Chapter 1

Improvisation in Traditional Drama

Introduction – the principle of improvisation

Improvisation is not just a style or an acting technique; it is a dynamic principle operating in many different spheres; an independent and transformative way of being and doing.

The twentieth century has seen an explosion of experiments which have embraced the principle of 'improvisation'. Music, for example, has been transformed by the various forms of jazz: technical proficiency has been allied to improvisation to create a practically inexhaustible synthesis. In modern dance, Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham, in different ways, opened up a wealth of new, plastic possibilities for the expressive body. The former immediately and spontaneously danced the truth of what she felt. The latter broke down the rigid formulae of classical ballet and replaced them with a language that responded to the world around as well as within the dancer. Graham wrote: 'There is a necessity for movement when words are not adequate. The basis of all dancing is something deep within you.'1 (The main subject of our book is, of course, improvisation in drama, and in this section we shall be looking at the uses – and the users – of this principle in the drama of the twentieth century. But we shall also be stepping outside the field of artistic creation, for the same principle is being borrowed from drama and used in innovative ways in other endeavours.)
Overview

All theatrical performance ideally strives for a rigorous authenticity. The lines of development we will be discussing in this section lead in three principal directions, but each ultimately demands the same degree of commitment, and each is concerned – though from different angles – with an exploration of ‘self’ and ‘reality’ for performers and/or audience. This concern is basic to theatre and its relationship to human capacity and to the meaning of individual and communal acts; it links practice – outlined in the exercises and techniques given in Part II – with the historical and theoretical perspectives of Part III.

Improvisation is used in three major contexts. It feeds firstly into what we might call traditional theatre training, as a preparation for performance and a way of tuning up the performers. We can place this in the (Stanislavskian) tradition of ‘character’ preparation, or, to put it another way, as a method of schooling the actor to project the ‘reality’ of the character; a process which involves the development of imaginative skills so that the body can experience and express appropriate emotional states: discovering in oneself the self or being of ‘another’ and presenting it.

We discuss the use of improvisation in actor training below; this line of work tends – though not exclusively or rigidly – towards the naturalistic, the documentary, even the socio-political, with a relatively clearly defined concept of ‘character’ as the focus of deterministic forces: what D. H. Lawrence called the ‘old stable ego of personality’ clings to this and inhabits the structure and content of the ‘well-made play’. Perhaps the most extreme development occurs in the improvisation-for-performance work of Mike Leigh, where a scripted text arises from improvisation fleshed out by ‘sociological’ research. (Though observing from life, we should note, is common to virtually all actor training, the uses that, say, the Bristol Old Vic Theatre School and the Ecole Jacques Lecoq put it to may, however, be interestingly different.)

The second tradition (or perhaps anti-tradition) rests on a more radical acknowledgement of the fragmentation of nineteenth-century notions of a consistent personality. The comic and the satiric vein, often allied to improvisation, challenges assumptions about stable social personality and ‘bourgeois’ respectability; taken to extremes, it undercuts political, religious and philosophical myths about the coherence of individual identity and its