

Bodily poeticizing in theatrical improvisation: A
typology of performative knowledge.

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In lieu of an abstract, here is a brief excerpt of the content:

Bodily Poeticizing in Theatrical Improvisation: A Typology of Performative Knowledge

Lesla Lockford (bio) and Ronald J. Pelias (bio)

Two actors are engaged in a scene. One jumps several lines and the other is lost. To move the play forward, they must improvise. Another scenario: A group of actors comes on stage and asks the audience for details or situations that they agree to enact spontaneously on stage. Laughter ensues. Still another scenario: An ensemble works together to write a play by creating scenes, not with pen in hand, but through interaction on stage. Yet another scenario: A director finds a scene just doesn't seem to be working. The director stops the action and asks the actors to participate in an improvisational exercise so that they might come to a richer understanding of what is involved in the scene.

Scenarios such as these, while they all use improvisation, are employed in order to achieve different ends. An actor covering a blown line, a collaboration of ensemble creators, and a group of improvisational comedy performers are not doing the same thing in the same way or for the same reasons. Though the participants in each scenario have different intentions when using improvisation, they are all performers making spontaneous choices, often without recourse to a memorized script.¹ How actors come to make the choices they do is the focus of this essay. We ask, what is it that guides those choices? What embodied knowledges—be they cognitive, physical, somatic, affective, or a combination—is the performer drawing upon in such moments? While our specific concern is not improvisation per se, we locate our discussion within such off-script moments for how they help us delimit what is available to the performer in making choices. Our initial aim is to explore how actors orient to performative challenges. To do so, we explore a number of examples taken from various forms of improvisation. We go on to suggest the bodily sites of those knowledges and how they function. We also consider the resistances actors may experience in their efforts to meet those challenges. Finally, while our primary intention is to point to how performers make the choices they do, we include a section briefly suggesting how awareness of these knowledges and resistances may assist directors and performers in reaching the performance goals they seek.

As we have noted, our particular interest is in identifying the performative knowledge performers rely upon; to do so, we explore how performers negotiate their agency as they attempt to fulfill the range of goals demanded by various forms of improvisational work. While a number of scholars note aspects of the improvisation process that segue with our work, more often than not their aim differs from ours in that they are seeking to further a specific end. Their ambitions are reasonable given these scholars' focus on developing means of making better performances. Yet, where they are concerned with the various goals and intentions of diverse groups who engage in improvisation, our primary **[End Page 431]** aim is to explore how performing is a way of knowing and to account for how performers in various off-script situations do what they do. We consider that explanations such as our own may help inspire even more conscious and conscientious ways of applying improvisational skills. Our premise is that situations in which performers are off text and left to invent from their own creative energies provide a rich source for exploring the knowledge-based choices they make in performance.

We begin by first establishing the term "bodily poeticizing" as a framework for understanding how performance is epistemic and aesthetic. Second, we examine how bodily poeticizing is manifest in some forms of improvisation by setting out a topology that describes five key epistemic stances that actors deploy: communication, playfulness, sedimentation, sensuality, and vulnerability. We derived our topology through synthesizing the considerable amount of scholarship about improvisation that points toward the skills performers call upon during improvisation; yet we employ terminology that we believe points to the embodied, cognitive, affective, and intuitive locations of those knowledges. Finally, as noted above, we suggest what we see as some of the theoretical and pedagogical implications of...

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