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Keith Johnstone: Spontaneity, Storytelling, Status, and Masks, Trance, Altered States

Abstract: Understanding Keith Johnstone’s theories on spontaneity, storytelling, status, and mask work through neuroscience and psychology. Johnstone’s theories, especially on his mask work, introduce the possibilities of altered states of consciousness and/or trance states/amnesia to the discussion of improvisation. His theories rely on situated cognition and an embodied theory of the mind instead of placing consciousness only in the brain.

Keith Johnstone thinks of humans as apes. He talks a lot about alpha animals, instincts, and fear. His games and exercises aim to tame the players’ fears and allow them to then intuitively let their mouth and body act without thinking. For example in *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1979), his popular book that theorizes improvisation pedagogy, Johnstone describes the way he leads a specific exercise. He asks students to mime taking an object out of a pocket or off a shelf. The aim here is for the student to be spontaneous and not self-censor. Johnstone writes, “If they’re worried about failing, then they’ll have to think first; if they’re playful, then they can allow their hand to make its own decision.” His approach considers the entire mind, meaning not just the brain. Many of his exercises use an “outside in” approach to acting; he has students make a movement or embody a stance as a way to develop characters. These physicalizations can then bring out strong internal emotions and subtext. During the aforementioned exercise, Johnstone writes that he usually looks out the window or looks away while students mime picking up an object. He writes, “Afterwards I explain that I’m not interested in what they did, but in how their mind worked.” This chapter explores Johnstone’s theories on how those improvising and embodied minds are working.

### Keith Johnstone history

Johnstone’s teaching style is a reaction to his own experience as a young student. He learned to read early, teaching himself by using comic strips and asking for help when he came across a word he could not figure out. Once he started school though, he was stifled. He had bad posture and a speech defect that his formal schooling only made worse. He writes, “I’d left school with worse posture, and a worse voice, with worse movement and far less spontaneity than when I’d entered it. Could teaching have a negative effect?” His answer is a resounding yes, and that answer is the basis for his own teaching style:

> By happenstance I’ve spent my life teaching the skills that my teachers had ignored. I encouraged negative people to be positive, and clever people to be obvious, and anxious people not to do their best. People are surprised when I give as much attention to the “klutzes” as to the “talented” players.

Johnstone caters his teaching to the students. He lowers his status, which will be defined when his pedagogy is discussed later, to make students...