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Collaboratively Emergent Composition: Long-Form Improvisation and the Quest to Recover *Upton Abbey*

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*The lack of scholarship on improvisational theatre suggests that “going back” to examine improv with the tools of dramatic theory and criticism is complex. Without the dramatic text to fix one’s critical gaze, dramatic theories often look elsewhere for objects of study. Dramaturgical improv refuses singularity and resists reproducibility; instead, it enforces collectivization and polyphony. Troubling the notion of both singular text and authorship, this collaborative article examines long-form, serialized “dramaturgical improv,” focusing on the 2016 Rollins College production *Upton Abbey: An Improvised Comedy of English Manors*. Our study of the collective authorship cultivated by this improvisational mode embraces a multivocal form to argue that dramaturgical improv articulates the core tensions present not only in theatre making but also scholarly writing.*

Keywords: long-form improvisation, dramaturgy, authorship, collaboration

Fig. 1. The servants present themselves before the eldest daughter of the house and the performance’s protagonist, Abigail Cranworth (center), in the opening choreographed sequence of *Upton Abbey*. Photo credit: Tony Firriolo. Set design by Lisa Cody-Rapport, costume design by Katie Stine, and lighting design by Kevin Griffin.

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Upton Abbey: An Improvised Comedy of English Manors debuted on the Annie Russell Theatre stage at Rollins College for a two-week run in November 2016. The result of over a year of research and rehearsal, the eight performances of this long-form serialized improv—called “dramaturgical improv” by its creator, David Charles—defied box office expectations and received multiple excellent reviews.¹ According to box office and marketing manager Chelsea Hilend, “It was a marketer’s dream,” and an astonishing fifty-nine patrons returned for multiple performances to find out what might emerge in the next episode.

Despite the show’s success, what remains from these performances are only memories and the dramaturgical remnants: volumes of historical research, character analyses, plot iterations, and secrets. The lack of scholarship on improvisational theatre suggests that “going back” to examine improv with the tools of dramatic theory and criticism is complex, to say the least. Without the singular work—the dramatic text—to fix one’s critical gaze upon, scholars have looked elsewhere for objects of study. But dramaturgical improv refuses singularity. It enforces collectivization and polyphony, valuing ensemble and collaboration with an audience that is initiated by the work it initiates. Dramaturgical improv shares much with the theatrically postdramatic. Postdramatic theatre, according to George Pate, cannot be mass reproduced because its very existence is “an alternative means of creating theatre” that is “a challenge to ideological assumptions about how production and circulation can and should work.”² Our act of collaborative scholarship picks up five years after *Upton Abbey* closed, to recover the remains of the work in the bodies, voices, memories, and records of its participants. This case study of collective authorship enriches our understanding of constraints as they apply to the process of creative composition, arguing that dramaturgical improv articulates the core tensions present not only in theatre making but also scholarly writing.

An Introduction to *Upton Abbey*

GRETCHEN: The three of us have crafted our contribution to this issue in dialogic form—as a staged conversation, one we know others will be “listening” to. Armed with David’s copious documentation and Marianne’s historical investigations, during weekly improvisations we rehearsed this conversation repeatedly with our audience in mind. Voices of the cast and crew of *Upton Abbey* appear throughout this text, acting as prompts for our scholarly version of the improv game “Yes, and...” To be sure, this is merely a construct; we have, of course, rigged this article—the final, fixed version of the game—in our favor. We have done so, however, to honor the research process that mimicked the discovery and rehearsal process for *Upton* by both accident and design.

This article cannot and does not aim to capture all of our collaboration; what we offer represents only our best efforts to respond to a prompt within the constraints of word limits and alphabetic text. The unfinished plot lines and unrevealed secrets

of *Upton*, along with our own half-finished paragraphs and unresolved inquiries, have left us with more than can be contained in this “finished” academic work—a witness to the endless adaptation and re-creation made possible by collaboratively emergent composition. This project may initially appear backward-facing, aiming to recover what is lost from *Upton Abbey*, to identify only what remains. While we refer to *Upton Abbey* in the past tense, we believe that this article is an extension of the production that reveals what possibilities still remain. Although this writing precludes some of its potentiality, it does not foreclose the possibility for *Upton Abbey* to be resurrected. Even though the show you created ended, David, it is not necessarily complete.

DAVID: Agreed. *Upton Abbey* combines multiple sources of inspiration and organizational techniques spanning the worlds of improv, scripted theatre, and period television drama. The work draws both deliberately and unconsciously from the historical tradition of spontaneous performance. *Upton*’s use of stock characters echoes devices explored for centuries across Europe by commedia dell’arte troupes. Scenes deployed games and structural devices informed by the practices of Johnstone, Spolin, and Close, as well as contemporary narrative long-form traditions that look to the tropes of scripted drama for inspiration and guidance. The use of planted secrets and backstories evokes the scenario plays and sketch-writing techniques of Roger Bowen and the Compass.³ I would call the resulting piece a “parodic character-driven serial dramaturgical long-form improvisation featuring audience votes and selections.”

Marianne: David, I think you’ll need to break that down one term at a time.

David: Fair enough! *Upton Abbey* is an improvised *parody* inspired by English period dramas such as *Downton Abbey*, *Upstairs/Downstairs*, and *Gosford Park*.⁴ Set on a grand estate at the turn of the twentieth century, the production follows Lady Abigail Cranworth and her very British family. Stylistically, the piece embraces the irreverence of improvisation alongside the dramatic tones of the source material and historical period.

There are many ways to structure an improvisational piece and this work is unmistakably *character-driven*. The company comprises thirty period-appropriate archetypes, with an ensemble of fifteen improvisers assuming one role each in the upstairs and downstairs worlds. Upstairs characters include the titular Lady Abigail Cranworth; her younger sisters, Agnes and Alice; her brother, William (serving on the French front); as well as potential suitors, neighbors, and relatives dropping in as guests. The downstairs ensemble consists of housemaids, footmen, and cooks headed by the butler, Mr. Bernsby, and the housekeeper, Mrs. Barrett.⁵

The piece serves as a *serial*, or cohesive season of eight “episodes.” Choices, discoveries, and audience-selected plot points carry over from one episode to the next. Ideally, each episode also “stands alone” with a distinct beginning, middle, and end. Each installment includes an introduction of the major characters, allowing a brief recap of pertinent prior actions. Episodes occur on a randomly audience-

selected day in 1918, prompting a contemporaneous newspaper headline that further frames the stories of the day.

As the production is grounded in the customs, etiquette, and sociopolitical influences of the Great War, it is also rightly considered *dramaturgical*. *Upton Abbey* explores key tensions that defined the early 1900s, such as gender roles, class conflict, and the horrors of trench warfare. The performance ensemble benefited greatly from the extensive summer research of twelve student dramaturgs funded under the auspices of Rollins College's Student-Faculty Collaborative Research Fund.⁶

GRACE, STAGE MANAGER: Something we had to figure out in summer research was how to connect those [scenes. . .], how to keep everyone on track with what's happening and when...Another thing we needed to figure out was the stage, and what was on what floor...We needed to know where we were going, who was going to be there and who was "in charge" (no one is really ever in charge) of the scene.

DAVID: *Long-form* refers to a tradition of improvisational performance that utilizes the tools of spontaneity to craft a full-length (in this case, two-act) dramatic arc. The structural blueprint provides a predictable form for each performance, designating shifts in focus from upstairs to downstairs while also incorporating featured group scenes and smaller intimate moments.

Within the blueprint, *improvisation* steers the action of each performance, as process and product spontaneously merge. Inspired by the improvisers' knowledge of the period and performance structure, "games" develop as heightened, mirrored, or complementary choices recur and grow through the scene or show as a whole. The blueprint demands the creation of original story threads and character development alongside the handful of set moments (such as a choreographed introduction of the characters and the initial elicitation of audience suggestions).

Finally, as is typical of the genre, the *audience* serves a key role in shaping the onstage action, randomly selecting three estate characters and one guest to follow for the episode, and voting on an important plot point at the top of the show ("Someone is fired or removed from the estate"), in addition to the identity of the character who will face this fate. Traditional "ask-fors" are only used sparingly so as not to puncture the stylistic and historical intentions of the piece. In many cases, audience contributions could be likened to shuffling and selecting characters and combinations from an enormous array of possibilities that, in turn, drastically changes which stories might emerge and how they might develop.

Upton combines these (at times) competing devices and included fully realized technical support and design elements.⁷ The result combines historical fidelity with a nuanced stock of characters moving through a two-act structure that nods to the

artistic source materials as well as the whimsical and unpredictable tradition of improvisational play. Improvisers do not know which evenings their characters could emerge as protagonists, when secrets embedded during rehearsals might become triggered by the onstage action, if one of their characters will become embroiled in the audience-selected plot point, or how they might ultimately connect with other characters on the estate.

MARIANNE: Your conception of long-form dramaturgical improvisation, because it dwells within the frame of dramatic theatre while problematizing that frame, invents a text that is postdramatic without being anti-dramatic. By engaging the historicizing, productive methods of dramaturgy, David, you modeled how long-form improv intersects with the theatrically postdramatic as coined by Hans-Thies Lehmann.⁸ Richard Schechner describes “postdramatic drama” as proceeding not from story but from “the game” which becomes the “generative matrix” for a stage fiction.⁹ As a paradigm rather than a prescription, the postdramatic allows for the presence of older aesthetics (such as the upstairs/downstairs serialized drama), a game-like imitation of the tropes of television, and parody that returns “theatre from the status of object to the experience of a communal process that ultimately does not allow for an interpreting distance.”¹⁰ According to George Pate, the postdramatic in theatre reshapes “not just products but processes” with clear social, cultural, and political impacts.¹¹ The characters, the form, and the historical research of *Upton* are not text as much as they are rules to a complex game. Improvised performances have, on the whole, eluded serious consideration as postdramatic theatre—despite meeting the definition—precisely because to encounter them demands the theorist yield any “interpretive distance” made possible by the text-as-product. In order for us to inquire critically into improv, we needed to play by its rules.

Fig. 2. Company members (Malakai Green, Nicholas D’Alessandro, David Charles and Fiona Campbell) facilitate one of the several audience selections at the top of the show, which determined the featured characters for the evening. Photo credit: Tony Firriolo.

Performance as Authoring: The Evolving Dramaturg

MARIANNE: The dramaturgical phase of *Upton* created what D. J. Hopkins would call a “counter-text,” in the sense that the rules contained in the written materials and shared vocabulary developed during the devising process formed an “alternative center of gravity” capable of directing the outcome of the production process.¹² In dramatic theatre, dramaturgs do not typically disrupt the protocols that maintain creative division between author, director, and designer, but in both the dramaturgical phase and the rehearsal process for *Upton*, dramaturgs could exert authority over others’ creative choices if they sensed the decorum of the world was not being respected. Dramaturgical improv situates the dramaturg and the dramaturgical process as equal to the improvisers and director in the creative process.

After refining the blueprint and the dramaturgical content that would fill its scenes, the dramaturgy group began to improvise “possible worlds” of *Upton*, in which events occurred that sometimes would be recorded as character backstory for when the roles were cast. Two researchers remained with the project after casting and moved into positions of authority: Grace would stage manage the production, and Nicole would become the production’s dramaturg (called the “in-house dramaturg” amongst the team). Other members of the summer dramaturgy group were subsequently cast in the show and continued to bear some dramaturgical authority, even while improvising.

DAVID: Combining new company members with those already invested in the project certainly provided us with unique challenges and possibilities. With new collaborators came a litany of helpful questions, energies, and ideas that could push those with more experience out of stale assumptions, while the presence of a literal team of dramaturgs raised the bar quickly in terms of foundational knowledge.

MARIANNE: This dramaturgical creative process enacted what Lehmann and Primavesi call “a practice that no longer reinforces the subordination of all elements under one (usually the word, the symbolic order of language) but rather a dynamic balance to be obtained anew in each performance.”¹³ Researcher and cast member James recalled, “The cast was very aware who had worked on summer research and who hadn’t. There was a level of deferring to summer researchers.” The performance horizon exceeded the production period as authorship emerged from this collective of creative stakeholders, ultimately including eight separate audiences who provided the “ask-fors” that directed which characters and plotlines would be featured.¹⁴

GRETCHEN: Your notion of “performance horizon” connects back to those possible worlds enacted during rehearsals. Any narrative includes a number of possible worlds that might result from the choices made and unmade within it; while some are made impossible by the author, a nearly infinite amount remain viable within the audience’s imagination. The horizon of signification, in this case, is dramatically different for the authors than for the theatrical audience. For

Upton's audience, the performance lasted for only the episodes they witnessed; for the participants, it extended from the dramaturgical phase through closing night. In the case of dramaturgical improv, performance is authoring, and the collaborators are the first audience to assign meaning by agreeing upon the set of rules the improvisers would later be bound by.

MARIANNE: Yes, and dramaturgical improv, like the theatrically postdramatic, speaks in an idiom that, according to Gad Kaynar, is "a semantics and rhetoric of form proper which conjoin both performers and spectators as active participants." When speaking in this idiom, it falls to the dramaturg to organize and communicate these semantic rules to the team as they emerge.¹⁵ In the absence of a script, a critical creative voice during the process was Nicole, the in-house dramaturg who remained present with the production through all the performances and served as the keeper and releaser of the secrets. She also chose when to encode discrete acting choices as new dramaturgical rules for future episodes.

NICOLE, IN-HOUSE DRAMATURG: I took notes from some of the secret [rehearsal] scenes. There were a couple of things that once we established them we had to keep track of them. The cast had a lot of control, but there were so many rules that had been created within these characters that really focused how their choices could be made. . . The biggest struggle I saw was if someone in summer research had done characters that were not their own, they already knew some of the secrets. That was something for me to keep an ear out in the back and make sure nothing got accidentally revealed.

MARIANNE: Nicole makes me think of "Postdramatic dramaturgy," as described by Kaynar a process designed to "incite, legitimize, and embody the artistic and existential chaos of the creative process."¹⁶ The counter-text of secrets and the strict blueprint for how scenes were structured into acts would incite action and orchestrate the chaos of unfolding narrative possibilities. She controlled the system of phased secrets assigned to each character by releasing them based on her own calculus of what the narrative needed.¹⁷ Secrets, however, were never the clean-cut device for authentic surprise that the dramaturgical team designed. Nicole, one of only two people with access to the secrets besides the stage manager and you, David, recalled that one of her roles was to guard their legitimacy.

DAVID: I was admittedly paranoid about maintaining the legitimacy of the show's secrets, to the point that I took great lengths to keep myself from knowing backstory that was important to the arcs of my own two characters. This entailed removing myself as the director from some rehearsals so that I wasn't privy to how improvised scenarios played out, such as the potential parentage of the patriarch's second daughter, Agnes. I introduced these systems to level the performance field

as best I could so that I was playing under the same limitations as my fellow improvisers.

Creativity from Constraint

DAVID: As I hope is clear by now, *Upton* incorporated multiple systems that helped shape action, meaning, and play. The structure provided potential launching points for climactic complications, while broader guidelines were suggested by the decorum of the historical setting, base materials, and the inherited “rules” of contemporary improv pedagogy itself. The bravery and trust required on the part of the company was considerable as the combination of these approaches created ornate pathways of play where choices could, in fact, prove highly problematic for the production’s greater goals. This is in stark opposition to a typical ethos of the adage “there are no mistakes in improv.”

AMANDA, HOUSEKEEPER: If we didn’t have the constraints I think personally I wouldn’t have known where to start.

DAVID: Such constraints are integral to the unpredictability of the form. Four random characters were drawn and the audience voted on the plot point of the day. These five choices, determined by chance and the audience’s selections, provided 324 or more unique starting combinations for any given performance.¹⁸ To further complicate matters, the three characters potentially assigned to the plot point (“Someone confesses a long-hidden love,” “Someone receives a life-altering diagnosis,” or “Someone threatens a rival with a weapon”) were determined in real time by Nicole from a prepared list of possibilities so as to avoid overusing any players who were spotlighted in another selected story arc. Characters who were chosen as featured players had considerable freedom in self-authoring and would generally choose their own scene partners.

GRETCHEN: It’s important to emphasize that what you describe, David, is simply a set of rules, not a script or fixed textual representation. For audiences in the theatre, there most certainly *was* a text, however. Working from Roland Barthes, we can distinguish between a *work* and a *text*. The *work*, like a script, can be held in the hand, while the text “is held in language, only exists in the movement of a discourse” and, most importantly, “*is experienced only as an activity of production.*”¹⁹ This production is the signifying process that both actors as authors and the audience took part in as *Upton*’s improvised story unfolded. A scripted play, as a work, “closes on a signified,” functioning as a general sign; *Upton*, as a text, however, “practices the infinite deferment of the signified.”²⁰ Without a script, dramaturgical improv can never be closed or complete, but a text does not require totality. The work can be understood as an organism which grows by development; the text, on the other

hand, is a network that results from “a combinatory systematic.”²¹ *Upton*’s complex structure maximizes the possibilities for signification.

KATHLEEN, YOUNGEST DAUGHTER: I personally really liked the structure. It gave us a way to create... and so that was a great foundation for me to make decisions. I felt that it gave us a great way to build a narrative together. It was still delicate. This was a web that we were building together.

MARIANNE: A deconstructive acknowledgment of the deferment of the signified in this web (from one episode to the next) helps us to acknowledge the role of the time horizon in the text of *Upton*: this text *was not closed* at the end of any single performance or even of the production. Frost and Yarrow locate any improvised “text” in the “play of meanings itself,” an intertextual, (at times parodic) “bisociative” playing emerging within a fundamentally linguistic “matrix of language, associations, memories, and images” that can emerge through the collision, fusion, and reorganization of texts being activated by the parody.²² Many actors wrote characters whose signification remains eternally deferred. Despite attempts to “end” the show, the text did not yield “an ending,” but multiple beginnings for a “second series” that did not happen.²³ As the actors knew the (net) work of the text was approaching its conclusion, there was a rush to “wrap up” as many narrative threads as possible, leaving those with unfinished (even not-yet-started) stories frustrated, even angry.

GRETCHEN: Those not-yet-started—and the not-yet-imagined—stories already exist within the blueprint of *Upton*. By making this combinatorial structure visible, *Upton* suggests its own infinite possibilities to even the audience. As a text, it is irreducibly plural, not because of any inherent ambiguity, but because of the immeasurable number of elements that must combine for meaning to occur in any given moment. As Barthes argues, in the text “the *infinity* of the signifier refers not to some idea of the ineffable (the unnamable signified) but to that of a *playing*,”²⁴ as we see in the spontaneous activation of games and secrets. Dramaturgical improv can *never* be repeated, by desire and by design. In this way, it acknowledges what is true for all theatre—no performance is repeatable.

NICHOLAS, DR. DANKWORTH: We created a machine that would click into place, [one] that wouldn’t create the same things [as *Downton Abbey*].

MARIANNE: That machine was, by necessity and design, complex. Performers pointed continually to the intensity of focus required to play with so many signifiers

for a two-hour performance. Company members had more agency the more they mastered the improvisational form as a vessel into which the dramaturgical materials could be decanted. Frost and Yarrow note that improv's game strategies, popularized by Keith Johnstone and Viola Spolin, have been used for decades by writing groups (such as the Royal Court Writer's Group) to produce new works by younger playwrights. Mastery of these games allows improvisers to connect fragments "to propagate narrative" to yield a performance text constrained by audience choices.²⁵ Liberation within constraint was further activated for student performers by playing *with* the creator/director figure, as they became increasingly keen to seize that authorial agency for themselves.

GRETCHEN: Your phrase *liberation within constraint* brings to mind Oulipo, the experimental literary "salon" founded on the principle that constraint, instead of engendering limitation, does the opposite: it inspires boundless potential.²⁶ For the improvisers composing a text in the moment, I imagine that the limitations imposed upon them served to inspire unexpected and fruitful directions for the developing story. Within the context of rehearsal, such "boundless" potential may be welcome; in front of a paying audience with certain expectations for a cohesive narrative, this potential must be reined in. In constrained literature, an author ultimately shapes the text for a reader as a result of their experimentation; for *Upton*, this guiding hand is sometimes the creator/director, sometimes the stage manager, sometimes the dramaturg.

BRIANNA, MIDDLE DAUGHTER: We're building this slowly, this beautiful relationship, amidst all of this chaos that is the show.

DAVID: As director, I aimed to clearly articulate that secrets had been curated in a way to maximize dynamism while minimizing the risk of repetition. This was one of the perhaps more "traditional" authorship roles that I took on in the process. It was difficult to connect *Upton* to its primary artistic inspiration without it becoming a pallid approximation. Care was taken during rehearsals to develop and then thread dynamic potential into the backstories of the characters.

Pacing story arcs both in an episode and over the whole "season" became a critical aspect of the show. In some ways this was one of my own big lessons as the artistic instigator (and a significant reason I wanted to explore this style of play). Some improvisers innately embodied these skills and had a sense of how to take a character facet or embedded secret and build upon it over multiple scenes. Others would fall into patterns of inaction or find themselves getting to the end of a show as a featured character either having made no real progress or, in rare cases, having exploded too much too quickly.²⁷

Infinite and Unrepeatable: Secrets and Authorship

DAVID: A great deal of work went into crafting and protecting character secrets in the hopes that these would add heat and legitimate surprise to the production.²⁸ Some of these expositional “secrets” were known to the acting company but not the audience (at least initially).²⁹ Other secrets were closely guarded from actors and audience alike. Explosive secrets that involved more than one character were often explored in closed rehearsals to establish a common backstory. If the outcomes of these improvisations could influence my own two characters (the patriarch and butler), these explorations were overseen by my assistant director, Travis, so that I would not be privy to the details. In other cases, secrets were not even revealed during the rehearsal process, but rather handed to improvisers by Nicole if their characters were selected for the evening. *Many* provocative secrets made it into the action, but *at least as many* remained unexplored and unexploded.³⁰

JAMES, NEIGHBOR’S SON: We all knew our characters so well and what they wanted that it all seemed rather simple. We have an idea of where these characters should go. But the audience’s suggestions and the secrets coming out and learning our own secrets changed all of that...it made it truly fresh again. It made it improvised again.

GRETCHEN: In this way, *Upton* explicitly recalls Julia Kristeva’s argument against stable meaning, as texts cannot be finished or “consumed”; there is always yet another permutation brought to the text by the reader.³¹ Signification in *Upton* requires two sets of readers, the first being the improvisers who operationalize their reading immediately by authoring new text in the moment. The second is the audience, who ultimately assign meaning to the action performed before them. By giving the audience even limited power to make authorial decisions, *Upton* makes explicit the role that audiences play in the process of meaning-making; it reminds them that there is always yet another permutation to be brought to the text by their presence. Even as the show closed, both the actors and the audience left knowing that there could always be more *Upton Abbey*. Thus, dramaturgical improv proves to be both infinite *and* unrepeatable.

CASEY, FIRST FOOTMAN: What I loved about this form is that there was so much that we knew as cast members, but there was still so much that we didn’t. About each other as cast members, about each other’s characters. Secrets were just that: one-on-one conversations.

MARIANNE: Several other constraints emerged to guide *Upton*, according to participant interviews. All participants invoked the language of “status” and how you, David, in parodying the world of upstairs/downstairs English manors, had chosen a dramaturgical setting suited to improv’s historic focus on the “conscious and unconscious maneuvers of *status games*” first popularized by Johnstone in the 1970s.³² The language of high and low status in the dramatic world carried metaphorical power when discussing who had status as an improviser to “break” the cardinal rule of improv: the requirement to accept every action and suggestion with a “yes, and.” Onstage while improvising or behind the scenes preparing for the next entrance, certain collaborators had more agency to answer with “no,” or “not yet.”

DAVID: The burden and joy of being a “selected” character for the evening included an expectation that you were in control of some of your story parameters: who you wanted to have a scene or featured moment with and when; how you wanted to pace your arc for the run; what part of your backstory, secrets, or actions in previous shows did you want to privilege in this episode?³³ Company members could “offer up” themselves as scene partners; those who had been selected had the explicit right (perhaps obligation) to say no to these requests when they felt it wouldn’t serve their greater objective.

AMANDA, HOUSEKEEPER: I think that was the most agency I’ve ever had over myself, the most trust I’ve given myself on stage...to have the authority to cut a plot line if it wasn’t helpful or to steer something where it needed to go...to have that authority and to see it work in moments was something that was empowering as an artist and not something I knew I had the ability to do until the show was over.

MARIANNE: Many participants improvised with an added rule: authorship was power. If they wanted to “author” a scene, they tried to set it up and pursue a through line to a satisfying end. David, you’ve said you did not envision that as the dynamic nor did you enact such a model of authorship. Your approach seems one of a disappearing conductor of dynamics: moving through scenes to shift a focus or provide a problem for student-authors to explore. Still, a number of improvisers claimed the endings had been planned for various storylines.

DAVID: It was surprising to hear after the fact that some players felt certain outcomes were mandated; in my mind, strong character desires had been planted with no expectations as to what fruit they would ultimately bear. *Upton* felt most successful when authorship was communal, reactive, and connected, although there were moments when ruptures in the material caused ruptures in the company and a sense of frustration if choices did not display a deep knowledge of the blueprint and support materials.

GRETCHEN: My sense is, David, that the improvisers were unable to fully vent their frustration about such “mis-authoring,” as there was no one author responsible. We have been conditioned, as Barthes suggested, to identify one Author-God, but dramaturgical improvisation encourages us to break free of this limitation, demonstrating how we might finally resist assigning an author by acknowledging collaborative composition. A fixed product—the work—is made necessary only by structures that compel us to assign an author in order to make a valuation. This work is a commodity, the object of consumption. The *text*, instead, “decants the work... from its consumption and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice.”³⁴ The text asks readers to diminish the distance between writing and reading “by joining them in a single signifying practice.” Dramaturgical improv does just that, as the actors and audience co-create meaning in the moment.

Resource-Rich Improv

DAVID: Dramaturgical improv and the long-form traditions in which it is based draw from antecedents in the ancient mimes, to the scenario work of *commedia dell'arte*, and more recently contemporary practitioners such as Jacob Moreno, Viola Spolin, Josephine Forsberg, Keith Johnstone, Augusto Boal, Charna Halpern, and Del Close.³⁵ These lenses have all certainly influenced my own work in subtle and substantial ways,³⁶ and the last several decades have seen many practitioners deliberately eliding the boundaries between spontaneity and scripted realms of performance. Parodic work that interacts complexly with history and theory (as well as more overtly populist material) has become a mainstay at Edinburgh and other international fringe festivals, while conferences such as Impro Talks in Zurich have actively sought to bring together theorists and players.³⁷

MARIANNE: Amy Seham concludes that parodic improvised adaptations (like the recent London-based *Austentatious*) use improvisation as a tool in service of group script-writing.³⁸ These projects take authors and their texts as the subjects of their parody through the deployment of what Seham considers both camp and a Bakhtinian carnivalesque.³⁹

LISA, SET DESIGNER: I think the framework gives it the veneer of being so structured, but it is very experimental. I think maybe seeing that they've been commercially viable gives us the idea that we can do these.

DAVID: Producing such works in a college setting almost demands a carnivalesque approach to suspend theatrical “norms” and enter a liminal stage where traditional hierarchies are questioned. Improv in a modern Western context tends to occur as a largely labor-intensive artistic affair, taking place in nontheatrical or found spaces. North American long-form in the tradition of the Harold “barprov”

serve as strong examples of this impetus where players often improvise in low-tech environments while donning street clothes. Dramaturgical improv often marries this labor intensity with an equal reliance on capital and the design elements of conventional performance, requiring collaborators to use their tools in new ways—whether it’s reconfiguring how a light console can be programmed, or devising new best practices for efficiently organizing stage furniture and props so that they are readily available as needed.⁴⁰ Presenting such a production in a conventional theatre subscription season requires flexibility and creativity from all involved as inherited protocols must be reimaged.

TRAVIS, ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: The question for me is not “Is it theatre or is it not?” It’s a question of “Is it worth it?” Is it theatre that is worth it? That is the question that improv has to justify. Especially if you do a show that takes this much work. Because it doesn’t carry with it the weight of prestige that other things do. Especially if you’re in an academic environment, it is just taken for granted that some forms are worth the effort and others aren’t.

MARIANNE: The labor involved to produce these works defies the logic of the author-centric (playwright, director) production machine. Those who critique the productions do so, usually, in terms of the outlandishness of the investment when presented with no lasting product. When a long-form dramaturgical improv concludes, no singular reproducible work remains.⁴¹ Dramaturgical improv cloaks itself in all of the trappings of traditional scripted drama, provoking carnivalistic laughter at what Bakhtin calls its “decrowned double,” a parodic reflection of the legitimate theatre.⁴² The experimental processes of dramaturgical improv masquerade behind realistic sets, sound, and lighting to enter into conversation with what we typically would consider postdramatic, experimental theatre.

CHELSEA, MARKETING MANAGER: The way people feel about these shows is fascinating. It is so much more personal. The playwright is sitting right there and in many senses is you. It’s all contained. The choices, everything that fuels it, is right here—in-house. It feels special and insulated and somehow a reflection of you, even as a patron.

DAVID: I think it’s important to acknowledge that this blurring of boundaries and theatre “norms” does not appeal universally, and that many may take a while to warm to this style of performance. There is always the fear that by combining a “high art” subject with a “low art” approach you can end up alienating patrons

in both camps. For example, some members of my improv community who were unfamiliar with *Downton Abbey* and its ilk struggled to identify the character tropes, while some audiences unversed in long-form improv felt that the “writing” was uneven.

MARIANNE: Perhaps the disconnect occurs because long-form improv rarely receives theoretical treatment and is often considered low art or anti-theatrical by even its own practitioners, who prefer the action of play to the reflexivity of theory. However, one practitioner of long-form improvisation, Glenn Noble, engages practice and theory, calling the process by which a narrative emerges through improvisation “autopoietic.” Via autopoiesis, meaning emerges from layering speech, sound, action, and gesture through the performance space.⁴³ Emergent and collaborative meaning-making extends narrativizing dynamically across both space and time within the performance event. This collaborative emergence, according to Sawyer and Dezutter, is a process in which “there is moment-to-moment contingency...; the interactional effect of any given action can be changed by the subsequent actions of other participants...; and the process is collaborative, with each participant contributing equally.”⁴⁴ By eliciting signs that must be interpreted not just by the audience, but by improvisers, technical crew, stage management, and the dramaturg, in dramaturgical improv everyone in the theatre reads and writes, but the only writing that persists are the rules.⁴⁵ The text that they read/are reading slips away nightly.

GRETCHEN: Your reference to Noble and Pickles’s application of cybernetic theory to improvisational composition reminds me of how author Italo Calvino applies the concept of computation to invention. He describes the relationship between artistic production and the unconscious as a combinatorial game: the painter plays with combinations of line and color, the poet with words, until one “becomes charged with an unexpected meaning or unforeseen effect which the conscious mind would not have arrived at deliberately.”⁴⁶ He could very well have been describing an improv game: “We start from the particular pleasure given by any combinatorial play, and at a certain point, out of the countless combinations of words with similar sounds, one becomes charged with special significance, causing laughter.”⁴⁷ In the case of *Upton*, the “autopoietic” or closed system of the company, technicians, and audience not only generates the combinations, but—as each acts also as a reader—assigns meaning to them.

Case Study: Death of the “Author?”

MARIANNE: Once the combinatorial machine began to operate, it produced an excess of both authorial intention and effects. Interviews with the cast and creative team revealed that the unknown dimensions of *Upton*’s storylines far exceeded what any single contributor could either know or intend—including you, David. Participants revealed that as the production drew to a close, risk-taking increased and the rules were sometimes discarded, but secrets remained central. David, that

reminds me of the time you told me about the cup of poison that crossed your path.

DAVID: In the penultimate episode, someone was destined to be poisoned in response to an audience vote. There had been some backstage scuttle between costume changes about whether or not we could actually kill off one of our characters going into the finale. The conniving first footman, Benedict, had concocted a plan to do away with Dr. Danworth, and had him firmly in his targets for a surprise in his whiskey.⁴⁸ As the house's patriarch, Lord Albert Cranworth (and, in no small part, as the show's problem-solving director, David), I entered the scene in question and intercepted the (mimed) poisoned drink, downing it in one fell swoop so as to keep the doctor's character in play. There was an audible gasp from the audience. We had no idea as collaborating improvisational authors what this choice would do heading into the last performance. This moment was both terrifying and truly exhilarating and has remained firmly in my memory these many years later.

GRETCHEN: I would be remiss if I ignored the opportunity to connect this potential death of your character, David, to Barthes's infamous "Death of the Author."⁴⁹ As the production's originator and director, there's no small irony in potentially authoring yourself out of the text in order to maintain its integrity. Improvisational theatre substantiates Barthes's stress on reception as the site of meaning: the emphasis is, after all, on how the audience—which must first include the company members themselves—reacts. Moreover, it disrupts author-centered composition by creating a text that can *only* be collaborative. In this case, there could be no resolution to Albert's narrative without your dramaturg co-author, Nicole.

NICOLE, IN-HOUSE DRAMATURG: Albert got poisoned. I don't remember who poisoned him because I was dealing with six other things. So, we get to the end of the first show on Saturday and [David] came to me, "Find me a poison that makes me sick but not die." I spent the afternoon looking for that.

MARIANNE: Nicole's reference to the "six other things" that prevented her witnessing this pivotal plot point is emblematic of the dramaturg's generative role in the improvisation as it unfolded. Albert's poisoning is just the most vivid example of how the dramaturg was invested as the "alternative center of gravity" influencing the trajectory of every moment of the production process. The dramaturg provided solutions that would comply with the rules of the game for *all* of the improvisers, Albert's unforeseen poisoning being the most consequential example. The solution she found to your improvised choice, David, would make multiple narrative threads come together neatly in the final moments of the play

DAVID: Yes, there was certainly a lot to juggle in that finale. Albert spent the majority of the last episode (and the unseen month between the episodes) blinded by ethanol poisoning, which allowed my wife to receive an impassioned kiss from

her lady's maid in my presence and for Abigail, my daughter, to speak fondly and candidly to her suitor, Freddy. It was during the tail end of this scene that my eyesight came back (unknown to the characters but hopefully understood by the audience) and I finally saw who my daughter wanted to marry...So many major plot twists emerged due to this one impulsive onstage move that were not predicted by the months of development and research.

MARIANNE: Despite how bewildering those last few hours must have felt, the system worked as designed to support improvised authoring with dramaturgical fidelity to the world of the play. However, while these plot threads were being woven together *onstage*, offstage several improvisers were demonstrating a different sort of agency as authors of the finale: by breaking one of the foundational rules of the form, the promise to honor audience choices (which most improvisers saw as "unbreakable"). Despite *Upton's* story being structured around the question of which suitor (if any) eldest daughter Abigail would choose, as episode eight opened, some members of the cast were more interested in seeing the developing plot between the son, William, and his valet, Phillip, find a satisfying ending. In an attempt to have a stronger hand in the story's authoring, several members of the cast enlisted friends and family not present at the show to vote online for William to be featured in the final moment of the show. Even Nicole, keeper of secrets, had no idea several members of the cast sought to influence the final voting.

DAVID: This was something I learned after the fact! It's revealing from a structural perspective that even components of the show we believed were "closed systems," such as those in attendance voting on and determining significant plot points, may have been much more porous than we had anticipated or desired. While this effort to sway the vote pushes against my greater intent for the audience to determine pivotal actions, it does speak to the company's deep investment in authoring the final outcome of the piece.

Conclusion

GRACE, STAGE MANAGER: Most of the time the actors were not expecting me to turn out the lights when I did. It was just like, "Nope, you're done."...One of my most integral parts of telling the story was figuring out when things were ending.

DAVID: There would be moments in the heat of production where, as a company, we'd discuss these real-time calls during our intermission note sessions. But ultimately Grace needed the power to make these decisions even if they felt questionable when filtered through the ego of the performer. This was yet another instance of how authorship was necessarily shared across a broad team of collaborators. In the particular case of Grace's work as the stage manager, I'd note

that her creative eye was critical for keeping the show well-paced: she was truly improvising alongside the other players onstage.

MARIANNE: While dramaturgs begin theatrical processes, stage managers must end them, and like dramaturgs they receive little creative credit for the influence they exert on the final performance text. Collaborative creative processes require that some authors make rules for the process, excise fruitless pathways, and call for the project to end. The improvisers claim to “know” what the audience wanted the story to be or when the story was (or should have been) completed. Some also claimed they “own” the endings they created. But it seems to me after all of the conversations that what all of the collaborators own is an owning up, an acknowledgment of influence and of the gift of possibilities given to them by the audience.

DAVID: It’s been a delight and a struggle for me to negotiate my own multiple functions in this writing process as I’m aware I’m an authoring voice but also appropriately a subject for analysis and critique. That internal conflict experienced while co-authoring this article definitely reflects my experience in the process and production of *Upton Abbey*. I certainly tried to offer up a vision worthy of pursuit as the director/deviser, while sending signals of “play” as a fellow performer, and also providing nudging and in-the-moment coaching as an improv teacher. At some point you have to let these internal struggles just fade into the background and *do the thing*, trusting that something good will emerge. It’s certainly easier to write a scripted play alone, or write an academic article alone, but I am ultimately drawn to the messier process of group creation because of its generative unpredictability.

GRETCHEN: Over the past eight months we’ve engaged in a cooperative process that’s taught me surprisingly much about invention and composition. We, like *Upton*’s improvising team, have produced an ocean of text that our audience will never read. Our process of live scripting has reconfirmed the notion that authorship is not a *thing* someone holds; it is a shifting dynamic between participants, which we have aimed but necessarily failed to represent in this fixed text. We have learned to negotiate the varied gravitational pulls that each of us exerts: David, you have creator/director’s knowledge; Marianne, you have secondary knowledge as an audience member and member of the Rollins theatrical community, and then as the historian who holds all of the stories that cast and crew members have revealed. I have exercised my outsider’s perspective to bear editorial weight—the ability to (re) direct, refine, and recategorize our investigation. There has been a certain freedom in knowing that no one of us is the single author genius; at the same time, there is an anxiety in facing the reality that our work may well be judged less valuable for the very fact that it is collaborative.

MARIANNE: The biggest question raised by approaching dramaturgical improv with a “collaboratively emergent” methodology may be “Is it ultimately worth it?” The processes of bringing *Upton Abbey* to the stage and then returning to it have yielded precious little text in relation to the enormous artistic and intellectual

commitments given over to them. Both projects represent what some say is “inefficient” labor in relation to their products, as no fixed script has emerged from *Upton* and each individual author of this article may receive less “credit” for this work than we would for a single-authored essay. Whether or not a stable text results, emergent composition through improvisation—both on the stage and in our live-writing document—has crafted what no single author could do alone. Our efforts reaffirm that composing is *always* collaborative, and collaboration always anticipates its reader. Constraints contained within *Upton*’s blueprint or this journal’s call for papers liberate our composition, providing inspiration and a place to return when authors veer from the agreed-upon trajectory by reminding us that we are always composing for an audience.

DAVID: Our method also confirms that what *product* remains from each of these parallel projects is not commensurate with their value. The participants in dramaturgical improv gain knowledge that legitimizes the experience in other ways: lessons like embracing messiness, acknowledging that failure is often complicit with success, and valuing personal experience (their own and others’). We find similar value in this invention process, one that has required us to be vulnerable and to place community over authorial control. The model of emergent composition we have embodied resists the single author model which limits creativity and inhibits discovery, allowing us not only to find meaning in unexpected ways but also to embrace the intrinsic value of interdisciplinary conversation.

GRETCHEN: Though the show is long closed and no singular text remains to capture them, the stories collectively crafted within *Upton Abbey*’s performance horizon—and now *about* it—comprise a narrative that has yet to find closure. In much the same way, scholarly writing is an endless process of reworking existing ideas, of collaboration through adaptation. Much of the possibility inherent to scholarship is the potential for others to take up our ideas or questions; we hope that you, our audience, will answer our call for more collaboratively emergent scholarship.

Notes

1. See, for example, Seth Kubersky, “Upton Abbey sates your ‘Downton’ cravings in a timely improvised show,” *Orlando Weekly* (November 16, 2016) and Matthew J. Palm, “Review: Lots of comic fun among the intrigue of ‘Upton Abbey’,” *Orlando Sentinel* (November 15, 2016).

2. George Pate, “Performance Of: On the Postdramatic Mode and Reproducibility,” *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism* 30, no. 1 (2015): 9-27, 12.

3. For a history of the founding of the Compass, see Janet Coleman’s *The Compass: The Improvisational Theatre That Revolutionized American Comedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1991).

4. Publicity materials noted that “*Upton Abbey* is a parody of English period dramas and characters, and is not associated with or endorsed by Carnival Film and Television,” both connecting and legally distancing the production from its most obvious parodic source.

5. The full cast list included Lena Barker as Lady Catherine White/Lily, Brianna Barrett as Lady Agnes/Jane, James Blaisdell as Frederick Kraus/Phillip, Shey Bogumil as Lady Margaret/Sophie, Chloe Brewer as Lady Marian/Lottie, Fiona Campbell as Lady Abigail/Poppy, Kathleen Capdesuner as Lady Alice/Heather, Casey Casteel as Lord William/Benedict, David Charles as Lord Albert/Mr.

Bernsby, Nick D'Alessandro as Dr. Dankworth/Barnes, Bailey DeVoe as Lady Florence/Ms. Clayden, Amanda Grace as Lady Kraus/Mrs. Barrett, Malakai Green as Edgar Wellesley/Charlie, Carlos Pereyo as Lord Humphrey/Jack and Morgan Richardson as Lady Elizabeth/Fanny.

6. The summer dramaturgical researchers were Andee Atkins, James Blaisdell, Kathleen Capdesuner, Casey Casteel, Nicole Colaneglo, Clara Correa, Maddie Crump, Nicholas D'Alessandro, Bailey DeVoe, Kaitlyn Harrington, Kalli Joslin, and Grace Zottig. Many of these collaborators went on to work in the resulting production as members of stage management, dramaturgs, and players in the acting ensemble.

7. Amongst the long list of artistic contributors (see also the summer research dramaturgs listed in the footnote above) were the following key collaborators: Lisa Cody-Rapport (scene design), Kevin Griffin (lighting design), Robert Miller (sound design), Katie Stine (costume design), Travis Ray (assistant director), Isabella Rodriguez (makeup and hair designer), Fletcher Wilson (composer and live musician), Nicole Colangelo (in-house dramaturg), Grace Zottig (stage manager), Elissa Flaumenhaft (sound improviser), Jamila Carryl (lighting improviser), and Abby Hendry and Kalli Joslin (assistant stage managers).

8. Hans-Thies Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, trans. Karen Jürs-Munby (New York: Routledge, 2006).

9. Richard Schechner, *Performance Theory* (New York: Taylor and Francis, 1988), 21.

10. Lehmann, *Postdramatic Theatre*, 118–19.

11. Pate, "Performance Of," 12.

12. D. J. Hopkins, "Research, Counter-text, Performance: Reconsidering the (Textual) Authority of the Dramaturg," *Theatre Topics* 13, no. 1 (2003): 2.

13. Hans-Thies Lehmann & Patrick Primavesi, "Dramaturgy on Shifting Grounds," *Performance Research*, 14 no. 1 (2009): 3.

14. The improv "ask-for" or "suggestion" refers to the ubiquitous tradition of eliciting information from the audience that then inspires or disrupts the stage action. For a consideration of this device, see <http://improvdr.com/2020/11/09/a-is-for-ask-for/>.

15. Gad Kaynar, "Postdramatic Dramaturgy," in *The Routledge Companion to Dramaturgy*, ed. Magda Romanska (New York: Routledge, 2016), 392.

16. Kaynar, "Postdramatic Dramaturgy," 395.

17. For example: she could and sometimes did choose to jump over first and second phase secrets if a character was first featured in one of the final episodes. By releasing the most "juicy" secrets, the dramaturg gave the improviser more dramatic possibilities with which to play as the series approached its conclusion.

18. At the top of the show, four audience members blindly selected characters from four pools: three options for an upstairs character, four options for a downstairs character, a second drawing from three different upstairs characters, and finally a drawing from three possible guests who would visit the estate. Prior combinations and audience selections determined which characters were shuffled into contention for featured status in the next episode. For example, if the eldest daughter, Abigail, was selected the previous evening, she was typically rotated out of the running for the following show. In addition to these drawings, the audience voted online for a key story thread at the top of the show that could connect to one of three different characters that was then selected via a second online vote during intermission.

19. Roland Barthes, "Work to Text," in *Image-Music-Text*, trans. Stephen Heath (New York: Hill & Wang, 1977), 157; emphasis added.

20. Barthes, "Work to Text," 158.

21. Barthes, "Work to Text," 161.

22. Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama, Theatre, and Performance* (New York: Palgrave, 2016), 233.

23. This concept of a "second" unrealized season was, in fact, often used as a shorthand in the rehearsal process to address choices or story arcs that were unlikely to find space in the current offering.

24. Barthes, "Work to Text," 158.

25. Frost and Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama*, 235–6.

26. As Daniel Levin Becker aptly puts it, Oulipo was founded on the principle that "the most arbitrary structural mandates can be the most liberating". See Daniel Levin Becker, *Many Subtle Channels: In Praise of Potential Literature* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2012), 6.

27. As is the case with most improvisational projects, the production remained a work in progress throughout its run, with adjustments occurring through notes to address unexpected (both problematic and delightful) discoveries and trends.

28. For example, the actor playing Doctor Dankworth had a secret rehearsal in which he learned that he had seduced Albert Cranworth's first wife, Almina, while Cranworth was fighting in the Boer War. This scene was improvised privately by D'Alessandro with a guest improviser from outside the production in order to preserve the secret from the entire company, including David, who did not know this outcome until after the show had closed.

29. Secrets were woven into a brief description of each character's backstory that were privately circulated to individual improvisers during rehearsals. For instance, Lord Humphrey Pickering's secret sheet reads: "He knows Jane Miller (Head Housemaid) from his childhood as he attempted to seduce her when he was fourteen on his father's Estate (with no luck on his part). When this came to light, his mother sent him abroad and gave Jane a reference to silence her and remove her from their home." The sheet then contains four phases of action for each character centered around actionable verbs with strong objectives, with one phase to guide the rehearsal period and then three potential phases that could be activated during the eight-episode series. Were the actor playing Humphrey Pickering to develop the character's actions enough, he might by the third phase begin a plot that reads, "Humphrey fights to bed an (any) occupant of the Estate during his last days in England before he is shipped back home to Burma and possible death." Some secrets for supporting characters were more playful or simple in tone: for example, the housekeeper talked to one of the birds in the garden and viewed it as one of her dead parent's souls visiting.

30. The aforementioned playboy Dankworth was also the biological father of the estate's second housemaid, Lottie Sturgess, but the planets never aligned for this story (that neither actor knew) to see the light of day.

31. See Julia Kristeva, "The Bounded Text," *Desire in Language: a Semiotic Approach to Literature and Art* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1980).

32. Amy Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?: Beyond Second City* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 36.

33. While players had an opportunity to select potential partners, it's important to note that they could not control the outcome of scenes and were frequently surprised or jarred away from their objectives when they intersected with the motives of other characters on the estate.

34. Barthes, "Work to Text," 162.

35. See Johnstone, Keith, *Improv for Storytellers* (New York: Routledge/Theatre Arts Books, 1999); Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson, *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation*, 1st ed. (Colorado Springs: Meriwether Pub., 1994); Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1983); J. L. Moreno, J. L. and Jonathan. Fox, *The Essential Moreno: Writings on Psychodrama, Group Method, and Spontaneity* (New York: Springer Pub., 1987).

36. Other long-form shows created at the Annie Russell Theatre stage include *Murder We Wrote* (2008), *It's All Greek to Me* (2011), *The Lost Comedies of William Shakespeare* (2014), and *Private Lies: Improvised Film Noir* (2019). See www.improvdr.com for more details.

37. For examples of the works referenced here, see *Austentatious*, Accessed September 28, 2021. <https://www.austentatiousimpro.com>.

And *Showstopper! The Improvised Musical*, Accessed September 28, 2021, <https://showstopperthemusical.com>

And "Improv Talks: A Symposium on Improvisation in Theatre", Accessed September 28, 2021, https://www.zhdk.ch/file/live/59/59514e5839a9e20ccb5b0408eaf1fe9be9a9ee9/subtexte14_impro_talks_layout_02_print_einzeln.pdf.

38. Amy Seham records that Free Associates were often accused of producing a dull product in large part because they valued the product over process. See Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, 165.

39. Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, 166–8.

40. Capital-intensive improv, or work that leans heavily into traditional design elements, is by no means unknown in the field, but formats such as *Showstopper! The Improvised Musical*, and the more theatrically framed work of companies such as Loose Moose, Impro Theatre, Free Associates, and the Hideout tend to stand as exceptions rather than the norm, at least in Western improv circles.

41. Production photos remain and they provide some value in terms of future marketing of the department and the college, and reviews in the local paper can be pointed to for confirmation that a theatre event happened and have continued to provide professional value to creator David Charles and others who received a mention. The use of these photos to advertise a production (fittingly, "Episode 0" of the series) reinforces that even the most anti-capitalist performance forms can serve the logic of reproducibility and the exchange value of the performance text, but only ever in a way that withers what Walter Benjamin would call its "aura," since that which makes an improvised work unique

is entirely its presence in time and space (220–21). The utter unsuitability of improv for recording or the more recent Zoom performances are just further examples of the resistance improv poses to reproduction. See Walter Benjamin, “The Work of Art in an Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 217–52.

42. M. M. Bakhtin, *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics*, trans. Caryl Emerson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 126–7.

43. Glenn Noble and Daren Pickles, “Long Form Improvisation, Feedback Loops and Cybernetics,” *Body, Space & Technology Journal* 14 (2015): 2–3.

44. R. Keith Sawyer and Stacy DeZutter, “Distributed Creativity: How Collective Creations Emerge From Collaboration,” *Psychology of Aesthetics, Creativity and the Arts* 3, no. 2 (2009): 82.

45. We are borrowing the concept of the “collaboratively emergent” potential of long-form improv to make meaning from the ethnographic work of Brad Fortier, *Long-Form Improvisation: Creating Spontaneous Communities Through Collaborative Comedic Performance* (Saarbrücken, Germany: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2010), 17.

46. Italo Calvino, “Cybernetics and Ghosts,” in *The Uses of Literature*, trans. Patrick Creagh (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1986), 21.

47. Calvino, “Cybernetics and Ghosts,” 21.

48. The doctor had assisted Benedict's successful efforts to dodge the draft, but was now threatening to reveal this unsavory truth.

49. Barthes, *Image – Music – Text*.