

***Applied Improvisation: Leading, Collaborating, and Creating Beyond the Theatre.* Edited by Theresa Robbins Dudeck and Caitlin McClure. London: Methuen Drama, 2018; Pp. 304.**

More than forty years since Keith Johnstone published *Impro* and more than sixty years after Viola Spolin's seminal *Improvisation for the Theater*, there remains a paucity of literature concerned with either "impro" or "improv." In this context, the scholarly rigor in *Applied Improvisation: Leading, Collaborating and Creating Beyond the Theatre*, a collection of essays by practitioners/facilitators as edited by Theresa Robbins Dudeck and Caitlin McClure, is refreshing. "Applied Improvisation," here, refers to the use of the theories, techniques, and teachings of Spolin and Johnstone (and quite a bit of Augusto Boal) as applied outside of traditional theatrical performance contexts — often with the goal of training intrapersonal skills. While it might commonly be considered a subcategory of the broader "applied theatre," an explicitly stated goal of this collection "is to establish AI as a field of study worthy of independent investigation" (3). While the viability of "AI" as an acronym for something other than Artificial Intelligence may be questionable in a post-ChatGPT world, the book does provide a foundation for further inquiries and can serve as a resource for practitioners and educators.

As in the practice of improvisation, this collection emerges from the disparate contributions of a diverse set of practitioners and scholars. The book begins with a foreword by improvisers Phelim McDermott and Lee Simpson, and an introduction by editors Dudeck and McClure that gives a brief history of the theory and practice of improvisation. Dudeck returns in the concluding chapter, moderating a conversation between comedian Neil Mullarkey and creativity and learning expert Keith Sawyer. The body of the book consists of autoethnographic essays; each chapter functions essentially as a postmortem of an applied improvisation project reflecting on successes, limitations and discoveries. Except for the introduction and conclusion, every chapter ends with a "workbook" detailing instructions for between one to three of the exercises referenced in that chapter. Application remains the editors' central concern, and thus the book is tailored for practice in the field.

The collection is divided into four parts that highlight the diversity of this field. The first, "Bringing Brands Back to Life," consists of two essays describing how improvisation techniques were used to develop intrapersonal skills amongst service workers at a Pacific Northwest fast food chain, and to enliven market research in Karachi, Pakistan. Part 2, "Resilience and Connections," looks at applications of improvisation in more humanitarian contexts: training resilience amongst Baltimorean oncology nurses, juvenile refugees in San Antonio, and in the wake of a typhoon in the Philippines. Part 3, "Leadership Development," returns to a corporate environment with contributions describing how improvisation was used to modify the management culture at Tiffany & Co., coach executives in leadership skills in Hong Kong, and shake-up the organization of a real estate agency in Portland, OR. Part 4 "Higher Education," includes chapters detailing the use of applied improvisation within the academy, including to

facilitate conflict resolution at Portland State University, social justice initiatives at the Catholic University of America and communication with non-academics at Indiana University—Purdue University Indianapolis and the Indiana University School of Medicine. The contributors to the collection are all knowledgeable about and committed to the theory and practice of applied improvisation.

However, readers should be forewarned that many of the authors have continuing relationships with their corporate clients and sometime their prose can slip into what is essentially ad-copy. “Charles Lewis Tiffany would have been amazed that 174 years after founding his stationary and small goods store in New York City, the name Tiffany & Co. would still be synonymous with quality, craftsmanship, and extravagance...” (141). That passage from Caitlin McClure’s “Tiffany & Co. Says Yes, And,” comes from one of the stronger contributions to the collection, despite a handful of sentences that read like advertisements. In her case study, McClure details how she used techniques and exercises developed by Johnstone as part of a broader effort to shift Tiffany’s management team from a theory of an “organizational culture” to an “organizational *climate*.” While such a distinction might appear inane, McClure ably identifies how this shift in management theory mirrors the practice of improvisation and illustrates how her workshops helped to facilitate a meaningful shift in behavior at the company. It is a highlight of the collection.

Both McClure and Dudeck are heavily influenced by Johnstone—Dudeck has written a biography of Johnstone and is his literary executor—but other contributors draw on the work of Spolin, Boal and other improvisation theorists, often mixing and matching across these different and distinct traditions of improvisation. As scholarship, the book misses an opportunity to flesh out these separate genealogies and explicate how discrete strains of improvisation practice circulate and intertwine in contemporary workshops. Instead Dudeck and McClure flatten history and blur the distinctions between Spolin, Johnstone and Boal. They argue that the terms “impro” (the title of Johnstone’s book) and “improv” (closely associated with Chicago theatres like The Second City) are interchangeable (10). Neither their reasoning, nor the Facebook survey they marshal to support their claim is convincing. It is disappointing that a collection that aims to establish a new field of study would inadvertently erase complexity from that same field.

Applied Improvisation: Leading, Collaborating, and Creating Beyond the Theatre will interest practitioners of applied improvisation who are looking to see the cultural, practical and global range of the field as well as educators who want to demonstrate the uses of improvisation beyond theatre. The contributing essays are all written in a readable style and function as essays independent of the collection; this makes the volume easily digestible by undergraduate students. The exercises at the end of every chapter are thoroughly explained and should be easy to reproduce in studio classrooms. For these reasons and more, this volume very well may establish itself as a mainstay on the shelves of improvisation instructors.

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