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(Salmiya, Kuwait) *almuwaifadhe@gmail.com***GENESIS OF IMPROVISATION IN HISTORICAL RETROSPECTIVE**

*The article examines the genesis of improvisation within the historical development of European theater. The study employs an interdisciplinary approach that integrates historical-cultural, comparative, and art criticism methods. The historical-cultural method made it possible to analyze the conditions that contributed to the emergence and development of acting improvisation across different periods – from antiquity to the present. The comparative method was applied to compare the specifics of improvisational practices in the theatrical cultures of different countries and eras. The art criticism method assisted in identifying the aesthetic principles of improvisation and its functions within the stage structure of performances. Elements of hermeneutics were also employed to interpret theoretical texts and to conduct a cultural analysis of contemporary theatrical practices. The article examines the evolution of improvisational forms – from ritual practices of antiquity, medieval farce, and commedia dell'arte to modern improvisational theater. The key stages in the formation of the phenomenon are identified, and the influence of socio-cultural factors on its transformation is analyzed. Improvisation is regarded not only as an acting technique but also as a philosophy of interaction with the audience, text, and space. The author focuses on the role of the leading theatrical reformers – Stanislavsky and Kurbas – in the development of actor's freedom, which encompasses spontaneity, creativity, and bodily presence. The importance of improvisation in 20<sup>th</sup>-century creative laboratories and its gradual establishment as a distinct genre are outlined. Attention is paid to the practices of contemporary improvisational theaters, which have both preserved the traditions of live stage and adapted them to the needs of the digital age. It is demonstrated that improvisation, despite changes in aesthetic paradigms, retains its significance as a means of deep stage exploration and the actualization of live dialogue with the spectator.*

**Key words:** acting improvisation, history of theater, art, comedy, spectator.

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(Сальмія, Кувейт) *almuwaifadhe@gmail.com***ГЕНЕЗА АКТОРСЬКОЇ ІМПРОВІЗАЦІЇ В ІСТОРИЧНІЙ РЕТРОСПЕКТИВІ**

*Стаття присвячена дослідженню генези акторської імпровізації в контексті історичного розвитку європейського театру. У дослідженні застосовано міждисциплінарний підхід, що поєднує історико-культурний, порівняльний та мистецтвознавчий методи. Історико-культурний метод дав змогу проаналізувати умови виникнення та розвитку акторської імпровізації в різні періоди – від античності до сучасності. Порівняльний метод використано для зіставлення специфіки імпровізаційних практик у театральних культурах різних країн та епох. Мистецтвознавчий аналіз допоміг виявити естетичні засади імпровізації та її функції у сценічній структурі вистав. Також використано елементи герменевтики для інтерпретації теоретичних текстів, а також культурологічний аналіз сучасних театральних практик. В статті розглянуто еволюцію імпровізаційних форм – від ритуальних практик античності, середньовічного фарсу, commedia dell'arte до сучасного імпровізаційного театру. Виокремлено ключові етапи становлення цього феномену, проаналізовано вплив соціокультурних чинників на його трансформацію. Імпровізація розглядається не лише як акторська техніка, а як філософія взаємодії з глядачем, текстом і простором. Акцентовано на ролі провідних театральних реформаторів – Станіславського, Курбаса – в розвитку акторської свободи, що передбачає спонтанність, креативність і тілесну присутність. Окремлено значення імпровізації у творчих лабораторіях ХХ століття та її поступове оформлення як окремого жанру. Увагу зосереджено на практиках сучасних імпровізаційних театрів, що не лише зберегли традиції живої сцени, а й адаптували їх до потреб цифрової доби. Доведено, що акторська імпровізація, попри зміну естетичних парадигм, зберігає свою значущість як засіб глибокого сценічного пошуку та актуалізації живого діалогу з глядачем.*

**Ключові слова:** акторська імпровізація, історія театру, образотворення, комедія, глядач.

**Problem Statement.** For many centuries, improvisation techniques in the art of acting have served as an important tool in constructing a stage image. In the modern period of theater development, improvisation remains a relevant means of expression. In many performances, actors are observed adjusting their behavior during the action following the circumstances, responding to the stage situation. Although these improvisational elements often take on a pre-prepared form today, they keep key features – particularly, a focus on spontaneity and live interaction.

The ability to improvise contributes to the development of acting technique and professional skills. Improvisation provides opportunities to explore a range of emotional states, trains quick responses to changes in stage situations, and fosters the ability to establish effective contact with partners on stage. The study of improvisational techniques in historical retrospect allows actors to expand their toolkit and adapt to different genre styles and artistic contexts.

**Research analysis.** Many foreign researchers, including Keith Johnstone, have addressed the study of acting improvisation. His work “*Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*” is a fundamental study that covers both the theoretical foundations and practical aspects of improvisation. The author views improvisation as an important component of acting technique, analyzing its historical background, involving the traditions of *commedia dell’arte*, which significantly influenced the development of the modern approach to stage spontaneity (Johnstone, 2018). The contributors to the almanac edited by Anna Libera explore the history and methodology of improvisation in “*The Second City*”. The comedy troupe, which eventually established itself as a leading institution in the world of improvisational theater, pioneered the use of improvisation to develop acting talent and create satirical revues. The texts in the almanac also include historical references to the theatrical traditions of improvisation (Libera, 2004). Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow view improvisation as a method, practice, and philosophy of acting on stage, drawing on historical examples from ancient theater to the 20<sup>th</sup> century (Frost, Yarrow, 1990). Their approach allows for tracing the evolution of improvisational techniques amidst changes in aesthetic and socio-cultural paradigms.

Although Marvin Carlson’s research does not specifically analyze improvisation as a distinct theatrical form, it provides a broad historical and cultural context for understanding the evolution of theater and acting styles, including improvisational forms (Carlson, 1993). This approach enables the comprehension of improvisation as an integral part of theatrical tradition across different historical periods.

Improvisation as a performing technique in theatrical art has not been sufficiently covered in Ukrainian scientific discourse. At the same time, certain aspects of the relevant topic are elucidated in scholarly works by Valerii Patsunov, Nina Husakova, Tetiana Hubrii (Patsunov, Husakova, Hubrii, 2019), Viktoriia Strelchuk (Strelchuk, 2015), and Valeriia Shtefiuk (Shtefiuk, 2021). Their publications contain valuable scientific material that allowed delving into the topic, analyzing the state of its evolution in Ukrainian theater studies, as well as tracing the impact of improvisational practices on domestic actors and theatrical figures. These works have become a crucial fundamental source for the present research.

**The purpose of the article is** to examine the historical development of improvisational techniques in performing arts.

**Statement of basic materials.** It is difficult to disagree that theater is the art form closest to life, as the act of creation occurs in the “here and now”, in the direct presence of the spectator. The actor’s lively interaction with the audience, emotional immediacy, and situational unpredictability – all contribute to creating a unique form of artistic experience inherent in theatrical art. Acting is one of the key categories that defines such uniqueness. The process of acting can evoke creative enthusiasm, aesthetic pleasure, and deep personal involvement in performers. This is especially evident in improvisation, which embodies the essence of acting as free, intuitive, and expressive self-expression.

Serhii Bezklubenko accurately conveys the concept of improvisation in art: “this is a kind of artistic creativity (in poetry, music, choreography, stage art), when an artwork is created directly during its first performance” (Bezklubenko, 2008: 141).

Improvisation is based on the involvement of the performer’s subconscious resources and is often carried out without a clearly defined model of action. It allows freedom of expression – in movement, word, gesture – and thereby opens new opportunities for creative exploration of image building on stage. The improvisational action encompasses the full range of emotional states, allowing the actor not so merely to demonstrate but to live through the scenic circumstances. In this regard, improvisation serves as an effective tool for achieving acting truthfulness and stage authenticity. It enables the realization of the widely used theatrical formula “live on stage”, which implies deep emotional engagement and authentic experience.

At the same time, it is essential to distinguish between professional improvisation and unprofessional manifestations of stage disorganization, in

which the actor arbitrarily alters the author's text or approved *mise-en-scènes* not out of creative initiative, but due to insufficient preparation and poor assimilation of rehearsal material. Such actions often indicate not artistic freedom, but a lack of performance discipline.

The earliest manifestations of improvisation in acting practice can be traced back to antiquity – the formative stage of theatrical art. As noted by O. G. Brockett and F. J. Hildy, “the earliest narratives about the origins of Greek drama [...] suggest that tragedy evolved from the improvisational performances of dithyramb soloists” (Brockett, Hildy, 2004: 27). At the same time, it must be emphasized that ancient Greek theater, closely connected with the religious cult of Dionysus, had a canonical structure: fixed texts, mythological plots, masks, and well-established *mise-en-scène*, all which limited the possibilities for acting improvisation.

Outside the cult theater, a street folk tradition gradually emerged, characterized by greater freedom of form. This gave rise to the genre of mimes – short everyday scenes without a fixed script, which did not require a formal stage, as they were performed outdoors or in private homes. Actors relied on facial expressions, gestures, and spontaneous language to create satirical portrayals of contemporary issues. According to O. G. Brockett and F. J. Hildy, “mime was partially improvised and therefore required a talent for inventing dialogue, organizing action, and coordinating movement” (Brockett, Hildy, 2004: 73).

The tradition of mimes should be regarded as one of the earliest manifestations of acting improvisation in the history of European theater. Their performances, which stood on contrast to the canonical norms of cult theater and were often perceived as vulgar or marginal, nonetheless initiated a line of spontaneous and live performance that later became a crucial vector in the evolution of acting.

In tracing the origins of improvisation in ancient theatrical art, it is worth turning to the figure of Herodas (also known as Herodotus; Greek: *Ἡρόδας* / *Ἡρόνδας*), a Hellenistic poet of the 3<sup>rd</sup> century BC, credited as the author of *mimiamb*s – short everyday scenes. These works, resembling dramatic monologues or dialogues with a pronounced comic effect, were written in verse that closely approximated spoken language. In 1890–1891, a papyrus containing eight *mimiamb*s by Herodas was discovered in the Fayoum Oasis (Egypt). This finding became an invaluable source for the study of early forms of everyday satire and theatrical improvisation in the Hellenistic era. Scenes such as “The Matchmaker” (I), “The School” (III), and “The Girlfriends” (VI) depicted

ordinary urban life and featured the characters from the lower social strata – figures who were rarely met in the “high” Greek theater (Kenyon (ed.), 1891; Arnott, 1971).

A distinctive feature of the *mimiamb*s is the simulated nature of the scenes, which were likely intended for performance by a single actor or a small group of performers. Some scholars suggest that Herodas's *mimiamb*s may be a foundation for improvised performance, in which the actor, guided by the general narrative framework, could freely vary intonation, facial expressions, and even the text itself, adapting it to a specific situation or audience (Arnott, 1971; Storey, 2003). Thus, Herodas and his *mimiamb*s can be regarded as some of the earliest historical evidence of the use of improvisational techniques in theatrical performance. Although the *mimiamb* texts were recorded in writing, their stage realization likely allowed for spontaneity, with acting based on imitation, caricature, and a vivid response to everyday reality – features that align these works with the modern concept of theatrical improvisation.

Alongside mime, the genre of pantomime developed in ancient theater, flourishing during the Hellenism period and the Roman Empire. Its founders were former slaves, Pylades and Bathyllus, who elevated pantomime to the level of “high art” under Emperor Augustus (Other Types of Roman Theater). The genre originated in ritual ceremonies and was characterized by expressive physicality, gestures, and the use of masks instead of words. Over time, pantomime evolved into an entertaining, improvisational form that influenced the subsequent development of non-verbal performance art. In the Roman context, pantomime had a profound cultural impact. Although initially shaped by ritual, it quickly transformed into an improvisational performance style in which bodily expression and masks replaced spoken language, laying the groundwork for modern forms of improvised performing arts.

The origins of ancient Roman theater can be traced back to folk improvisational traditions. “The Roman poet Horace (65–8 B.C.) wrote instead that the Latin theater arose even earlier from improvised, offensive, and often immoral verse dialogues of clowns who, wearing masks, entertained people during harvest festivals and wedding celebrations” (Brockett, Hildy, 2004: 58). One of these genres was the *Fescennine verses* (Latin: *fescēnnīna carmina*) – poetic improvisations with satirical elements, characterized by lively language and spontaneous performance. They became a crucial folklore source for the formation of professional theater and initiated the tradition of improvisation on the Roman scene.

Improvisational techniques of mimes inspired Titus Maccius Plautus, one of the most prominent Roman comic playwrights. His comedies were distinguished by dynamism, satirical sharpness, vivid language, physical expressiveness, and lively dialogues, which had much in common with improvisational practice (Kovbasenko, 2012: 185). Thus, the mimetic tradition, though marginalized by contemporaries, laid a vital foundation for the development of stage improvisation as a technique, which would later gain recognition as a legitimate artistic technique within the comedy genre.

In ancient Roman theater, the Atellan held a prominent place as one of the earliest forms of Italian folk farce. Originating in the 3rd century BC in the city of Atella (Campania), it had rural roots and a distinctly improvisational nature. Performances were structured around a basic plot or theme, while dialogues, stage interactions, and dramatic developments were shaped spontaneously during the performance. Such a structure provided flexibility, an element of surprise, and direct engagement with the audience. Improvisation was a fundamental principle that ensured a lively and dynamic theatrical form. Even after the Atellanæ began to be transcribed in the 1<sup>st</sup> century BC, the freedom of performance was largely preserved. Typical character masks – Maccus, Bucco, Pappus, Dossennus, and Manducus – allowed actors to switch roles quickly, maintaining anonymity and flexibility in shaping comedic action. Mask and improvisation functioned complementarily, supporting both physical and verbal expression, thus laying the foundation for the further development of improvisational theater traditions (Fabula Atellana; Hrkach, 2013).

In the folk art of ancient Roman theater, a place of prominence was held by histriones – traveling actors. They typically specialized in improvisation and comedic performances. Histriones had a significant impact on the development of Roman theater, with their repertoire encompassing a wide range of genres, from comedy to dramata. They employed various props and masks to portray their characters. Histriones also incorporated dancing, singing, and different acrobatic elements to make their performances engaging and dynamic (Brockett, Hildy, 2004). These actors rarely followed a fixed script; instead, they worked from a general theme and appeared to improvise dialogues and situations in response to the audience.

Performers of English and French mystery plays, morality plays, and farcical comedies of the 10<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> centuries actively employed improvisational techniques, even when following predetermined scenarios. Actors were often free to insert lines, add jokes, respond to the audience reactions, and even involve

spectators in the performance. These elements contributed to the liveliness and interactivity of the theatrical experience, especially in contrast to the rigid formalism of church ceremonies.

In the cycle of English mystery plays (Smith, 1885), dramatic characters frequently addressed the audience directly: they preached, joked, and even provoked reactions. This created a form of “festive interdiscourse”, in which the boundaries between performer and spectator became blurred.

In his monograph, O. Klekovkin, referring to an analysis of the most prominent theatrical fraternity in France – the Confraternity of the Passion in Paris (*Confrérie de la Passion*) – cites a fragment of a text by the Paris prosecutor to the parliament, which attests to the use of acting improvisation in mystery performances authorized by bishops or city magistrates: “These dishonorable people – sorts of carpenters, city watchmen, fish traders – cannot make head of tale of it. They decided to stage the Acts of the Holy Apostles, incorporating numerous apocryphal elements at the beginning and obscene farces at the end. Their performance lasted six to seven months, diminishing the audience’s sense of piety and charity and provoking scandals and ridicule” (Klekovkin, 2006: 143). This case illustrates that improvisation in medieval theatrical practice functioned as interactive performative technique, yet it often conflicted with the official expectations of both the church and state.

Having separated from church drama and gained prominence in folk theater, the farce emerged as a distinct theatrical genre in the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Its earliest forms relied heavily on improvisation, with plots being developed directly during performance, although some scenarios were latter committed to writing. Farce was characterized by physical comedy, absurd of situations, and grotesque characters. Interaction with the audience introduced an improvisational element, as performers enjoyed considerable freedom in onstage expression. Actors employed facial expressions, gestures, bodily movement, and spontaneous dialogue, interacting actively with spectators. Adaptation to audience reactions became an integral part of performances, reinforcing the communicative dimension of theatrical production. The improvisational nature of farce demanded flexibility and inventiveness from performers, contributing to the dynamic and engaging character of folk theater (Brockett, Hildy, 2004).

It was the farce of medieval theater that served as a blueprint for one of the most significant achievements of Italian Renaissance theater – the *commedia dell’arte*. The Italian folk theater of the 14<sup>th</sup>–16<sup>th</sup> centuries can reasonably be regarded as an improvisational

phenomenon and a site of stage experimentation. During this period, Italian theater experienced active development accompanied by an expansion of creative freedom for actors and theater troupes in interpreting popular comic plots. Under these favorable conditions, the *commedia dell'arte* emerged – a form of professional theater based on fixed script outlines (*canovacci*). However, it allowed for extensive acting improvisation, particularly in dialogues, audience interaction, and physical performance. The continuity with medieval farce is evident in the use of stock characters, masks, sharp satire, and physical humor.

O. Klekovkin comments it as follows: “The main emphasis in the theater of masks was on the skill of physical expressiveness, the art of replacing lengthy speeches with a few gestural signs, as well as on the choreographic organization of the performance. The performer demonstrated their abilities primarily through variation, clever delivery of lines, and *lazzi* (jokes inherent in the theater) – improvised use of props appearance, costumes, scenic elements, and so forth” (Klekovkin, 2012:605).

The Shakespearean stage marked a significant milestone in the legitimization of acting improvisation. Despite the presence of a clear dramatic text, actors of his troupe had scope for improvisation – in lines, intonation, and interaction with the audience. This freedom enabled adaptation of the play to the situation and enhanced audience engagement. Improvisation in the relevant theater went beyond verbal expression, encompassing psychophysical actions and responsive interplay with partners and the environment. It demanded skill, flexibility, and a “here and now” presence, becoming the hallmark of the professional Renaissance actor (Stern, 2000).

The decline of acting improvisation is linked to the establishment of professional national theaters in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. However, the process began in the 18<sup>th</sup> century with the rise of stationary theaters, the strengthening of the director's authority, and the increasing complexity of stage discipline. Improvisational forms were displaced from the main stage to marginal venues, such as fairs, cabarets, and clubs. Although improvisation lost its dominant position, it did not disappear but adapted to new socio-cultural realities (Brockett, Hildy, 2004).

As part of the development of modern theatrical acting, Konstantin Stanislavski's method played a key role in rethinking the nature of stage action and improvisation. His system encouraged actors to “live” their reactions within a predetermined structure, fostering organic and emotionally authentic performances. The principle of the “if” and the “circle of attention” established the foundation for natural and spontaneous

interaction both between stage partners and with the audience – features closely aligned with the fundamentals of improvisation (Stanislavski, 1953).

Les Kurbas, a reformer of Ukrainian theater, sought to liberate the actor from strict subordination to the literary text and directorial schemes. At the Berezhil studios, improvisation functioned as a tool for exploring the depths of the human Self and for shaping a collective actor, combining emotional plasticity with intellectual expression. Kurbas noted: “The director's theater is the acting theater within the artistic composition of the performance” (Kurbas, 2001: 568). However, he emphasized that “improvisation is good only in the order of search – not spontaneous” (Kurbas, 2001: 568). Anticipating the development of the theater toward post-drama, he attributed a leading role to improvisation: “It is possible that there will be almost no words... <...> It is possible that improvisational theater will be revived <...> in a different, new form of theater” (Kurbas, 2001: 31).

Since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, improvisation has emerged as an independent theatrical genre. Improvisational theaters, such as The Second City in Chicago and The Groundlings in Los Angeles, have functioned as laboratories for the development of stage techniques. Ideologically, they emphasize rapid response, co-creation of the plot, and close interaction with the audience. The Second City Theatre Company, founded in 1959, is the oldest continuously operating improvisational theatre in the English-speaking world and has focused on satirical improvisation as a way of creative expression (Second City 40th anniversary celebration, 1999). The Groundlings, founded by Gary Austin in 1974 in Los Angeles, are based on Viola Spolin's techniques and specialize in an improvisational sketch-comedy approach (Spolin, 1999). Improvisation festivals and international workshops have also emerged, facilitating the exchange of practices among artists worldwide. In the digital age, these traditions have expanded into the online space, ranging from short sketches to interactive streams.

**Conclusions.** Improvisation is one of the oldest and, simultaneously the most relevant forms of theatrical expression. The historical development of theatrical art, along with the diversity of artistic trends and traditions, has contributed to the formation of improvisation as a distinct acting technique. This phenomenon inevitable arose as a natural response to the actor's need for lively creative exploration, cognitive flexibility, and sensitivity to the immediacy of the stage moment. From ancient farces and medieval mysteries to *commedia dell'arte*, Shakespearean theatre, and Kurbas's modernist quest, it has constantly evolved, preserving the vital connection between

actor and spectator. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, despite the increasing authority of the director, improvisation not only endured but also emerged as an independent theatrical discipline. Today, improvisation remains a vital tool for creative freedom, emotional authenticity, and interactive dialogue in the theater.

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