time and place. Our conscious perceived self is not entirely in charge of the experience. We undergo perhaps some sort of depersonalisation, an estrangement from the self, what Freud in his 1919 description of *The Uncanny* describes as the unexpected reappearance of something familiar that has been repressed.

Maybe the very states, borderline and otherwise, which Kohon suggests are activated in people who are the receivers of an aesthetic experience through their relationship with painting, music, literature and performance, are also a part of the internal world of the creator of the performance in the moment of creation. *The Uncanny* is related to both conditions.

Related to this the Performance Scholar and research Richard Schechner suggests that all performance is restored behavior, that all performance



behaviour is made up of behaviour that has already been performed. Something familiar is returning in a different context. He says 'Restored behavior includes a vast range of actions. It can be "me" at another time/psychological state as in the psychoanalytic abreaction;'

Schechner mischievously says that restored behaviour takes place in the space between a denial and the denial of a denial. So, if I perform Macbeth:

Tomorrow, and tomorrow, and tomorrow,
Creeps in this petty pace from day to day,
To the last syllable of recorded time;
And all our yesterdays have lighted fools
The way to dusty death. Out, out, brief candle!
Life's but a walking shadow, a poor player,
That struts and frets his hour upon the stage,
And then is heard no more. It is a tale
Told by an idiot, full of sound and fury,
Signifying nothing.

I, Tim Moss am not Macbeth. But neither was I not Macbeth. The character of Macbeth existed somewhere in the space between who I was not and who I was not not, somewhere between a denial and a denial of a denial.

Now I'm not entirely improvising then. I know the words and the order in which they can be said. But I am playing. I am utilising the space that Winnicott says is related to transitional phenomena. The space between my internal psychic world and the external world of here and now in this room. There seems to be to be a connection between Schechner's space which is situated between a denial and the denial of the denial and Winnicott's transitional space that it situated between internal and external reality. Maybe the ability to tolerate the paradox implied by this space is necessary for creativity to be active.



IMPROVISATION AS PERFORMANCE

I want to look at the process of the performance improviser. Live performance can be thought of as an aesthetic object in the same manner as a painting, film, or poem. There is a difference in that live improvisation is ephemeral and disappears as an external material object that can be experienced as soon as it has finished being performed. The innovative Polish theatre director and theorist Jerzy Grotowski suggests that 'theatre cannot exist without the actor-spectator relationship of perceptual, direct, "live" communion' (Grotowski 2002 p.19) and it is the liveness of the action that is key to improvisation.

Improvisation in performance takes on many forms and has many uses, both to create cultural material and for therapeutic purposes. There are many theatre makers and others who have worked with and written about improvisation: Rumanian-born Psychiatrist Jacob Levy Moreno, the founder of the concept of psychodrama in the 1920s, whose 'point of departure is Freudian psychoanalysis' (Balme 2008, p.183); Danielle Goldman's *I Want to be Ready: improvised dance as a practice of freedom*; Viola Spolin, who published *Improvisation for the Theatre* in the 1960s and who describes improvisation as 'openness of contact with the environment and each other and willingness to play' (Spolin 1999, p.25); Augusto Boal whose 1970s book *Theatre of the Oppressed* introduced the technique of Invisible Theatre, which asks performers to rely on improvisational techniques; Keith Johnstone, whose seminal book *Impro*, first published in 1979, offers both exercises to develop improvisational spontaneity and his philosophy of performance, which has links with psychoanalytic ideas concerning the understanding of defences that allow the repression of anxiety-producing material. He famously said that 'the imagination is our true self'

All these theatre-related practitioners talk about the making of material in the moment, the spontaneous act of creation, in a continuous time frame. It is for this reason that I choose improvised practice as the subject for discussion and investigation: those moments when there is little time for the artists to analyse



and consider the generated material – they have to generate and shape in almost the same instant. I am interested in the conditions and processes undertaken in these moments when the stakes are high because a process of creative action has to be maintained – the creative process happens in a long continuous moment.

It is the sphere of improvised public improvisation performance that I'd like to concentrate on: friends and ex-colleagues of mine, Dr. Hilary Elliott and John Britton, who trained initially as improvisers with such luminaries of the field as Al Wunder and Andrew Morrish, curated a long series of completely spontaneous performance events in which they would improvise both together and singly, in front of a paying audience, with no prior knowledge of what they might do. But this is not quite the case, as Hilary pointed out to me by pointing me to improviser Susan Foster, who talks about knowns and unknowns in performance improvisation.

She says that in improvisation The knowns might include a set of behaviours stemming from the Context of the performance – is it in a theatre a street etc.. Any overarching rules that might be in place such as time limit or score. It might include vocabulary arising from the performer's training. It might include another medium with which the performer is collaborating, such as music or film.

She goes on to say that 'the known includes that which has already occurred previously in the performance of improvising.' Perhaps there is a link here back to The Uncanny again.

She continues: 'The unknown is precisely that and more. It is that which was previously unimaginable, that which we could not have thought of doing next. Improvisation presses us to extend into, expand beyond, extricate ourselves from that which was known. It encourages us or even forces us to be taken by surprise. Yet we could never accomplish this encounter with the unknown without engaging the known.' (From Taken by Surprise: a dance impro



reader.) So improvisation might be thought of as a mixture of the already known and the unknown.

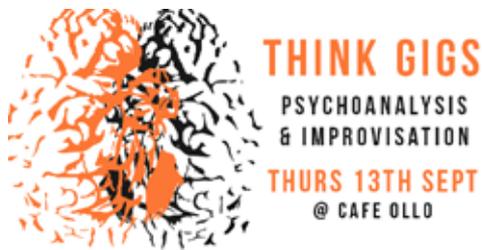
Improviser artist Andrew Morrish says that not 'all my content is new. Often material that I have dealt with before re-emerges, I do not reject it because it is not "new". I am interested in finding something "new" in it.

My assumption is that it has emerged under the conditions of the current performance and it therefore is relevant in some way, which I will hopefully discover if I can bring a fully enlivened attention to it. Thus old content that re-emerges is not simply re-presented, but gives a focus to finding a new direction or perspective.'

Our performer's generation and formation of material can be seen to have two important stages or, to align more closely with Kleinian metapsychology, two important positions, which I suggest have affinity with Klein's description of the stages of infant development, the paranoid-schizoid and the depressive positions, which I'll briefly put into context.

I will briefly trace the journey from Klein's development of the term 'projective identification' (Klein 1997, p.8), to Segal's identification of the distinction between symbolic equation and true symbolism, leading to Bion's distinction between normal and psychotic projective identification and the development of the concept of the container and the contained.

Klein suggests that from the beginning of life an infant has a primitive ego and is object-related, albeit initially to part-objects. She also maintains the view that unconscious phantasy, the activity of which belongs to the ego, is active from the start of life and that it is the direct expression of instincts and impulses, as well as primitive defences. The paranoid-schizoid position is a term that refers to all the internal and external object relations, anxieties and defences that are a feature of early infant life in the first two to three months. I'll concentrate on the process of splitting and projective identification that occurs in order for the infant to successfully develop, protect and strengthen

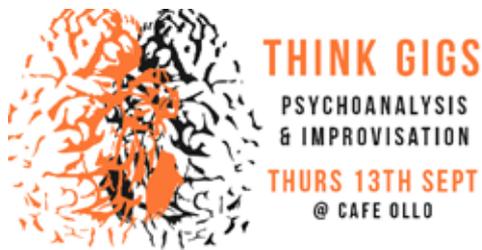


its nascent ego. So, all that the infant feels to be bad, anxiety and destructive impulses, are split off and projected into the first external object the infant encounters, the mother's breast. As Klein suggests,

The need to master persecutory anxiety gives impetus to splitting the breast...externally and internally, into a helpful and loved and, on the other hand, a frightening and hated object. (Klein, 1997, p. 238)

Defensive actions of denial and omnipotence allow the bad to be kept at bay, while the goodness that the infant has projected, and which seem manifest in the good breast will be re-introjected to strengthen the life affirming aspects of the young ego. This process of projection and introjection is necessary for development and ego strengthening.

In successful development, after the part-object related first three months of life, over the next three months Klein describes a shift in the infant's development and position, to a more whole object-related experience, the onset of what she terms the depressive position. Neville Symington offers a useful image to visualize this: that of an infant putting parts of the jigsaw pieces of her mother's body parts together, so that a whole picture of the mother is formed (Symington, 1986, p. 265). If the paranoid-schizoid position is marked by projective identification, aggressive, sadistic impulses and overwhelming persecutory anxiety, with the need to keep good and bad as separate entities, the depressive position marks a turn towards love and concern, albeit still accompanied by an additional set of anxieties. The developmental achievement can be thought of as a desire 'to protect, repair and securely establish the good internal object' (Spillius *et al*, 2011, p.87) and this is in part possible because of the physical maturation of the infant's mental capacity (Roth, 2005, p.52). As the jigsaw is put together the baby realises that the mother is a whole separate being, and that she is capable of loving but also of ignoring the infant or not always being available and present whenever the infant wants her to be. With this realisation comes the potential to understand that this person, who is the source of love and warmth and the



cause of pleasurable feelings is also the cause of frustration and hatred. She is not a separate bad breast and good breast but a whole person who embodies all the characteristics associated with the two part-object relationships that the baby has previously experienced. Added to that is the sudden knowledge that this person has also been the recipient of all of the infant's sadistic hatred and venom. The positive result of this understanding is the development of guilt and remorse and the infant's desire to repair, through love, what is felt to have been attacked.

With less excessive use of projective identification the infant comes to experience objects as separate from herself. Segal takes this insight into her thinking about symbol formation; she suggests that symbolic equation, the idea that the symbol is thought to be the original object not a substitute for it, is an aspect of paranoid-schizoid functioning. Excessive projective identification leads to or results from a phantasy that the external object is in the subject's possession. As Segal says,

The symbolic equation is used to deny the absence of the ideal object...The symbol proper, available for sublimation and furthering the development of the ego, is felt to represent the object...The symbol is used not to deny but to overcome loss.' (Segal 1986, p.57)

True symbolic representation requires the ability to be able to bear loss and separateness, and hence an understanding that the symbol is separate from that which it symbolises.

Bion makes sophisticated use of Klein and Segal's developments of projective identification to introduce his valuable concepts of the container and the contained and alpha and beta elements and alpha functioning. In *Learning from Experience* he describes an aspect of projective identification thus: 'the infant projects a part of its psyche, namely its bad feelings, into a good breast.' (Bion 1984, p.90). He goes on to describe how the bad feelings' sojourn in the good breast allows them to be modified and re-introjected by the infant in a



manner that is bearable. Bion uses the term beta elements to denote the unbearable primitive raw elements that the infant needs to evacuate. Once they have been modified in the breast, by what he terms alpha function, they are then re-introjected as alpha elements, which can be thought about and used as symbols and ideas. This image and concept led him to the idea of the container, in which the beta elements, the contained are modified. If all goes well and the mother can contain the infant's anxiety, the beta elements, and metabolise them through alpha function into alpha elements, then the infant can not only re-introject the modified elements but also the function of the containing mother as well, building the infant's own internal container that can hold on to beta elements long enough to allow her own alpha function to modify them into alpha elements, which can be useful for thought and further development.

So, if all that goes well, and what a turbulent and precarious start to life is being described here, if all goes well, then there is the possibility of the establishment of a healthy mental apparatus. And this model of functioning is what I suggest is taking place in the psyche and body of the improvising performer, when things are going well.

The first position in the creative action of improvisation is the accessing of the raw material. This requires our performer to have access to her unconscious phantasies and as psychoanalyst Hanna Segal suggests 'The deeper the layers of the mind which can thus be mobilized, the richer, denser, and more flexible is imagination.' (Segal 1991, p104). Access to unconscious phantasy and the potentially disturbing thoughts and feelings aroused by the attempt of these unconscious wishes to become manifest is important as a catalyst for raw thought and feeling. This primitive material of creation is analogous with what Segal speaks of in relation to Bion's description of 'the first primitive stages of development' the first few months of life when the 'infant is filled with raw perceptions, objects and emotions' (Segal 1991, p.50), which Bion



names 'beta-elements' (Bion 1984, p.6) and which the infant feels need to be evacuated, to be got rid of.

The second position in the creative action of improvisation is a coming to terms with, or the metabolising of the material generated, which is an almost instantaneous act. Our performer has a series of thoughts or feelings in response to conscious and unconscious stimuli, which she then has to sift, consider, metabolise and transform into a knowable performative action, be that speech, movement or combinations of both. It is akin to a type of Freudian dreamwork, the transformation of raw instinct and wishes into a modified form that is acceptable to the censoring part of the mind provided by the context of the performance situation. In Kleinian terms this modification is possible when a movement from paranoid-schizoid functioning to the depressive position has taken place, or in Bion's terms when 'alpha-function' (Ibid) can operate to metabolise beta elements into alpha elements, which as Segal suggests can 'lend themselves to...understanding, symbolization, and further development (Segal 1991, p.51)

So, from moment to moment in the creative action of improvisation I am suggesting that there is an oscillation between the evacuation of raw material into the performer's conscious psyche and the modification of this material for immediate use in the building of a narrative of performance.

I suggest that this process can be understood through Klein's understanding and description of the processes at work in what she formulated as the paranoid-schizoid and depressive positions, Segal's succeeding understanding of symbol formation and Bion's development of Klein's notion of projective identification, in his description of beta and alpha elements and alpha function and the concept of the container and the contained (Bion 1984, p.90).

So, to return to the improvising performer, maybe it is useful to conceptualise her process as a relationship between two objects, the infant with her nascent



ego and the good breast or the container. The infant, that infant part of the performer, dealing with the vicissitudes of early life, the early life of the improvisation when nothing is known but rather when unconscious phantasy is already active, the infant aspect of the mind projects beta elements, those raw impulses, thoughts and feelings that arise from the anxiety, excitement and heightened sense of self-consciousness that emerge in moments of improvised performance, into the container part of the performer. There, through the unknowable process of alpha-function, they are sifted, modified, metabolised and used for creative action, transformed into a knowable performative action, be that speech, action, movement or combinations thereof. Knowing that these elements have been transformed from beta-like formless and unknowable instincts and impulses into useful and useable alpha-like elements, the infant part of the performer re-introjects both them and, increasingly, the function of the container as well. There is increasing confidence that the raw material that is produced will be contained, that the anxiety that it produces can be thought about and borne. Through progressive introjection and projection a discourse or conversation or continuous feedback loop occurs that sustains the development in the infant and the improvisation for the performer. I suggest that the practice and 'rehearsal' of improvisation – the act of doing it again and again forms a 'performance ego' which has managed to unconsciously internalise at its centre an object with the capacity to think. Because creativity and creative action is an active process, the improvising performer has to be able to allow access to, and to bear the anxieties of paranoid-schizoid functioning, and at the same time to be available to herself as a container capable of allowing alpha-function to take place.

If we add this to Winnicott's ideas around the creation of transitional phenomena perhaps we can begin to build a connection between this space and Bion's concept of the container and contained. Psychoanalytic Training might include a training in improvised performance.