The following is an excerpt from the book:

Insight Improvisation

Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment

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To learn more, please visit http://www.insightimprov.org.

Naked Improvisation

> *"Naked" describes the experience we encounter when everything extraneous to the essential nature of being falls away: all the grasping and rejection, me and mine, wanting and not wanting, hopes, fears and struggles. What would life be like if we could relax into our world rather than feeling like we always had to cherish ourselves with it or protect ourselves from it? What would it be like to have a "naked" experience?*
>
> — Elizabeth Namgyel (2012)

Contemplative Theater: Stripping It Down

In Insight Improvisation, the term Contemplative Theater (CT) refers to the exploration of performance and the art of acting through the lens of mindfulness.

Part II of this book is devoted to Contemplative Theater, and specifically to techniques developed for actors—that can also be enjoyed by non-actors—for use in training, creative exploration and sourcing of new material, and in performance.

(Please note that throughout Part II we will be referring to "the actor," "the performer," or "the improviser." However, many of the concepts discussed—such as Performance Mind versus Being Mind, or the expressive use of voice and body language—can be applied more broadly, e.g. to a presenter or leader communicating with a business audience, or other everyday communication situations.)

I've been lucky enough over the years to be able to study with theater artists exploring the integration of theater with meditation and mindfulness, including Jean-Claude van Itallie, Scott Kelman, Ruth Zaporah, and Christie Svane, all of whom are referenced in the chapters to come. Others have explored this union, such as Lee Worley, Professor of Performance at Naropa University (2001).

Several elements distinguish CT from other kinds of theater:

Mindful Intention. Theatre can do many things—it can entertain, inform, warn, question or poke fun at social norms or trends, and/or evoke a cathartic response from the audience. Although CT can do all of these things, its underlying purpose is to create an experience of mindfulness for the audience, as well as the performers. Together, all share in a space of open, heightened, present-moment awareness, appreciating the richness of what is unfolding.

Actor as meditator. CT is interested in the inner state of the performer, and in cultivating acting that is present, focused, open, and connected with other actors and the audience. Although creating a mindful experience for the audience is also a goal of CT, it is equally concerned with the performer's creative journey, in the present moment, and how their state of mind and body affects that journey.

A "poor" theater. CT is poor in the Grotowskian sense—it is stripped down to its essentials: actor, audience and empty space—with a minimum of sets, props, costumes, lighting effects, makeup, etc. (Grotowski, 1968). As Chögyam Trungpa, the Tibetan Buddhist teacher, once said, "The art of anything is not adding, it's subtracting."

Valuing negative space. In CT, what is not happening can be as important as what is. Silence, slowness, breathing, pausing, and movement without words all contribute to the creation of a mindful performance. The actor does not rush to fill space; instead, he breathes fully and deeply, letting the moment in.

Contemplative Improvisation

Insight Improvisation builds on all of the elements described above, with a particular focus on improvisation. Improvisation, as we'll see in the exercises in Part II of this book, can include acting without a script, but can also include working with a text or a chosen story in a spontaneous way, not planned beforehand. There are several parallels between improvisation and meditation. Here are a few, based on the three types of awareness discussed in Part I of this book:

- **Mindfulness:** Being present—being "in the moment"—is fundamental to both improvisation and meditation; if an improviser is not present, the improvisation will quickly go off the rails.
- **Choicelessness:** Saying "Yes" in an improv scene, e.g., accepting the offer of another actor, or accepting the impulse arising in one's own body/mind and going with it, is parallel to opening to and accepting whatever is arising in the field of awareness in meditation.

- **Lovingkindness:** The confidence to improvise, as well as the ability to lend support to another actor in the scene, ideally comes from an inner attitude of caring, for oneself and for others.

This chapter offers an introduction to two core concepts in Insight Improvisation and Contemplative Theater—Performance Mind and Being Mind—as well as two exercises by a "Zen Master" of improvisation, the West Coast theater artist, teacher, and ground-breaking producer Scott Kelman (Heffley, 2007).

Naked Improvisation	
Introduction to Part II: Contemplative Theater ***Performance Mind and Being Mind***	
Walk-Stop-Walk	***One-Minute Solo***

Performance Mind and Being Mind

> *"Let me give you a brief insight into stage fright. It is an animal, a monster which hides in its foul corner without revealing itself, but you know that it is there and that it may come forward at any moment."*
>
> — Sir Laurence Olivier (1986, pp. 128-129)

As a form of Contemplative Theater, Insight Improvisation replaces traditional theater's focus on performance with an emphasis on the actor's awareness. One of the useful aspects of this change in focus is that in can help the actor to break out of habitual ways of approaching her craft.

We refer to the actor's habitual way of thinking as "Performance Mind," a core concept in Insight Improvisation. Performance mind encompasses a number of actors' tendencies, each of which have an alternative from an Insight Improvisation point of view—a different set of attitudes or responses referred to as "Being Mind."

Acting can often seem the opposite of relaxed. It can feel pressurized, tense, pushed—the need to "perform" takes the fore. It is natural when appearing in front of an audience to be nervous: adrenaline is produced that leads to a flight, fight, or freeze reaction. This can lead to an "out-of-body" experience for the actor—not really being present, speaking memorized lines on auto-pilot.

Something different becomes available to the actor when she breathes, relaxes, slows down, and opens all her senses, taking in the present moment. The actor *lets* something happen, rather than pushing to *make* something happen. Instead of reacting, the actor is inspired by and responds to what is around her. This is what "Being Mind" is—a relationship with acting based on mindfulness, choicelessness, and lovingkindness.

The following table delineates some of the main distinctions between Performance Mind and Being Mind:

"Performance Mind"	"Being Mind"
A desire to secure the approval of the audience, by impressing, entertaining, or gaining their sympathy—often driven by an underlying feeling of insecurity, lack of approval, or of not being loved.	An intention to connect with the audience, to be a present and vulnerable human being with them, motivated by a spirit of lovingkindness—*metta*—toward oneself, the audience, and toward all beings.
A desire to control what is happening onstage, or to "push" in order to make something happen—e.g., to push emotions to make them bigger, or to push in order to make an improvisation more interesting to the audience.	An intention to *let go* of control and remain open to what is unfolding moment by moment, enjoying and *accepting* the unexpected—exercising *choiceless awareness*. To be open to whatever outcome emerges, trusting that what occurs naturally has its own richness and depth, greater than what is produced by controlling or forcing.
An aversion to performance, characterized by stage fright, butterflies in the stomach, a fear of failure, a fear of making a fool of oneself, and a desire to hide.	A love of performance and embracing of the sensations that occur, including a *mindful awareness* and *acceptance* of the physical changes present when one is in front of an audience. Noticing the tendency to project into the future and instead returning the mind to an awareness of what's actually happening right now—to exercise *mindfulness.* Honoring the tendency to hide—having *metta* for the hiding part of oneself—while also being willing to remain present, open, and vulnerable with the audience.
Strong self-judgment or critique before, during, and after the process of performing.	Noticing and accepting the inner critic without identifying with its messages, then bringing the mind back to the body, reconnecting with the intention to *pause, relax, and open—slow down, breathe, and listen.*
Lack of connection to the body, the senses, other performers, and the audience—instead being connected mainly to one's own planning and critical minds.	Appreciating the mind's ability to plan, and to take what is useful from that, but then to be willing to *enter empty, letting go of "good" ideas* and returning the mind to a more *choiceless awareness* of the unfolding present, the body, the senses, other performers and the audience—to reconnect in the here and now.

A tendency toward Performance Mind is not something only beginners experience. Olivier's stage fright is but one example. Experienced actors can form habits that are hard to break—including a tendency toward needing to please the audience, or toward using technique instead of touching the emotional truth of the moment. What I have seen in Insight Improvisation workshops is that veteran actors and novices have a great deal to learn from one another: novices are inspired by how the veterans use the full range of their voice and body to express what is arising; and veterans are enriched by the novice's "beginner's mind," their ability to make fresh discoveries and ask sometimes profound questions.

Letting Go of Performance Mind

Each of the more than 50 Insight Improvisation exercises and variations are designed to help one strengthen Being Mind while decreasing the reliance on Performance Mind. Underlying many of these exercises are a specific set of techniques that support that shift:

Enter Empty

Our tendency before improvising is to plan what we are going to do, what our topic, theme, or content will be, and to follow that plan. In Insight Improvisation, we break this habit by actively disregarding the "Planning Mind," and, instead, listen to the body and senses in the moment for our inspiration, trusting that whatever arises is what we need to be working with. We allow ourselves to be actors in the play of the moment.

Let Go of "Good Ideas"

Scott Kelman often said: "If you have a good idea, don't do it." As we improvise, it is important to notice our habits as performers, and to break out of them, to let go of "Performance Mind." Our tendencies usually fall into two categories: a desire to impress the audience with how talented, entertaining, clever, or risk-taking we can be on the one hand; and, on the other, a desire to hide. As we perform, the mind works overtime, generating many "good ideas" about how to impress the audience and how to hide from them. These ideas often occur as "wouldn't it be neat if…" In traditional forms of improvisation, the actor is encouraged to be clever and do all their good ideas. In Insight Improvisation, we drop the good ideas, and tune back into what the body, senses, and inner imagery are telling us. What can emerge from this approach is often uniquely creative, unexpected, and authentic—both to actor and audience.

Close Your Eyes

Working with eyes closed is not recommended as a performance technique, but can be quite useful when working one-to-one or in a workshop context. When we work with eyes closed, it encourages us to focus more on our own inner reality than on the audience—it helps us open to all the other senses: what's coming in through the body, the ability to notice sounds, smells, thoughts, feelings, the breath, etc. Although not all Insight Improvisation exercises are performed with eyes closed, many are, including the progression from meditation and authentic movement to role stream and psolodrama.

Walk-Stop-Walk

As actors, we don't often notice what's around us onstage: we're more concerned with ourselves and how we're coming across.

This exercise originally comes from Scott Kelman. Both this exercise and Scott's One-minute Solo exercise are best practiced in a group setting; the instructions that follow are from the standpoint of teaching a workshop.

Begin by having participants sit along one edge of the space—either on the floor or in chairs. Have a single row that arcs slightly so people can see each other.

Point out an imaginary line on the floor just in front of their feet extending the length of the audience. "When you cross this line you're entering the space. To exit the space, cross the line again and return to your seat. Once you exit, that's it."

Have every other person (half the group) stand up.

"When the bell rings, those who are standing will cross the line and enter the space. Once you enter the space, walk. Walk until you stop walking. When you stop walking, check it out: check out the room, check out the audience, check out the clock, check out the floor, check out yourself, etc. Once you're done checking it out, walk. When you hear the bell a second time, the next time you walk, exit the space. Any questions?"

If there are questions, just repeat the instructions—do not elaborate or justify. If they ask what the role of the audience is, "to be the audience" should suffice.

Ring the bell to start them off. Let the movers go for as long as feels right—probably somewhere between 5 to 7 minutes. Then ring the bell to end, and let everyone eventually make their way back to their seat.

Once everyone is seated, engage the group in a short debrief conversation: “What was your experience? Let’s hear from the movers first.” Etc.

When you invite the audience to share their experience, you could also add this follow-on question: “If this were a performance, what would be your experience of it?” And later: “How does it feel to watch this performance?”

Then switch roles and do the exercise again.

Commentary

Walk-Stop-Walk exists on an edge between acting and “real life.”

The movers are given simple instructions to follow, mainly about being present and aware (“checking it out”). If they follow the instructions faithfully, they are not acting—just being.

For the audience, what emerges is a piece of unplanned contemplative improvisation: there is plenty of silence, and the action seems random. It is a dance, but probably unlike any the audience has seen. It is a dance that does not try to force its agenda on us, to entertain or surprise or teach or touch. Instead, it is a dance of chance, of emptiness, of curiosity, of happy accidents—such as those moments when all the movers are still at the same time, or those moments when two or three begin to move simultaneously. Rather than a message being pushed out, the audience is invited in, to explore with their own curiosity, and to choose what aspects of movement, stillness, and interaction they wish to observe.

One-Minute Solo

Same setup as Walk-Stop-Walk: chairs for participants are arranged in a single gently-arcing row forming the audience. Point out the invisible line in front of the participants; crossing it means one has entered, or exited, the space.

"This is an exercise called the One-minute Solo. In a moment, one person will volunteer to go first by standing up. When you cross the line and enter the space, your one minute begins. There are only two rules. The first is, at some point during the minute, acknowledge the audience. The second rule is, if you have a good idea, don't do it. When the minute is up you will hear the bell—that's your signal to exit the space. Any questions?"

If there are questions, just repeat the instructions—do not elaborate or justify.

Invite one person to go first. When they are finished, say "we will talk about this afterward, but before we do, let's see another"—and invite someone else to go.

After two or three participants have done a solo, ask the group, "What are you noticing? What was your experience of being the audience, or the actor?"

Then give others a chance to try.

Commentary

For actors—and most human beings—to find themselves onstage, not being able to do their good ideas, feels like a soldier running into battle without armor or weaponry. One is naked in the space, vulnerable. How this vulnerability expresses itself is unique to each person. Each has his or her own way of dealing with this paradoxical situation.

As audience, we have the privilege of seeing each person's truth—or their defenses or habits. In a sense, the exercise lays everything bare, no matter what the performer does.

Kelman has created a form that is the opposite of what we tend to think of as acting. By doing so, he helps us get at what underlies acting: the performer's relationship with the audience.

Variations

A couple of variations have developed over the years as I've led this exercise in Insight Improvisation workshops:

Speaking. Often the actor does not say anything in this exercise, which is fine. However, it's also interesting to discover what it is like to speak in the context of not doing one's good ideas. At any time the facilitator can say, "let's add a new rule: at some point during the minute say something."

A variation on this variation is to ask the actor to tell a story—something that is even more challenging to do without good ideas.

Duets and Groups. Invite two people to enter the space at the same time with the added instruction: "At some point during the minute interact with each other." You can also try being more specific and assign any of the following to either or both actors:

- "At some point make eye contact with your partner"
- "At some point make physical contact with your partner."
- "At some point speak to your partner."

You can also progress to a group of three, then four, and then see what happens with larger groups.

Naked

One example of how I dealt with my own tendency toward being stuck in performance mind comes from a one-man show I created and performed in 1996, *A Naked Man in Boston.* The first act of this theater piece was made up of performed stories and short improvisational structures that the audience could choose from by way of a random selection process. The plan for one of the improvisations, entitled "Naked," was extremely simple: I would remove my clothes and stand before the audience. I knew in advance that in such a situation, my normal tendency as an actor would be to want to entertain, impress the audience, or to hide, through a number of different means: e.g., being clever or funny, using self-deprecating humor, distraction, or even physically covering up in some way. Instead, I chose beforehand to approach the improvisation completely differently, using Kelman's guideline: "If you have a good idea, don't do it."

On the night when this improvisation was chosen by the audience, what emerged onstage was a very simple improvisation, with a great deal of silence and stillness. Once I removed my clothing, I remember feeling extremely present. I became conscious of each breath and each gesture I made. Stripped even of my defenses, I stood still—slowing down to take in the moment, to see the audience and to allow myself to be seen by them. Members of the audience shared afterwards that this enabled them to also be simply present, and take in a naked body in a new way. What I discovered was a new freedom as a performer, not to rush through a risky moment, or to try to impress the audience, but to simply be there and appreciate the wonder and strangeness of it all, moment by moment.

Where We're Headed

Each of the chapters which follow in Part II examines a different aspect of the performer's craft through the lens of mindfulness: how to use the actor's instrument—the voice and the body—expressively; how to relate to other actors; how to write and perform a text; how to tell a story effectively; how to play characters and create scenes; and how to apply singing—the use of rhythm and melody and the full range of the voice—to all of the above.

The chapters in Part II represent an alternative or supplement to standard acting training. Acting students—as well as experienced actors—tend to enjoy these exercises, as they provide new and unusual ways of looking at performance. All of the skills developed in Part II are useful in themselves, in day-to-day life as well as in performance, but they are also good preparation for what's coming in Part III, as we delve into drama therapy and psolodrama. In addition, each exercise reflects back on Part I, in the sense that each is a form of active meditation.

Two interesting questions to ask as you encounter the exercises in Part II: "how can I approach this exercise as a meditation?" and "how is this exercise also a form of drama therapy—how is it therapeutic?"

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