

## **Improvisation Theatre Performance as Maintaining and Breaking Cultural Model Narratives**

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In this article, I will take a look at some examples of how a particular theatre genre, improvisation theatre, maintains or breaks cultural model narratives. Cultural model narrative refers to shared ways of understanding how a person is expected to behave in certain situations or to live his everyday life.<sup>1</sup> My experiences as an improvisation actor inspired me to do research into improvisation. The actors in the group I worked with kept on creating similar characters on the stage in our performances. These characters kept on appearing in similar situations on the stage, and the performances had clear and resolved endings. The tendency was very much towards avoiding complexity and open endings. We were aware of the tendency, talked about it, and tried to change the pattern, even though, after rehearsing around this very subject for some time, we ended up making one similar stereotypical story after another. For some reason it was very hard for us to change the pattern.

What were the reasons for this? Did we want to make it clear what the performance had been about? Could it have to do with different strategies through which the plot of an improvised play is born on stage? What influences the choices the actors make on the stage? Under what conditions do these choices maintain culturally specific model narratives? All these questions culminate in the following question: what makes it possible (for the group) to be able to break cultural model narratives and create new, original, individual interpretations of these narratives? To answer this question, I will later analyse one improvisation theatre performance.

Elements of improvisation are present in all theatrical activity. Any kind of performance includes spaces for variety. Improvisation is a common method during rehearsals. There are often moments left open for improvisation in the actual rehearsed play. However, I refer to improvisation theatre as a genre of its own, within the field of theatre and performance. There are plenty of guides for improvisation practitioners about the history, methods and aims of improvisation. At the same time, there is very little research on actual improvisation theatre. What happens during the process of improvisation? Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow describe improvisation in the theatre as follows: "Improvisation is a part of the nature of acting, certainly. But acting is only one part of the creative process of improvising. Improvisation is a physical response, including the verbal. It is immediate and organic articulation; not just a response but also a paradigm for the way humans reflect (or create) what happens. [---] In

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<sup>1</sup> The particular narrative approach is by the Finnish social psychologist Vilma Hänninen. She develops further Jerome Bruner's (1995) ideas of a narrative mode of thought.

that sense improvisation may come close to pure ‘creativity’ – or perhaps more accurately to creative organization, the way in which we respond and give shape to our world.” (Frost, Yarrow 1990: 1–2.)

Improvisation is very much a matter of reacting to and reflecting upon whatever is going on. Improvisation theatre performances can be seen both as reflections of cultural model narratives and as reactions to today’s culture, in which everything is changing very quickly. People are required to adapt to new, changing situations. In addition to that, improvisation also portrays the relation(s) and life worlds of the performing group, its members and the audience. As in the case of narratives and discourses in general, an improvisation theatre performance is a structure, which therefore has an ability both to include and omit; it can give a voice or silence, and provide words and concepts to what can be said, and by whom (Eyerman 2005: 97–98).

Methods of practice and dynamics of the performing group influence the cultural and aesthetic outcome of the performance. The motives for the choices actors make on the stage also lie inside the group. When a play is written and acted simultaneously, it is very much these choices that make the plots<sup>2</sup> of the play. It is necessary to ask for the motives behind the artistic work, since if people themselves knew their motives better, art would be better (Hotinen 2002: 322).

Improvisation theatre as a performance technique has its roots in *commedia dell’arte*. Improvisation in theatre goes back to the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, when Constantin Stanislavsky and Vsevolod Meyerhold brought improvisation back to modern theatre as a rehearsal technique. Around the same time Jacques Lecoq and Jacques Copeau also started to experiment with improvisation as a performance technique (Siltala 2003: 105). In Finland, improvisation as a rehearsal or performance technique has not been widely practiced. Like many other Finnish impro groups in the late 20<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Koponen 2004: 11), our group uses a method by Keith Johnstone, whose first visit to Finland took place in 1983. His improvisation method became more widely known in the 1990s through the work of a professional impro group, Stella Polaris (Koponen 2004: 140–151).

Johnstone’s method and particularly theatre sports have been greatly influenced by professional wrestling. (Theatre sports is a team based improvisation competition, where teams of actors compete with each other by acting short improvised scenes.) The importance of the audience in improvisation theatre has also its roots in wrestling. The audience with its sympathies and antipathies had a great significance for the sport. In improvisation theatre, it is the audience who gives the ideas, which act as a starting point for the scenes then performed. The applause and other audience reactions also act as guidelines for the actors.

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2 Plots in the plural, since there are many simultaneous interpretations of what the plot of the play is.

They are, therefore, very significant for the whole performance. The competition in theatre sports is about “no blocking”<sup>3</sup>. The group whose actors are best at no blocking are the ones to win the game (Johnstone 1995: 19–20).

No blocking is the most fundamental rule in improvisation theatre. Johnstone’s teaching is about accepting everyone’s idea as equally good, and reacting with acceptance to whatever is given to you. However, acceptance can also lead the actor towards stereotypical thinking and encourage her or him to deny any difficulties she or he may feel on the stage, passing over them quickly and accepting the next possible idea with an open heart. Alternatively, staying with the conflicts and exploring them more deeply could make a more interesting performance. The interpretation I am making here can easily be made from Johnstone’s method. Johnstone does talk about this dilemma in relation to an actor who refuses to be a hero by refusing to be in trouble on the stage, claiming that “players who reject the role of hero suffer the very agony of being trapped in front of a bored audience” (Johnstone 1999: 78). One possibility is that a player does not want to get into trouble in the fictional world, because she or he refuses to do this in the actual situation. Here we come to the crucial role of the group and its dynamics, which I find more important to the outcome than the methods used in creating the performance. A great deal depends on the level of trust within the improvisation theatre group, particularly the depth to which various conflicts and uncomfortable moments can be explored during the performance.

Johnstone writes about moral decisions and says that all stories are trivial unless they involve a moral choice. It does not matter whether the choice is “right” or “wrong”; the dilemma itself makes the story interesting (*ibid*, 78). He also emphasizes the “purity” of improvising and says the improviser should enter situations without any pre-planning, with an open mind and acceptance of anything that comes (Moisala 2002: 90). The ability to be surprised requires an open mind and a trusting attitude towards one’s fellow actors.

For Johnstone the connection between improvisation and the actual life situation is very strong. Individuals in a group have different ways of reacting to fear or other kinds of tension born in the situations that are real for them on the stage. These anxieties are reflected in the impro performance. The reasons why actors are not able to sustain tension or situations in which their role characters are in trouble have to do with the very real and human tendency to try to avoid difficult situations. One strategy Johnstone uses in putting his ideas of acceptance and equality into action is the mission of helping the other person on the stage. This is a necessity for an improvisation theatre group to function well. You can feel that you are supported and are not alone on the stage, because you can count on someone helping you.

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3 No blocking means accepting a fellow actor’s idea(s).

However important and necessary as the support of the group may be, I think it is the possibility of loneliness and therefore being in trouble on the stage that opens a door for something potentially interesting to happen in improvisational theatre. These are the moments that offer an opportunity of getting in touch with one's own otherness. If an improvisation actor finds her- or himself in situations where she or he is surprised and astonished by what she or he has said or done, it is a sign of a skilled improvisation actor and a functioning group. Luce Irigaray says it is the astonishment we encounter when faced with strangeness and otherness that offers the opportunity for the subject to make space between oneself and the other (Irigaray 1996: 92–94). Without the astonishment that lies in being surprised and confronted by the unknown, the spaces for encounter do not exist. That is why I think that too much acceptance towards whatever comes can swallow up the potential of exploring truly fruitful difficulties and conflicts. Staying with instead of accepting the “problem” can open up something new and unknown to the story.

Improvised dramaturgy never tells a single narrative, but opens spaces to multiple narratives. These can comment on each other and point to other contexts, for example to something as trivial as conversations that took place earlier that day. Similarly, the process of a performance opens doors to new possible performances. What is performed on the stage is not an accident, but rather a complex, layered mixture of influences that can be acted out in numerous different ways. These influences include the actors and their unique personal narratives and life experiences and situations, the group dynamics, and the context where the work takes place. The group also rehearses in a certain way during a certain time span. Then there is the audience. They are often asked to give something to start the play with, and in addition to that, there is something that just comes through from the audience, unintentionally and often unconsciously: the prevailing mood, or a certain rhythm. All of these factors influence the eventual outcome.

Vilma Hänninen (1999) talks about cultural model narratives and culturally or nationally specific narrativities. Narratives embody different roles for different groups of people: women, men, different age groups and so on. Cultural narratives<sup>4</sup> can be distinguished from a model or a formula which underlies individual narratives (Phelan 2005: 8). During an improvisation theatre performance numerous potential narratives have a chance of being represented on the stage through improvisation. At the same time social, historical and mythical themes are presented and acted out in the performance. What happens in everyday life also influences the performance. Recently published books, TV series, or yesterday's news are all part of the narratives that improvisation theatre groups perform.

For the remainder of this paper, I shall analyse one improvised theatre performance by

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<sup>4</sup> James Phelan, a literary researcher (2005) refers by this term to culturally specific narratives. According to him such a narrative has to be owned by a broad enough collective in order to be considered a cultural narrative.

a group to which I belong myself, Improvisation Theatre Joo, which rehearses and performs in Jyväskylä, Finland. In this case improvisation was not only the method of practice, but also the means of performance. The entire play was created on the spot, and there was no director involved. The play was from a series of performances called “Stories of a Town” made in spring 2006. The performances started with a fictional town name given by the audience. In the performance that took place on the 1<sup>st</sup> of April 2006, the town was named Heppula. There were a few other specifications given by the audience: approximately five thousand inhabitants were living in Heppula, a railroad passed the town, but only goods trains stopped there, there was some sort of industry, etc. The group also asked the audience to choose two actors from the group to start the play. One of the actors chosen to start asked the audience to give him a profession to use in the play. He was designated as a fireman. The other actor asked the audience for a character trait. She was described as being paranoid. The performance consisted of two acts with an interval of 15 minutes in between.

The genre of this play is the usual one in improvisation theatre, a comedy. Ten different role characters appear in the performance about Heppula. A fireman, Antti, is the antihero of the story. He sets buildings on fire in order to keep himself busy and therefore keeps his job. Then there is the fireman’s sister, Laura, the one to whom the audience gave the character trait of paranoia. She is dependent on her brother, and cannot do anything without him. Then there is Harri, a radio shop worker who falls in love with a maid. This leads to the happy ending, the resolution of this performance. The Maid and Harri live happily ever after, train-spotting together. The Maid is the maid of a rich Madame, who lives alone, and whose life is tragic because her husband died 13 years before. Her only friend is a guinea pig, who arrived on the goods train. Then there is the Teacher, who has to teach 150 pupils, since so many schools have closed. The Teacher works with a bunch of kids that make his life miserable. In the end, the Teacher experiences burnout and leaves the school.

Next, let us take a closer look at the characters of Madame and the Teacher. In the case of Madame the story remains on a stereotypical level, never evolving into a more individual story. There are a few examples of moments when it could have done so, but the group did not make use of those moments. The Teacher’s story, on the other hand, is an example of a cultural model narrative evolving into an individual story. I will demonstrate the phenomena and reasons behind both these outcomes in the following passage.

The story of Madame is a stereotypical narrative of a woman who is unfulfilled without a man. Madame becomes bitter when she tackles loneliness throughout the whole performance. Even in the end, she does not get a man, but joins a poker club instead. At the beginning of the play, since Madame is so lonely, she buys herself a pet, a guinea pig. Madame becomes so attached to her pet that when there is a fire, she is ready to sacrifice her own life in order to save the only thing that separates her from being alone. In the next scene, there is a fire, and the Maid tries to get herself and Madame out of the building. Madame does not care for

her own life but only worries about her guinea pig and its panic.

**Maid:** Madame, Madame, where are you?  
**Madame:** The guinea pig is running away!  
**Maid:** Oh my lord, there is so much smoke! Let's go out quickly.  
**Madame:** I have to save my only friend.  
**Maid:** Where the hell is the fire brigade?  
**Madame:** No, no, it is running away!  
**Maid:** No, don't you go, you fucking animal!  
**Madame:** Grab it!  
**Fireman:** Is there anyone here?  
**Maid:** Yes, here, around the corner, oh my God how much smoke there is.  
**Madame:** The guinea pig has panicked and it has not taken any medication.  
**Fireman:** Calm down, you ladies!  
**Maid:** It is very calm here!  
**Madame:** It does not matter what happens to me as long as the guinea pig is saved!

In this scene, the actress playing Madame refuses to pay attention to anything else but her guinea pig in this scene. Regarding the functioning of the group, this choice is an example of what Johnstone calls blocking<sup>5</sup> and it makes interaction between the actors more difficult.

The story goes on and Madame falls in love with a radio shop worker called Harri. However, Harri ends up in love with Madame's Maid. This is another stereotypical cultural model narrative. The man chooses the younger woman, a woman who does not have a powerful social position.

The roles that are born in improvised performances often rely on strong stereotypes, since there is very little time to communicate the role in question to the audience and the other actors. Typical roles have to do with both the group dynamics and the actors as persons. Everyone has their own place and ways of working, which are safe for them on the stage. However, the group gives suggestions, often unintentionally, to make members perform the usual kind of role characters. This is often the reason why a particular actor plays similar roles in the group, time after time.

In the following scene, there is a knock on the door and the Maid goes to open it.

**Madame:** Who is it?  
**Maid:** The guy who always looks at the trains.  
**Harri:** (gives flowers to the Maid) I live downstairs.  
**Madame:** (to Harri) Sit, please!  
**Harri:** I came to ask Madame...  
**Madame:** The Maid can make some coffee.  
**Maid:** (doesn't want to leave, talks about the flowers) But this will dry out...  
**Madame:** (to the servant) Go!

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<sup>5</sup> The opposite of Johnstone's "no blocking" described earlier.

**Harri:** I came to ask Madame if your maid could come out some night.

**Maid:** (walks around trying to find a place for the flowers) Can I put these somewhere?

**Madame:** I'm not interested.

**Madame:** (to the Maid) He wants to talk to you.

**Maid:** To me?

**Harri:** Would you like to go out to see the trains?

**Madame:** (goes to Harri and makes a gesture as if the guinea-pig is biting him) Came to bite him, could not help. Animal nature...

This is a good example of bypassing an opportunity to explore the tension created on the stage. The conflict arises between Madame and her Maid, because Madame had hopes about herself and Harri, who comes and asks her Maid out instead. What happens on the stage at this point has the effect of making the audience laugh.

However, staying with the conflict between the role characters of Madame, Harri and the Maid could have made an interesting turn to the story. Instead, it is turned into a gag with a guinea pig's bite. This is what Johnstone talks about in relation to an actor who refuses to be a hero by refusing to be in trouble on the stage (Johnstone 1999: 78). Working through a conflict is often a more demanding task for the actor, since then the actor would also have to become more aware of the tension in the actual situation. Therefore, it is easier to move to the next situation than to stay with the conflict. Staying with the tension requires a certain level of trust within the group, which supports and facilitates the actor's move into more unfamiliar territory within himself. To be able to stay in trouble on the stage or the fictional world means the actor has to stay aware of her or his own reactions to being in trouble in an actual situation. Paradoxically, the safer the actor feels within the group, the less safe he is able to feel on the stage.

In the western traditions of storytelling, there is a repertoire of ideologies and cultural model narratives which repeat themselves through different contents. Joseph Campbell (1993) thinks the most fundamental of those narratives is the "myth of a hero". The hero meets various dangers and obstacles during his or her journey. The story of the Teacher is a twisted version of this myth of a hero. The Teacher has it rough, tries to manage, but cannot handle it in the end. In this case, the cultural model narrative evolves into a more individual story. During the performance, the Teacher becomes the failing hero of the workplace. The story starts with a parody of the Teacher coping with problems at school. In the next scene, the Teacher is installing a broadband connection so he can be teaching in three schools at the same time.

**Teacher:** Yeah, that is ok, look, I ordered the phone or whatever it is in order to work from home.

**Harri:** Teaching from home?

**Teacher:** Since so many schools have been closed, I am now teaching in three different schools.

**Harri:** That must require some broadband.

**Teacher:** And some special skills.

In the next scene, the Teacher has gone to the hospital where Madame is now recovering because of the fire. He is asking her to help him with his job, but Madame does not hear him out. In addition to being part of the fiction created on the stage, the problem with hearing and listening in this situation is also real. The actor playing the Teacher cannot make himself heard no matter how much he tries. A real life problem also becomes fiction. Once again, real life and improvisation get very close to each other. At that very moment, the performance becomes interesting: the audience does not know what will happen to the Teacher.

**Teacher:** At school it is... I need a substitute.

**Madame:** A substitute?

**Teacher:** Would you do it?

**Madame:** There is the new girl Päivi, she is very efficient...

**Teacher:** I have already asked her.

**Madame:** You know Päivi? Well, that's it. What are you waiting for? Get her.

**Teacher:** Yes, but...

**Jussi (pupil):** Teacher, when does this hospital trip end?

**Madame:** So you brought your class to the hospital.

**Teacher:** Well, yes, a hundred and fifty pupils still need...

**Liisa (pupil):** Teacher.

**Teacher:** Yes.

**Madame:** (about the pupil) Another.

**Teacher:** (interrupts Liisa's comment) I've said, didn't I ask you...

**Liisa (pupil):** But there's a lady who fell off a bed.

**Teacher:** Who pushed her?

**Jussi (pupil):** Pete turned over all the hospital beds.

The teacher was asking for help, but instead of getting any, he ends up in even worse trouble. The stereotypical cultural model narrative of the heroic teacher begins to break at the very moment the actor chooses to acknowledge and stay with the trouble that has arisen from the actual situation.

Later on in the play, the Teacher cannot handle it anymore, and calls a helpline. In the following scene, he sings his troubles to the helpline assistant. The actor playing helpline assistant initiates the scene. The attempt is clearly intended to break the pattern of the Teacher having to cope alone, but the actor playing the Teacher chooses not to accept the help offered.



**Helpline assistant:** Go ahead; feel free to tell me...

**Teacher:** The sun shines in the mornings. The curtains are dusty.

**Helpline assistant:** You still think that the sun does shine?

**Teacher:** Yes, too much, it is too bright...

**Helpline assistant:** Is spring a hard time for you?

**Teacher:** Yes, it is.

**Helpline assistant:** Tell me more!

**Teacher:** The kids yell at school so loud and the cook makes a noise with her saucepans.

**Helpline assistant:** Do you have problems at work?

**Teacher:** No one wants to help.

**Helpline assistant:** I am listening.

During the play, the Teacher looks for help in many different ways. The actor playing the Teacher keeps his role character in trouble throughout the whole play. It may be a conscious choice, or it may just have happened that way, as a choice made by the rest of the group. Despite these choices, the Teacher fails to cope with his ridiculously demanding job. By leaving the actor playing the Teacher in trouble, the group shows that it did stay with the problem that had arisen on stage. No one came to rescue the Teacher, and he stayed with his troubles and let them grow. This became an interesting story of a teacher who is struggling with his life.

The play ends with a turning point, which means that the performance is open-ended. In the final scene, the new substitute Teacher, called Päivi, tells the audience that the Teacher has left the school for a long trip, which can be interpreted in many ways, a change for the better, or maybe a total collapse.

**Jussi** (pupil): Teacher told us to wait here...

**Teacher Päivi:** Shut up! (to the kids) Please rise for a moment.

Welcome to our spring fête. It is nice to see so many of you parents here.

(to the kids) Stay in line.

Let's raise the flag... ok, there it goes.

This year has been very busy.

**Liisa** (pupil): Yhyyy!

**Teacher Päivi:** (to Jussi) Don't tease her!

You parents know what happened to the teacher.

He went on a long trip...

**Jussi** (pupil): Pete went with the teacher.

**Teacher Päivi:** Yes, it was probably agreed with Pete's parents.

From the point of view of cultural model narratives, the ending does not exactly fit. It is unresolved and open to multiple interpretations, breaking the pattern of stereotypical, cultural model narratives.

Why do some narratives within the same performance evolve into more interesting, individual stories that go beyond cultural narratives? The choices and turning points behind the plots of a play are very much a reflection of group dynamics. Who in the group takes responsibility and how? Who takes the initiative, who follows? Group dynamics has a strong influence on positions of power within the performance. It is impossible to point out a particular choice made by one actor, or a turning point, that fully accounts for the change. Rather, it is very much a matter of teamwork, and everyone is involved in performing the story step by step. Indeed, an improvisation theatre performance tells stories by portraying the relation(s) of the group performing it. In order to work well an improvisation theatre group needs both actors who can see when a little help is needed and actors who take the initiative and bring something new to the story. In the example I have discussed, the actor playing the Helpline assistant has clearly taken the role of helping the actor playing the Teacher build his role character.

It is the choices made within the group, in the interplay among individuals that make some stories possible and more alive and heard than others. The more trust there is within the group performing the play, the better the chances of staying with and exploring these choices. When an actor feels safe in the group she or he is able to explore the role character more deeply on the stage and be surprised at what happens to her or him as the role character unfolds. In the performance I have analysed, a good example of this is the situation where the actor playing the Teacher uses a real life misunderstanding taking place on the stage to build his role character and the situation further. He trusted the group enough to stay open and react to the trouble that arose from the actual situation in a scene. Astonishment, the actor's own surprise opened up something new and unknown in the story.

The spaces for new interpretations are dependent on with the participants' courage to confront the unknown. By having a collective attitude toward staying with the unknown in the process of improvisation, one has the opportunity to listen to the very moment during which the new interpretations of cultural model narratives are made. It is within these moments of trust and listening that the cultural model narratives have an opportunity to break into yet unknown individual stories that intrigue both the audience and the group creating it.

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## **Improviseeritud teatri etendus säilitamas ja lõhkumas kultuurilisi mudelnarratiive**

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Artiklis uuritakse, kuidas improviseeritud teater ja seda žanri harrastavad trupid kannavad edasi teatud tüüpi kultuurilisi narratiive, mida samas mõjutavad reaalsed sündmused nii etenduse ruumis kui väljaspool seda. Lähemalt analüüsitakse üht Jyväskyläs tegutseva Improviseeritud teatri Joo etendust, selles loodud tegelasi ning nende kaudu esitatavaid kultuurilisi narratiive, milles segunevad erinevad sotsiaalsed, ajaloolised ja müütilised teemad.

Kuigi improviseeritud teatri ajaloo, meetodite ja eesmärkide kohta on avaldatud palju praktilise kallakuga käsiraamatuid, on seda valdkonda siiski vähe uuritud. Mis tegelikult juhtub, kui inimesed improviseerivad? Teine küsimuste ring on seotud improviseeritud loo temaatika ja dünaamikaga. Improviseeritud teatri etendus on koht, kus mängitakse simultaanselt läbi mitmeid erinevaid narratiive, kusjuures igal hetkel on iga süžee puhul õhus mitmeid erinevaid arenguvõimalusi, millest mõned on aktuaalsemad kui teised. Need narratiivid võivad ka üksteist kommenteerida või osutada teistele tekstidele, näiteks isegi mõnele nii triviaalsele asjale nagu varem aset leidnud vestlusele. Tekste interpreteeritakse alati suhtes ümbritseva kultuurilise kontekstiga, teiste tekstide ja diskursustega.

Artiklis vaadeldakse, kuidas etendajate tehtud valikud kinnistavad või küsitlevad erinevaid kultuurispetsiifilisi stereotüüpseid narratiive, kuidas neid narratiive saaks uutest vaatepunktidest interpreteerida ning kuidas need peegeldavad suhteid trupis. Improviseeritud teatri toimuvat ei käsitleta juhuslike sündmustena, vaid kompleksse mõjutuste kogumina, kus etenduse kultuuriline ja esteetiline väljund sõltuvad paljus proovimeetodist, trupi dünaamikast, etendajate unikaalsetest isiklikest narratiividest ja tegeliku elu sündmustest ning laiemast kultuurikontekstist.

Improviseeritud teatri puhul ei ole kuigi lihtne eristada ühe etendaja valikuid või etenduse pöördepunkte, sest kogu protsess põhineb täielikult rühmatööl, kus igaüks on seotud loo esitamise iga etapiga. Kõik tehtud valikud ja pöördepunktid peegeldavad seega trupi sees toimuvat. Trupi dünaamika mõjutab tugevasti etenduses esiletulevaid jõupositsioone. Samas on huvitav ka see, mis teemasid ja tegelasi mingi trupp regulaarselt vältima kipub: kellele ja millele antakse etenduses kui kultuurilises representatsioonis hääl ja kes/mis jäävad vaikusesse.

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