

Canadian Theatre Review

CTR 77 WINTER 1993
\$8.50

Close-up on Second City

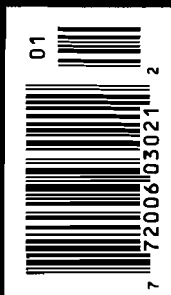
Scripts:

Shockers Delight!

by Stewart Lemoine

The Interview

by Tamara Bick



turalism by the federal government and the exploitation of it by large corporations in their advertising campaigns. The inclusion of these works in the Festival suggests Falcon's active attention to theatre that has too often been relegated to the margins.

As did the four earlier instalments of the Festival de Théâtre des Amériques this fifth one continues to stimulate significant discussion of the theatrical practice, in Quebec, and internationally.

Natalie Rewa

Ottawa

The Canadian Improv Games

Finding (out) the Vision

Ottawa 1974: two high school students crash an Improvisation workshop wearing loincloths and wielding cardboard spears.

Ottawa, March 1993: the theatre of the National Arts Centre was filled to its nine-hundred-seat capacity with avid fans, alumni, and the merely curious, to witness the finals of the Canadian Improv Games. The event was given national coverage via YTV.

Coincidence?

Not so.

The Canadian Improv Games, over its roughly twenty-year history, has become a growing fixture in the Ottawa theatre community. In the past five years it has steadily stretched its sphere of influence into Vancouver, Regina, Toronto, Quebec City, and Halifax, among other cities. Improv fever is spreading through high schools across Canada; and happily, an antidote has as yet to be concocted. Its future so far remains promising, and one which should be closely watched by those of us struggling to discover an inexpensive, mobile popular theatre form which inherently demands constant growth and experimentation.

The central concept under examination in this article is the nature of improvisational performance and its relation to the structures of the Improv Games in their present (1993) state. As well, it will examine how the Games are adapting to improv's widening appeal and popularity.

Howard Jerome, the instructor of the 1974 workshop, was suitably impressed to schedule a separate session for the loincloth-wearers in question. One of them, Jamie Wyllie, took it upon himself to introduce the art of improvisa-

tion to the Ottawa area. Many performances in basements and in front of washing machines ensued. Some time later, David Shepard (co-creator of the Second City in Chicago with Paul Sills) created the Improv Olympics in New York City. Hearing of the enthusiasm occurring in Canada's capital, he invited the team which had formed over a short period of time down to compete with the New York team.

And Ottawa won.

Wyllie brought back along with his victory a commitment to establish the Improv Olympics in his home town. And in 1978, the first competition was held, which included four high schools in the Ottawa area. Wyllie formed Stage Fright as well, an improv troupe which performed around the city.

Three years later disaster suddenly loomed. Wyllie, a law student, went for his bar exam and was unable to commit to either project full time. The renowned (and now defunct) local sketch / improv troupe Skit Row formed from Stage Fright members, and the Improv Olympics were officially non-functioning for over two years. However, within a few high schools a small, amateur tournament managed by a local high school teacher was held during that time. Despite the unknown quality of those competitions, the idea was at least kept alive in the interim.

In 1983-84, Wyllie once again took hold of the Olympics and, along with his partner-in-improv Moretti, began work on restructuring the essential nature of the Olympics. After a friendly warning concerning copyright laws from the actual Olympic committee that same year, they changed their name officially to the Canadian Improv Games. In its first year (1984), twenty-two teams participated. It was presented at the Great Canadian Theatre Company, where it was held until 1989.

The basic format established ten years ago still exists today. The tournament is divided into five separate "events" which the teams must perform, and they are judged by a "expert" panel. Each event is scored out of a possible fifty points. The "events" are as follows: (1) The Character Event, where the team demonstrates its "ability to play a character during an improvisation"; (2) The Story Event, where the "team designs and performs a game demonstrating its ability to tell or perform a story"; (3) The Emotion / Issues Event, where the team must create a scene around a topical issue which specifically concerns youth, in order to demonstrate "ability to portray emotion"; (4) The Style Event, which is an improvisation performed in a style chosen by the team (e.g. Gilbert and Sullivan, Film Noir); and (5) The Theme Event, in which the

team "performs a scene or a series of scenes which explore a theme given by the judges". These events were created to highlight the five fundamental skills in performance. The original Shepard / Sills Olympic format was tightly structured, comprising of one-minute, two-minute, or thirty-second scenes based around audience suggestions concerning either character or story. Each scene in the CIG is accorded four minutes each to allow exploration and flexibility (and fun) for the team.

With the convention of judging, variations on certain familiar questions concerning evaluation arise: What is "good" improvisation? What attributes make up a "good" improvisational performance? Examples of the technical criteria on which the CIG judging panel bases its scoring are as follows: "Was teamwork evident during the event? Did the team use the audience suggestions in as spontaneous a manner as possible? Was the team's scene interesting? Was the team observing the rules of the stage such as speaking loudly and clearly and facing the audience during the performance?"

The core concept which informs the evaluation of teams in general in the Canadian Improv Games is perhaps the most subjective and variable of all, but is often highly visible in performance, and in one case, empirically proven: this is what they call The Vision, a notion which will be further examined below.

Within this framework, an experience unlike anything which occurs in "conventional" theatre filters through. I was a member of the Canterbury High School team from 1986 to 1988. The feeling from "doing improv" is formed from a sheer, often overwhelming, tide of adrenalin, and tempered with the concrete reality of competition. Before each tournament, my team would gather in a circle in our corner of the GCTC, piled high with coats, water bottles, and props. One of our members would quietly whisper a prayer in Greek as we held hands. The moment was magic; it was a moment for me to focus on the few hours ahead; a moment not to get in contact with any elusive higher spirit, but with the tangible spirit within our imperfect circle. We were heading into the unknown together, and this more than anything else created a sensation which is impossible to describe in words other than terrifying and exhilarating, these are vague terms, unfortunately, which cannot begin to scratch the surface of a deeply affecting experience.

The Canterbury team has been "coached" by creative writing teacher Jane Moore since 1986, and has enjoyed five straight years (1988-93) as reigning champions. The main reason for their

astounding success, claims Johnson Moretti, is that Moore and her team have The Vision. In a conference held this year, Moore was invited to answer the burning question of the moment: How do you do it?

For Moore, the bottom line is potential. She first invites students to casual lunch-hour sessions, where she watches out for talent. For many, an interest is sparked, and they will go on to attend the auditions. As to how she goes about choosing people for the team, she says: "I pick some people because they'll be good in the huddle. I pick some people because they're widely read. I pick some people because they're smart-asses, so we have a real variety."

The Canterbury teams, under Moore's direction, have introduced several innovations into the Games, one of the most important of these being playing "serious" scenes. It is a commonly held opinion that improv equals comedy, despite the fact that improv's most influential ancestor, *commedia dell'arte*, did perform tragic scenarios. Granted, they were not as popular, but the success of "serious" scenes, both in terms of audience reaction, judging and performance in the CIG shows that improv is champing at the bit to transcend popular perceptions.

Moore believes she can teach general improvisational skills to anyone. The real work lies in a whole range of other things, among them developing speaking abilities, teaching basic techniques of theatre, and vocalizing and physicalizing. A great deal of rehearsal time goes as well into research and study. From the outset, however, team members have to be able to commit themselves almost exclusively to improv outside of school hours. Commitment requires that each member will spend up to and perhaps over two hundred hours rehearsing for the tournament.

For Moore, a good team merges into a gestalt; each individual skill becomes an indispensable link in the whole of the ensemble. She finds herself applying teaching skills, mother skills and doctor skills, in order to develop the team and its essential spirit. Moore believes that students must be involved emotionally in anything before they involve themselves intellectually; she commits herself absolutely, emotionally and otherwise, to the project, and she finds that the members tend to follow her lead, each in their own time.

But what separates a good improviser from a great one? What special element pushes a team to first place for five years running? Two things, Moore believes: "The ability to dare, and to get to the truth of the scene. And to do that people have to trust each other. They're not going to

risk letting the truth out if they don't trust anyone."

Trust largely stems from Moore's greatest challenge: fostering team spirit. This is helped along by the tremendous momentum of straight championships and from the establishment of the team as a focal point for school pride. In 1989, the team was given a name by that year's members: BOFA (acronym for Bunch Of Fucking Artsies). Each year designs its own BOFA shirt and often wears them long after the games; it has become a Canterbury status symbol not dissimilar to a football jacket.

This wave of school spirit has spread to every level of the CIG, and the larger it becomes, the more fervent the feelings. In fact, this year saw the advent of painted faces, flag-waving and practised cheers in the audience (or should I say, crowd?). The orchestra and balcony of the NAC theatre looked more like Saturday night at the Skydome than anything remotely theatrical; and a car drove around downtown, banners hanging from its doors, people leaning out the windows, chanting the name of their school (this is the-atre?).

In 1986 the CIG approached Andis Celms, Producer of the National Arts Centre's English Theatre, to discuss the possibility of renting out the studio space. Celms agreed, recognizing the potential of the relationship. For the next three years the semi-finals of the games were held at the CCTC, and the finals held in the studio. This lent an additional level of excitement and prestige to the games, and gave the NAC full houses.

In 1988 the CIG welcomed the first teams from outside the Ottawa area: Cornwall, Brockville, and Kingston. A year later Toronto was added. It was clear that the CIG's popularity was growing exponentially, and that the intimate, "love-in" atmosphere it enjoyed in its early days was transforming quickly into something greater and far more competitive. By 1990, when the CCTC declined to continue its five-year relationship with the CIG, the NAC officially incorporated the Games into its youth and national mandate.

All this profoundly affects the essential nature of the Games and the nature of the performances. The nature of competition can easily overshadow the simple thrill of improvising; the need to win can create performances which seek to satisfy judging standards (real or imagined) and set aside pure intuition and reaching for magic. The addition of YTV to the CIG machine in 1991, giving national exposure, threatened to break the ideal spirit of the Games under the weight of its own popularity; the first attempt to

film the games is conceded by both sides as being not as successful as first imagined.

Competing in the CIG, to state it mildly, is a unique experience. As a performer, you are expected to test the limits of your imagination, physical and verbal wit each time you take the stage, not only to score points, but to entertain the audience. You are a competitor / performer at all times, and must be conscious of both roles while losing yourself in your craft. In the time I was performing, I did so in front of two hundred people at the most. Today's improv team might perform in front of thousands, perhaps hundreds of thousands. I never had to contend with such pressure to perform, and to make a cheering mass of painted faces and several camera lenses laugh.

The context of the Canadian Improv Games has changed radically in only a few short years. As more corporations become involved, as more schools take part, as the viewership on television increases (as it certainly will), it is perhaps inevitable that the stress on entertainment value will gain priority. The corps will want a good show to keep the sponsors, the priority on the judging might lean towards inventing "tight races" in order to keep the TV audiences on the edge of their seats and their fingers off the flicker ... the list of negative outcomes is long and disturbing. The hunt for the art of the act of improvisation could well be postponed indefinitely, due to an increase in commercial time.

But thankfully this hasn't happened yet, and I'd like to hope that with the tremendous passion of the people running the show, it won't happen to the degree described above. But change is inevitable, and there has always been competition and pandering to some degree throughout the years. But increased competition, not surprisingly, has served mainly to increase the degree of professionalism. I attended the Friday, April second show of this year, and the performances were by and large of a quality that I had seen in only the best teams five years ago. The YTV taping was far better, giving the audience clearer information as to the scoring and how the games are played. Like the best teams in any sport, the majority of the improv teams have risen, evolved to the challenge; those who have transcended it have The Vision.

Teams with The Vision are easily spotted, says Johnson Moretti. "The teams who win the most need us the least." In terms of training, the CIG have always offered a manual and a videotape to assist teams in their work, and have offered to "visit" rehearsals to give advice and insight into the process. However, this year they have somewhat altered their approach to in-

house training. "Instead of us coming to the school to teach them how to play character," Moretti says, "we're going to come to the schools and try to teach them how to find out how to play the character." This subtle change in philosophy creates a do-it-yourself atmosphere for the teams, which is necessary since, as the Games increase in size, less time can be spent on one-on-one training, and more responsibility must fall to the individual teams.

The most recent innovation towards making the CIG truly national in scope is the introduction of the video competition, set for the 1993-94 games. In September a poster was sent out to every high school across Canada (over 2500), inviting students to participate. The first step is ordering a kit, which, for thirty dollars, includes an updated manual and a video which shows last year's games on YTV. The tape shows twenty games, giving the team a good idea of what's demanded of them. By February first, the CIG will expect each team to send them a video of a performance the team gave to an audience of at least thirty people. The CIG gives the teacher involved a call far in advance to answer any questions and to discuss a range of issues, including cheating.

This increased exposure and popularity gives a higher profile not only to the games, but to improvisation. Improv has suffered from ill-informed comparisons to stand-up, and has often been passed off variously as a fad and / or something of a para-theatrical phenomenon for some time; the growth of the CIG might in time even make improv a "legitimate" form of theatre.

This is the highest hope of the CIG. Over the years they have contended with people who see improv merely as a "sport", or a series of practical exercises in order to develop certain skills. While it is true that improv is an effective exercise tool, it has a history which extends at least back to the *commedia dell'arte*. And if the CIG have proven anything, it is that improvisation is no less theatre than the Stratford or Fringe festivals, and it should be accorded equal respect, if not attention.

The CIG's central attention has always been on the performers first and foremost. With ages ranging from fourteen to twenty, these are people facing abrupt and radical changes in their lives, and - most importantly - they are not yet professionals. But the potential of the CIG to raise self-esteem and to highlight youth accomplishment is immense; it has always promoted itself as teaching "life-affirming" skills to their performers, and with good reason. However, as attention on the games increases, the fear of losing and the disappointment when it inevitably

occurs will affect self-esteem much like losing a key game in the finals of any sport. As difficult as the task may be, the CIG must emphasize Art over Victory.

With Jamie Wyllie, Johnson Moretti, and now Scott Florence holding the reins, there is little doubt that they will do their utmost to prevent the CIG from becoming merely a matter of trophies and medals. Along with leaders like Jane Moore, moved by The Vision, someone who "stopped listening to what they said the rules were a long time ago", improv's natural craving for innovation will be well fed, and will provide the excitement and art the best of any species of theatre can offer. And most importantly, it won't be forced to run about in loincloths with cardboard spears at the ready to take a moment of our time.

Scott Duchesne

Works Cited

"The Canadian Improv Games", *Prelude* March/April 1993: 33-37.

Moore, Jane. Personal interview, August 1993.

Moretti, Johnson. Personal interview, August 1993

Jerusalem and Tel Aviv A Canadian Spring in Israel

Four years ago a new theatrical festival, titled Theatrenetto, opened in Israel. It was devoted to one-actor plays and within a couple of years reached immense popularity with the audience. And while actors are still complaining that they are not being paid enough for their performances in this festival, the fact remains that they get enormous exposure out of it, exposure which money cannot buy. In fact plays that won first prize in the festival competition were soon grabbed by leading theatre companies here and added to their ongoing bills.

The success of the Theatrenetto led organizers to expand. They are already talking about an Israeli Theatrenetto in London, England in 1994, and last May presented the first ever International Theatrenetto in Tel Aviv, in which eleven performers from as many countries presented their one-man or one-woman shows. And while plays at the Israeli Theatrenetto are always new, here organizers brought existing theatre fare. In this festival the competition element was scratched and theatre lovers packed the various halls of the beautiful Suzanne Dellal Centre in Tel Aviv to enjoy theatre in languages they understood. This is the main reason why audiences