

LABORATORIET



What you Hear is What you Write

by Barbara Simonsen

Experiment 1:
Musical Improvisation and Text



Part of a series of experiments by The Laboratory
Script Development Methods 2005-2007

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What

- *An experiment concerning the relationship between musical improvisation and writing of dramatic texts.*
- *An investigation of various methods for writing based on musical improvisation.*
- *Creating a space where musicians and dramatists improvise together in an attempt to approach two kinds of listening and speaking: music and dramatic text.*

Why

- *To find out if the physical closeness of the writing process to the musical creation process can result in new forms or qualities of writing - e.g. a more musical language, or new types of characters etc.*
- *To find out if the writing of a particular dramatist will be fundamentally different when influenced directly by the musical improvisations - and how.*
- *To test the various improvisation methods and their results in the perspective of starting to outline creative rehearsal processes for specific performances.*

How

- *Time schedule: 5 days' workshop, 9-16*
- *Participants: 3 dramatists, 4 musicians (members of a stomp group), 2 voice performers (trained in the Roy Hart method), 1 dramaturg, 1 director (leader of the experiment)*

On the one hand, the work focuses on a kind of musicalization and rhythmification of words and text, e.g. through improvisational writing where the dramatists write while listening and watching the musicians/performers improvising - as directly as possible, without reflecting or analysing. A kind of double improvisation where the musicians know nothing about the work of the dramatists, and where each dramatist is writing completely in his or her own universe of associations.

And on the other hand, the work focuses on a kind of verbalization and textualization of the musical improvisations and the musical "actors" - turning them into characters, theme, space, dramatic conflict. This type of work takes the form of group work with one dramatist and a couple of musicians/performers, developing together an idea of the dramatist sparked by the musical improvisations.

Participants in Experiment 1:

*Director: **Barbara Simonsen** (experiment leader)*

*Dramaturg: **Christian Horup***

*Dramatists: **Julie Maj Jakobsen, Anne Grethe Linnet, Michael Monberg***

*Musicians: **Jeppe Bai Andersen, Marianne Lewandowski, Troels Vestergaard, Johannes Smed***

*Voice performers: **Louise Thrane, Mathilde Vendelbo Andersen***

*Video documentation: **Christian Horup, Eva Mikkelsen***



The Experiment

Day 1

Focus: Dialogue

Morning: Introduction.

Improvisations with the voice performers.

Afternoon: Improvisations with the musicians: "Object jam"

Point of view of the director:

I've decided to start out very simply and minimalistically with the two voice performers. They are given very simple rules for various kinds of duets, and they are using voices/sounds without words. I try to make rules that will create an inarticulate form of dialogue between the two; for instance that they must make sounds separately and wait for each other's response, that they must wait for the impulse before making sound etc.

I also use very minimalistic body work to introduce a kind of character outline; for instance making one performer stand up and the other lie down, or having them sit back to back and move each other with body as well as with the voice.

Afterwards I think that starting out gently and minimalistically was not the best idea. To immediately seduce everybody into this strange universe, it might have been better to start with a big bang: all performers on the floor, improvising wildly - writers writing whatever comes into their minds. Not that the voice performers weren't wild and wonderful from the start - but the minimalistic restraint that I put on them focused the work on fine little details and an intense kind of listening that the dramatists might have been more capable of exploring at a later time.

On the other hand, I find that in all our discussions after the workshop, people (including myself) think that we should have started with something else, because at first the work was hard and then it got so much easier and better - and I'm wondering if it wouldn't have been like that whatever we did...

In the afternoon, we actually continue to a kind of "big bang": "Object jam" which is an improvisation with the stomp musicians playing with the objects that everybody has brought. Again, the perspective of the improvisations is to create dialogue: the writers write while the improvisations are going on, immediately, with as little reflection as possible, "translating" the stomp music into words and voices. The frame of the improvisations is simple: at the beginning of each session every musician chooses one thing and sticks to it while jamming (communicating) with the others. This musical universe is more complex - the writers have to choose to listen to certain "voices" and sounds from a polyphonous whole. Later, we make it even more complex by letting the musicians change objects whenever they choose.

The reactions of the dramatists to the first day: one is "turned on" immediately, one finds the voice improvisations very strange and inspiration hard to find, and one is sort of in between, but seems to be tuned into the work at the end of the day. Two of them have been writing dialogue and other material, the third has not felt ready for that.

To me, the enormity of the work and its possible variations seems to sweep away with me from day one. Example: I have asked the participants to read a text (an extract from "The Upanishads", a text that I have had in mind before for a project involving this kind of work) as a point of departure to prepare a dialogue/ a musical phrase/ a voice, accordingly, that we might have bits and pieces to improvise on. I have also asked everybody to bring an object, inspired by the text (since of course, the stomp group specialises in playing on anything).

The preparation and the text is an attempt to create some sort of common point of reference to the group to ease the work and the creation of a common feeling that I consider necessary for a successful experiment. And it might have had that general positive effect, I am not sure. At any rate, not everybody has taken the preparation seriously (has done some of it or nothing) and some have made even more than needed, and so the ground to build upon was a little too uneven. And in practice, most of the prepared stuff never came into use during the week, simply because the work took off, and new possibilities seemed to unfold every hour - and I simply forgot about it. As I said, the enormity and complexity of the work just seemed to carry me off. I scheduled and rescheduled almost every day, trying to navigate the best possible way through this enormous sea of possibilities.

The funny thing was, though, that for me "The Upanishads" as a common starting point for the group gave a kind of colour and quality to the work that I was able to use and be inspired by, when I had the time to take notes about my own personal project. The objects (especially an African string instrument, a bowl of water, a branch with leaves, an old suitcase) created sounds and a space that were immediately recognisable to my own basic idea.

All in all, a good first day. Everybody curious and positive, although almost everybody is eager to know where this is going - and it takes some getting used to the concept that learning from the process is the goal of the whole thing.

Day 2

Focus: Character

Morning: Working in couples

Afternoon: Showing the work, discussing the experiences
"Relay object jam"

Point of view of the director:

The three dramatists are paired up with one or two musicians/voice performers. The dramatist describes a character to the musician/voice performer who then tries to give it a musical expression - voice, rhythm, or sound. The dramatist directs and adjusts, the musician/voice performer suggests, etc. until there is a small portrait or sequence.

It's fascinating to see how differently the dramatists approach the work, and how flexibly and receptively the musicians/voice performers respond.

Dramatist Julie Maj and voice performer Mathilde seem to hit it off really well and create a really strong character that, during the week, both of them express a wish to return to and develop more (unfortunately, we never get around to that). Julie Maj states that she gets a lot of new information about the character from Mathilde.

Dramatist Michael makes this fantastic sequence with voice performer Louise where he uses his very minimalistic, almost obstructing narrative technique - to the frustration of Louise he strips her of all sound, until she is an almost imperceptible breath withheld, with an immense tension in the body. It's almost a kind of humoristic protest against the first day's work where he seemed unable to write anything from the inferno of sounds that he was introduced to... But the character is strong and clear as daylight.

To me, the most important experience of the day - apart from the fact that this kind of work seems to be very useful and displays potential both as a way for the dramatist to build a character and as a way of expressing character in performance - comes from the third group:

Dramatist Anne Grethe works with musicians Jeppe and Johannes, because she wants to develop both characters from a dialogue that she has brought. They work with different approaches to improvisation under the guidance of Anne Grethe. What becomes crystal clear to me as I watch them work is that at this level, we need to use the musical language at its best and the musicians at their best. It's too early to go to the integration of playing music and playing characters - it disturbs both languages (musical and theatrical) and lessens the quality of the work. And it's funny, because I actually chose the stomp musicians also because they had a basic understanding of drama, and had scenic experience, since the story is always a part of their shows - but it turns out that in this context that doesn't really benefit us.

The really interesting things happen when the musicians/performers do the musical work at which they are really proficient - and meet the dramatists doing what they do best, putting ideas and atmospheres and situations into words. That is where the two languages really meet and integrate, interestingly enough - when they are being themselves at their purest and most complex. That's how dramatist Julie Maj gets "information" from voice performer Mathilde.

It also means that in the creative phase, you could work with any kind of music and musicians. It would be interesting to work with really experienced star classical musicians, for example, provided they can improvise. Or jazz musicians, who certainly can. Would there be different kinds of stories in classical and jazz music?

Probably. This whole idea of "translating" live improvised music into words and stories and characters opens up new fields of questions. And it is not just a matter of putting on your favourite cd at home and turning on the computer - that is another way of working, of course, and nothing wrong with that - but this mutual live creative space is totally different, everybody in the experiment experiences that. And of course the possibilities of working together and taking the ideas further are obviously beneficial and much more complex.



Day 3

Focus: Dramatic space

Morning: Impros with the musicians, colour themes

Impro with whole group: Sound space travelling, 3 corners of the world

Afternoon: Group work, developing dramatic spaces to story set-ups

Point of view of the director:

We may be already developing a general work pattern: In the morning to open, inspire, generate ideas - everybody in the same room, all 3 dramatists writing to the same impros. In the afternoon in smaller groups, focusing, developing a particular idea. It seems a good basic pattern for starting to create new material.

To generate material related to space, again I've decided to use very simple themes for the musical improvisations. The four musicians are now playing instruments, at their own suggestion, because we felt we needed a more varied field of musical possibilities - to be able to use melody as well as rhythm and sound. So now we have drums, guitars, flute a.o. The musicians improvise together a sequence with three headlines - blue, red, yellow. Their task is to follow each other through the three colours, trying to change at the same time without any kind of signal, just by listening. The task of the dramatists is to describe space - one or more - in relation to what they are hearing.

This is perhaps the most "effective" of all the improvised writings that we do all week. It seems to appeal to everybody - the ideas seem to come easily to the dramatists, the musicians experience something new and different by playing this way, a different kind of putting "meaning" into the music - and even I, trying out the role as dramatist just for fun, find the music extremely inspiring and am able to write down a complete idea for a one-act performance sparked by "the blue room". So, for some reason, "colour" and "space" hit it off really well. Probably, colour is a simple way to add a visual dimension to music?

Or maybe we are just getting comfortable enough with the group, the work, this kind of creative process, to really start profiting from it.

At any rate, the spaces that come out of these improvisations are very elaborate, and each contains a set-up to a story or even the bigger part of a story already.

The afternoon is spent working in smaller groups, 2 musicians/voice performers and 1 dramatist, developing the ideas further. Each group explores their own way of letting the music and the stories enter into a dialogue and develop each other.

One of the groups finds the exchange very easy and fruitful, developing a musical theme as a kind of mirror of two spaces combined and a story that is also developed further. At the end there is a complete set-up of story, locations and characters (for a film) - that the group has literally developed together.

Another group continues to use the improvisations as a means of providing the dramatist with more material, exploring the spaces and the story. Their conversation is a blast to listen to, completely strange to outsiders, like, "Why don't we start with red, then the snake, and we finish off with east - and then you can read to us what you heard.."

And the third group spends a lot of time just trying to figure out how to go about the work, ending up with more frustrations than ideas.

Normal. All in a day's work.

As a whole, a bit of a breakthrough day. Dramatist Michael, who found the work difficult in the beginning, suddenly experiences a flow of creative exchange with the music and the musicians. And for some of the musicians the purpose of the work becomes clearer today, as they experience more involvement. I haven't been quite fair to the musicians from the start, I think: we've been using them as instruments for the creativity of the dramatists, but of course, they too are creative people and like to feel a more active part of the process.

This day, we have entered into a more equal and genuine exchange between writers and musicians/voice performers, and everybody seems to benefit the more.



Day 4

Focus: Scenarios

Morning: Continuing group work, developing

Afternoon: Combining groups, developing

Point of view of the director:

I decide to let the groups from yesterday continue their work, as there seem to be so many more possibilities in developing a specific idea through this kind of close collaboration. I encourage the groups to continue from yesterday's spaces and set-ups to more detailed scenarios and stories. The basic tool for the group work is the idea of mutual translation, like yesterday, exchanging the language of music and the language of words to develop the dramatist's idea further. Before starting the work, we discuss with each group what they want to work on and in what direction they need to move.

Dramatist Julie Maj feels the need to structure her material. She has a scenario, a setup, characters and pieces of action - all in a certain state of chaos. She would like to be able to give a direction or an aim to her writing without losing the wonderful inspiration and madness that comes out of the music. The group decides to work with repetitions of the musical themes they have been developing, letting Julie Maj work on details and structure and clarity.

Dramatist Michael and his group want to continue developing his story. The spaces and the setup is very clear - but the two spaces are very different, and the group decides to work on the transition between the two, thus finding out more about the story. The group works almost simultaneously on music and story, with a sort of close, mutual interpretation between words and music. To their own surprise, they seem to hear the same things in the music, which makes the development work very easy and flowing.

Dramatist Anne Grethe still needs to find the right method to get on with her story. She enjoys using the music as a kind of fantasy voyage, travelling into her own dramatic universe and hearing what the characters are saying. So she needs flow in the work, not too much discussion or translating, just listening and writing. The group decides to work with different ways of using the instruments to let Anne Grethe "hear" her characters.

In the afternoon, the groups come together and talk about the work, and we put the musicians/voice performers together to do another impro to help Julie Maj solve a question concerning her characters.

At the end of the day, Julie Maj has added a group of characters to her idea and more details, but not a whole lot of structure yet. Michael and his group have developed a new (third or fourth?) movement to the music piece and with it a sort of key moment or key event in the story that contains a secret of the past which they haven't yet uncovered. And Anne Grethe has an outline of the beginning of her play.

All in all, I'm extremely happy about the work. We are so far beyond the questions of whether this kind of work is even possible, is it fruitful, will anything happen, will we uncover new ground, interesting dramatic material etc. What most of us feel like doing now, I think, is continue to work on the specific ideas and to discover even further what will happen in that process of becoming more and more specific. As Julie Maj has put it, how do we give the work aim and structure without losing the inspiration and madness? Some of the groups have already started that work, but there is of course so much more to try and discover.

But that's another experiment. This is already coming to an end.

One of the most interesting statements about the work comes from dramatist Anne Grethe. Already in the morning on the second day, she announced that she had written a huge number of pages the day before - and boy, was it all boring! It's not until later in the week when she gets back to it that I realise what she actually means. Nothing of what she has written on the first day - or writes during the whole workshop - is comic. And that is new to her. Nothing ironic, nothing witty - she says herself that the stuff seems to come from somewhere deeper within her. A different stuff - maybe more "unconscious" - than what she usually writes on.

I find this very interesting, of course, since it is a direct answer to one of my experiment questions: would the writing of a particular dramatist become fundamentally different under the influence of the musical improvisations. It also relates to one of the discussions we have on this fourth day:

About the human ear. The difficulty of learning to pronounce a new language lies not in what your mouth is able to do, but what the ear is able to hear (according to language scientists). If your language doesn't contain for instance the sound "r" (isn't that Chinese?), then your ear will be almost incapable of discerning that sound in another language, and you will hear whatever seems close to that sound to you, for instance "l". Of course, if you are less than 2 years old or something like that, you are able to hear anything. But later, the ear starts closing to what you don't know... (Very characteristically human.)

And I'm thinking that it's the same way for any artist, in this case a dramatist. You are only able to write what you can hear (= imagine). And the music can give you access to hearing other things - things to which your ears and mind might normally be closed. Music activates the unconscious - any director of horror movies knows that - but the interesting thing about this experiment is that we have tried to use the music not just as stimulus or a can-opener for the dramatist's unconscious - but as a tool that may be used consciously as an access to expanding and enhancing the heights and depths of an idea, and even perceiving the outskirts, the shadows and hidden dimensions of it. What eludes the mind's eye comes into reach of the ear.... perhaps.

I don't know. What I do know is that this meeting of two different artistic languages has generated a powerful spark of creativity and new understanding.

As dramatist Julie Maj said about the work, "We are at the very source here".

Or as dramatist Michael said, dryly, when asked if he could have thought of this story without the music, "Well - before the sound there was nothing."

Day 5

Focus: Themes

Morning: Impros, themes, open and secret

Afternoon: Summing up, jamming out

Director's point of view:

Although tired and filled with experiences, we try out a few impros with all the musicians and voice performers together, focused on "themes". I ask the dramatist to write down a few key words, themes, in relation to the story they have been working on. I then ask the musicians to do three different improvisations on these keywords, respectively. As a little experiment within the experiment, I start by hiding from the dramatists which keywords I show to the musicians, so that the dramatists don't know when their story is on. It turns out that all three of them are able to recognise not only their own improvisation, but also the others'. I am able to recognise one, but get the two others mixed up.

But then it gets really spooky: We repeat the exercise, same keywords, new impros. This time I let everybody know who is on, first, second, last. Only without discovering it myself, I get the notes mixed up when showing them to the musicians - and the dramatists STILL recognise which story is on - disregarding what I said! Pretty impressive.

But I have to admit that before we have even started the day, to me the experiment is practically already finished. I'm so full of impressions and thoughts and ideas which I have to digest that I'm happy just talking over the experiences and fetching a birthday cake for one of the musicians and drinking beer in the afternoon. We also end up in an improvisation - was that before or after we started on the beer (?) - where everybody joins in on the "performance space" (including me), trying out the instruments and the water bowl and the branch, and the dramatists reading their texts with all the sounds hammering around them. It doesn't make much sense, but it's a nice way of closing this whole crazy complex thing we've created together these five days.

I want to thank the whole team for their effort, for openness and critical sense and dedication to what this was really about: exploring our artistic practice and discovering new ground to grow on.

