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Improvisation: narrative and character techniques in jazz pedagogy

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IMPROVISATION: NARRATIVE AND CHARACTER TECHNIQUES IN JAZZ

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores techniques in theatrical improvisation and discovers how they can be applied to jazz improvisation pedagogy. Improvised character and narrative are addressed from a theatrical standpoint and techniques are demonstrated to be easily relatable to jazz. The author proposes some techniques for use by educators of jazz improvisation and gives examples of how to teach simple concepts to ensembles using theatrical methods. It is the intent that these concepts will help develop soloists who perform jazz solos from a storytelling standpoint. The paper favors the use of impersonation rather than imitation of jazz artists, and also reincorporation rather than free-association of materials and ideas.

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Chapter 1 - Introduction

Stories can be told through music. A work such as Modest Mussorgsky's *Pictures at an Exhibition* takes a listener on a journey through an art gallery of paintings by the composer's departed friend Vicktor Hartmann. Mussorgsky uses the main 'Promenade' theme at the beginning and as interludes to portray a sense of location. This device also gives the listener a feeling of walking through the gallery and stopping to look at each piece of art during the next musical movement. Another example is by Duke Ellington's Puerto Rican trombonist Juan Tizol, who is credited as one of the first musicians to bring Latin American rhythms to jazz (George, 1999). In Tizol's composition *Caravan*, he tells the story of the gypsy caravans riding through the countryside by using melodies and rhythms from the folk music he is emulating. A jazz solo can also tell a story. Jazz music originated with African slaves who brought their tradition of telling stories through music with them to America. Although telling stories through music might seem like an obvious concept, when one looks at modern day pedagogy for jazz improvisation, one does not see narrative techniques being utilized. This may stem from different perspectives on how to teach improvisation. One perspective states that jazz improvisation "is a highly constrained structure and set of rules," while others argue that jazz improvisation "evolved well beyond

structured swing" (Zack, 2000, p. 228). This paper demonstrates how certain storytelling techniques from improvised theater can be implemented in jazz improvisation pedagogy.

Improvisational theater and comedy, also known as improv, are the dramatic equivalents to jazz improvisation in music. The dramatic version develops into a performance where the entire script, characters, setting, and blocking are created spontaneously by the actors involved. Improv comedy and jazz improvisation have both been passions of mine for the last decade. I have been a student of both these areas and it was not until recently that I began to make connections between the two. Brushing up on the basics of narrative in my theatrical work helped me to realize that the systems with which I was taught jazz improvisation left out what I believe to be an essential element of soloing: telling a story. In our fast paced times of standardized tests and high demands on public education, jazz improvisation education has been forced to go from gear one to gear five, often skipping the methodical development of basic skills. My goal for this paper is to take those rudimentary tools of theatre and not only to remind educators of the roots of storytelling that are inherent in jazz, but also to develop practical techniques they can use in teaching jazz improvisation.

It is commonly known in theatre and literature that, if one loses sight of the fundamentals, such as narrative and character, the story can become incomprehensible. Whether simple or complex, these basic elements are commonly in place when developing a logical story. This is not to say that content needs to be simple or 'watered down.' An improvised story, for example, can become quite complex by building on simple concepts and intertwining them together to develop a result that is more than the sum of the parts. This can also be applicable to jazz improvisation. By utilizing the fundamental techniques, we can develop more complex solos. The same is true, if not more important, when teaching jazz improvisation. It is my opinion that that jazz improvisation is not always systematically taught, and that one remedy to this problem is to apply principles of theater to the teaching of improvisation.

Chapter 2 - Review of Literature

Research in the areas of narrativity in music and jazz improvisation is vast and ever-growing. Although there is extensive literature about each individual topic, there appear to be few scholars who have chosen to link these areas, or even to speculate on ways to bridge the two. Vots (2005) referenced the television show *Who's Line is it Anyway?* and briefly mentioned the use of theater games to develop character devices for jazz solos. However, this small remark was not clearly linked to jazz pedagogy. Velleman (1978) came close to the topic of narrative, but aims the focus towards the building blocks of speech.

This literature review is approached from four areas: narrative, character, improvisational comedy/theater, and jazz pedagogy. Following this, the main body of this document will suggest methods that I have developed for the teaching of jazz improvisation that are based on my own personal experiences with improvisational theater in comedy.

Narrative

Narrativity in music was a popular topic among scholars and critics during the 1980s and 1990s. The validity of analyzing music with narrative

devices came under high scrutiny by music and literature scholars like Abbate (1989) and Nattiez & Ellis (1990), who claimed that it was a "limited and metaphorical" concept (Almen, 2003, p 1). Small and favorable additions to this topic have arisen in recent years. One example is the work of Almen (2003), which explores the four archetypes of literature in relation to music.

Stepping away from music, and focusing on narrative as its own topic, leads one to find a new collection of work from literary scholars. Sturgess (1992) analyzes how we perceive narrative. He supports his theories by looking at the psychology of how we perceive art. He observes that both narrative and music are art forms that are perceived temporally. Genette (1980) argues that:

> The temporality of written narrative is to some extent conditional or instrumental; produced in time, like everything else, written narrative exists in space and as space, and the time needed for 'consuming' it is the time needed for *crossing* and *traversing* it, like a road or a field. The narrative text, like every other text, has no other temporality than what it borrows, metonymically, from its own reading. (p. 34)

Current research on narrativity could go hand-in-hand with that of jazz improvisation, but until now the connection has not been made. In my own experience, parallels to character rather than narrative are more commonly used to help demonstrate jazz pedagogy.

Character

In theater, the embodiment of another being, fictitious or not, is a challenge that incorporates both physical actions and verbal assimilation. This concept of character has been the topic of theatrical scholars since theater began (Bortolussi & Dixon, 2003). To examine just one example of a theatrical genre in which characters are entirely improvised, one can look to the Commedia dell'Arte of Italy.

The literature covering the Commedia dell'Arte comes from several geographical locations. Primarily, one can see commentary of the time from translated Italian works. Some of the oldest works come from the seventeenth century, such as those by Purrucci (1699) and Barbieri (1634). Both of these manuscripts come from actors who were practicing Commedia dell'Arte and both gave suggestions for performance practices and scenarios to follow.   In recent years, it has been more commonly discussed by scholars from around the world. In contemporary

works, Katritzky (2006) argues that these writings would later lead to the formulaic standardization of the art form. In recent decades, the translation of many Italian works has greatly increased the available literature on the subject.

Improvisational Theater and Comedy

Improvising is a part of human nature (Irons, 2009). Humankind's journey from the Stone Age to now has been shaped by quick thinking and use of the imagination to find solutions to challenges. Though needs have generally shifted away from mere survival, the natural tendency towards improvisation has been given the opportunity to evolve with culture and art and become something new. These experiments of imagination and creation have become the signature difference that separates humans from the other creatures that share the planet.

The history of theater reaches far back to ages and cultures that are long gone (Macgowan & Melnitz, 1955). However, this document will focus on the last hundred years of improvised theater development. This century saw the birth of jazz, a development that was paralleled by the advancement of improvised theater—mainly improv comedy. The origin of improvised comedy is linked to the works of Viola Spolin starting in the 1920s.

Spolin and her sons are known among improvisers for the use of improvised theater games. Her book, *Improvisation for the Theater*, which is in its third edition, has been heralded as "the bible" of modern day improv by comedians. Her son, Paul Sills, became the creator and original director of Chicago's famed improv troop *The Second City*, where a lengthy list of the great comedians of today began their careers, including Tina Fey, John Candy, Allan Arkin and many others (Thomas, 2009).

Since Spolin, many comedians have added to the literature of improv comedy, most notably the works of Keith Johnstone and his "Impro" series of books, published between 1979 and 1998. He is credited with the creation of *Theatersports*, and currently teaches at the College of Calgary, Canada.

Further literature has added new ideas, but few works have been as widely influential as those of Spolin and Johnstone. Because of this, I will be using their works as a foundation to develop my own ideas for the pedagogy of jazz improvisation.

Jazz Pedagogy

Formal jazz education in America came into fruition decades after the art itself began. In fact, the first bachelor's degree in jazz was not

offered until 1947 from the University of North Texas.   Many books and articles on jazz education have accumulated since then, and today we have a wealth of sources available. In 2008, the largest jazz education organization, the *International Association for Jazz Education* (IAJE), ended its near thirty years of publications. The organization has since transformed into the Jazz Education Network. This new organization has yet to release any publications.

The topic of jazz pedagogy has evolved over the years since "Dance Band" degree was first offered at the University of North Texas. Scales and patterns were one of the first topics of collegiate focus in Nicolas Slonimsky's (1947) book, "Thesaurus of Scales and Melodic Patterns." During the 1950s and 1960s, some educators began to incorporate a more harmonic/chordal-based approach into their jazz pedagogy. An example of this is American saxophonist Jerry Coker's "Improvising Jazz" method book (1964), which was popularly used as a collegiate textbook after its publication. Most jazz educators today still consider this book a classic with collegiate musicians and independent jazz enthusiasts (Alperson, 1988). Today, this harmonic/chordal-based approach remains part of the standard pedagogy for jazz improvisation, as we see with the widespread use of similar method books by the jazz educator Jamie Abersold. Abersold is known for his "Play-a-long" series,

first released in 1967, which provides rhythm section accompaniment for most jazz standards. His method books draw on both Coker and Slonimsky's works. Though these examples are well-known and still used today, none had any method for using theatrical techniques, such as narrative or character, to develop jazz solos in pre-collegiate and collegiate formal instruction.

A wide examination of journal articles revealed that few scholars link improv comedy/theater to jazz education. Washut's (1994) article was a near match, because it explores using storytelling devices to build an improvised jazz solo; however, he did not go into further explanation about how educators could use his comparison study practically in their classroom.

After reviewing narrative, character, improvisational theater/comedy, and jazz pedagogy separately, the literature was found to cover these topics individually. However, there were few examples of strong connections and practical applications linking these subjects. One goal of this paper is to add to the literature, and to demonstrate how these four devices can be combined.

Chapter 3 – Jazz Pedagogical Applications of Improvised Theater Techniques

Ask someone what the theme for the shark in *Jaws* is and most people born before 1990 will be able to hum those infamous two notes to you. This is an example of music being used to support a character. The following section will discuss the use of character as a technique in theater, explore the connection to jazz improvisation, and provide practical examples to be applied in the classroom.

Character Techniques of the Commedia dell'Arte

Commedia dell'Arte is included in this discussion because of contributions made to improvised theater. As the oldest and most well documented form of improvised theater, Commedia dell'Arte has unique structures for character and narrative. Like other creative arts, it went through developmental stages, and by the 1700s the art had blossomed into a structured improvised masterpiece (Katritzky, 2006).

Katritzky (2006) describes how Commedia dell'Arte stories were developed into stock *scenarios* during the 1700s. Each scenario would follow the same basic plot points, and certain elements were predetermined and fixed. Elements such as entrances, exits, monologues,

physical comedy bits, and sight gags could all be predetermined. However, much of the dialogue during a performance was completely improvised, making for a one-of-a-kind script with each performance. Today, we know of over fifty different scenarios that were used by theater companies during that time.

In addition to stock scenarios, Commedia dell'Arte actors would also be assigned to play certain stock characters, all with predetermined names, traits, movements, and eventually recognizable masks. Archetypes were created. Examples such as Pantalone the lecherous man in charge of finance in the commedia world, or Arelecchino the comic acrobat servant, and a dozen or more characters could be recognized by the audience. An actor could spend his or her entire career performing as just one or two of these characters. There are also examples where a character was named after an actor, which happened to famed actress Isabella Andreini. After her lifelong work of playing the character of *Isabella*, other companies adopted the colorful role into their own performances, which made it a staple character of the young lover, who was flirtatious, provocative and stubborn.

It is typically considered best practice for an actor to get to know the character being portraying before attempting to act (Bandelj, 2003). Similarly, a musician would likely explore the distinctions that set the

character of an instrument apart from other instruments. Just as the actors in the Commedia dell'Arte know the traits of their characters, musicians know the traits specific to their instruments. Like a character in theater, each instrument has characteristics that are unique. A pianist cannot growl on a note the same way that a trombonist could, just as a trombonist cannot play multiple notes at the same time (multi-phonics aside), as would a pianist. As such, it is important to discuss an approach to jazz education that focuses on teaching the skill of impersonation before imitation.

Character Techniques of Imitation vs. Impersonation

In jazz literature, the words *imitation* and *impersonation* are often used interchangeably. For the purposes of this thesis, they will be defined as two distinct terms. Where *imitation* is the precise copying of what a performer has already done, *impersonation* is the exaggeration of a style or element of a performer's characteristics. Despite the numerous musicians who are famous for their ability to impersonate, the literature suggests that jazz pedagogy often focuses more on imitation than impersonation. For example, the musician Byron Stripling is known for lifelike impersonations of Louis Armstrong. Another example is trumpeter Arturo Sandoval, who in 2003 released his album *Trumpet Evolution*. On this album, he claims to impersonate a different famous trumpeter for

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each track. All solos on this album were original, but in the style and character of trumpeters like Armstrong, Davis, Gillespie, etc.

In my experience, jazz educators often start teaching jazz improvisation by focusing on imitation. For example, many educators require their students to memorize jazz licks or to transcribe jazz solos. "Jazz licks" is a common term used in jazz, referring to a small motif (or short melodic idea) that typically outlines chord changes. These licks can also be found inside solos, making transcribing a valuable teaching tool. This teaching method can be used to guide students toward imitating current and historic jazz musicians. Though both of these imitative practices have merit behind them pedagogically, I find the process to lack the creative exploration needed for students to eventually find their own unique voices. For example, a student who is only taught to imitate others can sound bland, or closer to a facsimile of the artist they are imitating.   A copy is never as exciting or clear as the original. This is also true with the use of transcriptions. It is likely that a student will gain more from learning how to impersonate than from learning how to imitate. I propose teaching the skills to impersonate before moving on to imitation. Colleges can produce Charlie Parker clones, but the students who produce truly new ideas are the ones who build upon their impersonations.

By comparing successful moments in comedy with unsuccessful ones, we can see a difference between impersonation and imitation. If a comedian were to imitate an Arnold Schwarzenegger scene from one of his movies verbatim, the audience might be somewhat impressed depending on how accurately the scene was performed. This, however, is only marginally entertaining or funny when compared to the use of impersonation. If that same comedian created a monologue, with original jokes, while impersonating Mr. Schwarzenegger, it would probably be wildly funny and entertaining. This may be the result of the impersonation not being judged under the same parameters as the imitation. No longer is the audience looking at how well the comedian is imitating. In fact, the comedian could be far from accurate, but because the audience is looking for exaggerated, recognizable elements of the characterization, the impersonation is often considered much funnier.

This principle of impersonation can be applied to jazz improvisation. Currently, I have only witnessed this technique being taught in one area of jazz education, often described as modal jazz. Modal jazz is taught by having students follow specific rules pertaining to modes. For example, some instructors might tell their students to only play notes in the Dorian mode for certain chord changes. The argument for this teaching method is that, by using this mode, it helps students impersonate characteristics of players like Miles Davis, who utilized modes during the modal jazz phase. I

am suggesting that similar approaches can be incorporated into more areas of jazz pedagogy.

This is not to say that imitation should be eliminated completely; there is merit in it. For example, imitation in jazz pedagogy is perhaps most used in the area of be-bop. Charlie Parker solos and licks are often taught with the use of the famous *Charlie Parker Omnibook*, a book of collected Parker transcriptions. The focus of this pedagogical proposal is not to remove all forms of imitation but, instead, to move beyond the focus on imitation. In this scenario, students may gain more adaptive skills and be freed creatively if encouraged to impersonate. Imitation can be taught later, though, for more experienced players to be used tastefully and in addition to the creative freedom impersonation allows.

There are many different ways to approach this shift in our teaching methods. An example in the classroom might be that students build flash cards of jazz artists. Underneath the artist's name, the teacher may have the student write two or three characteristics of that artist. Examples are:

Dickey Wells (Trombone)   Chet Baker (Trumpet)

- Pepper-pot mute   - Airy tone

- Pentatonic scale   - Melodic minor scale

- Heavy Slide Vibrato

During an improvised solo passage, the cards could be shown so that the student is cued to change playing to match the characteristics on the card. This process can also be inverted, where the instructor plays a solo using characteristics and the students are asked to determine who the instructor was impersonating. Once the student has a grasp of impersonating, it might be appropriate to move on to skills of imitation. One commonly used element utilizing imitation is the use of the "jazz quote."

Character Techniques of the Jazz Quote

The "jazz quote" is a long-lived tradition in jazz solos and an important aspect when teaching jazz improvisation. Quotes happen when a performer implants a famous melody or lick inside an improvised solo. For example, a jazz artist could be in the middle of a solo and suddenly the blues head from John Coltrane's "Mr. P.C." can be heard. At its most basic level, quoting is akin to a comedian doing a quick imitation of someone famous for the amusement of the audience. The question arises, is the jazz quote simply used for entertainment? If so, isn't this a form of "reincorporation" (see the section entitled "Techniques Pertaining to Canada," below)? If one answers 'yes' to these questions, then how is this different from the narrative form? I propose it is different because it is based on character.

Jazz history is full of characters. With each of these characters, a unique set of imitable characteristics can be seen. Growl vocally in a scat solo and a player becomes Louis Armstrong. Play a glissando up to a choice note on the clarinet and hold it long, with heavy vibrato, and one becomes Benny Goodman. Point a trumpet bell at the floor, play with a harmon mute in, and one can emulate Miles Davis. However, these are generalizations. Miles Davis did not always play with his bell pointed down, or with a harmon mute. The reason we use these generalizations is because they are memorable. This idea of a *memorable quality* is what makes quotes so effective when used properly.

A student must keep in mind that a jazz quote should be short, and its purpose is to reincorporate musical elements from the history of jazz into the solo. As in comedy, it is used solely as entertainment for the audience, and because it is imitative, the creativity depends on how and where a student applies it. If a performer is skilled enough, the imitation might be altered from a direct quote to a paraphrased impersonation. A teacher may simplify this concept of variation by asking a student to play a quote in different ways, such as, in a minor key, inverting the intervals, or playing the quote backwards. However, the main goal should be to step away from imitative teaching and develop student's skills more toward improvised impersonation.

Character Techniques Pertaining to Olympia

Improv comedy is not a standardized art in any sense (Thomas, 2009). One troupe might use completely differing techniques from another or similar techniques under unfamiliar names. Some of these techniques may be appropriate in jazz improvisation pedagogy. Examples are suggested here, drawing from my own unique experiences in improv comedy. These experiences, which I continue to gain, come from my intermittent rehearsals and performances with a weekly improv comedy troupe in Olympia, WA. The troupe began operating in the early 1990s, and continues to develop new and original improv techniques. The troupe bases each show around improvised "scenes." These scenes focus heavily on narrative and character. A large collection of "recurring characters" has been developed over time. These characters often originated as spontaneous creations. If the audience, or the troupe, found the character interesting or funny enough, it would be brought back at a later show. Recurring or not, character creation skills were developed during practice sessions. I will highlight important skills and how they can be translated to jazz pedagogy.

In my troupe, character is generally boiled down to two main elements: voice, and what can best be referred to as "jibba jabba."

There are deeper levels of character development that are explored in improv comedy, but these two relate best to jazz pedagogy.

Voice is sometimes the most defining element of a character. A performer might allude to many characteristics with the first few words that are uttered. The character being conveyed could be strong, weak, excited, scared, or a whole list of other traits, simply by the choices a performer makes for the character's voice. When relating this to jazz, an educator might simply replace the word "voice" with the word "tone" or "timbre." A jazz artist can evoke an improvised character by using timbre in different ways. Examples of this might be using mutes, fluctuating volume, or by expressing an emotion behind what is being played. An example of emotive playing could involve playing behind the groove, pulse, or beat to express sadness or sloth, or playing in front to express excitement or happiness. Teaching this concept can be done using simple group exercises. An educator may have one student play a solo while another student gives the soloist emotions to emulate through timbre. In this exercise, the note choice is not as important as the timbre the student chooses to make.

Additionally, the timbre that a performer chooses to use can immediately establish other elements of a character beyond emotion. In comedy, if the performer were to use a foreign accent, the scene could

be taking place in a far off country, or we could be setting up a "fish out of water" scenario. Just by making this choice, a performer is not only defining aspects of character, but also aspects of possible location. This too, can relate to jazz. By playing in non-western scales, or by quoting tunes from folk melodies, a performer can allude to a location. If a jazz vocalist adds elements of yodeling in a solo, a listener might think of some European hillside.

The second element of character my troupe developed is called jibba jabba. This term was inspired by the 80s T.V. actor Mr. T., who often uses jibba jabba himself. For my troupe, jibba jabba is the one defining trait of a character that can be repeated, sometimes ad nauseum, to give the audience an anchor for the character. This can be a physical or verbal trait, and usually happens at the start or end of a section of dialogue. Mr. T. is famous for ending his sentences with the word "fool" or "sucka," making this his verbal jibba jabba. This can also be more commonly referred to as a character's "catch phrase."

Many musical artists also have jibba jabbas. Michael Jackson can be recognized by his percussive vocal additions in-between lyric stanzas. Count Basie can be identified by his simple interjected high notes and short licks from his piano. Most people have naturally accruing body

movements, or phrases that can evolve into jibba jabbas either by choice or by habit.

A jibba jabba can also be used to define a particular jazz solo. The effect can give the audience an anchor point to the solo, and the artist can play with the audience expectation that the anchor point creates. Instructors can teach this concept to students by having them start a solo with a short and attention-grabbing motif. During the solo, the student could be instructed to repeatedly return to the short motif. Eventually, the student would be asked to experiment by varying the motif.

What is character, but a collection of characteristics that is more than the sum of its parts? Couldn't the same be said for an entertaining and engaging performance of a jazz solo? In summation, I encourage jazz educators to incorporate any of these theatrical skills for building character into their pedagogy. In this section pertaining to my own experience, many examples of teaching strategies are addressed for topics such as imitating, quoting, using timber and jibba jabba. The following sections on narrative, explore teaching strategies used for narrative techniques, rather than character techniques, in improvisational theater.

Narrative Techniques Pertaining to Olympia

In my personal experience with improv comedy, my troupe considers narrative to be one of the "big seven" skills that are used to teach improv. These skills are: narrative, character, salsa levels, focus, sub-scene communication, space work, and presentation. Each of these seven skills can be broken down into smaller elements, which can each be practiced individually. In the following chapter, the skill of narrative will be explored and broken down into elements and its use as a building block for an improvised jazz solo will be demonstrated.

In most improv comedy, the narrative is played out by actors in a "scene." Narrative, in its most basic definition, is a beginning-middle-end progression (Johnstone, 1979). In comedy, this progression is often followed by a tag or joke that serves to finish the story on a comedic point. In my troupe, this beginning-middle-end-tag structure was referred to as (BMET). A good narrative may follow this structure, since it is commonly the most logical way to tell a story. However, variations of this structure can be highly entertaining when done well. I will examine how a jazz solo can be set to this BMET structure in a relatively effective way.

The *beginning* is where elements such as theme, voice, character, and location are often established. Tension and conflict are not the focus of the *beginning,* and can be held off until the *middle* of the story. The *beginning* can be as short as needed to set up any elements of the

narrative before the conflict arises. Once the characters are in a conflict or a crisis, this is considered the *middle* of the narrative. The conflict can do a variety of different things for the story. For example, it could be escalated, deescalated, held in a state of suspension, or even incorporated into a larger/smaller differing conflict. In whatever direction the performer chooses to go, it inevitably leads to the *end.*

The *end* of the BMET structure is where the conflict is resolved. In some cases, this means the character's triumph over the conflict, or in tragedies, it can mean the conflict's triumph over the characters. Either way, the *end* of the BMET is where the narrative is played out and concluded. In comedy, the *tag* is a final comedic push, emphasizing a theme or moment in the "scene." So how can the BMET structure relate to a jazz solo?

There is a plethora of musical tools that a jazz musician may use when building an improvised solo. Rhythms, scales, modes, quotes, licks and style are just a few choices. These musical devices have been the major emphasis in jazz pedagogy, and although these are very useful, it is important to know which tool to use and when. I believe that the narrative approach may help a musician use the tools in logical ways.

The first exercise I propose uses the blues form to make a BMET. This exercise can be used for long solos lasting many choruses of the blues, but

to keep it simple, this example will only explore a solo that is one chorus long. A chorus of a twelve-bar blues form can be broken down into three phrases, each four measures long. For this exercise, each one of those phrases can be labeled the beginning, middle, and end of a BMET.   Since the *beginning* is free from any tension, a performer can choose to use elements that are also free from tension. I would suggest starting a student on a scale like the pentatonic scale that is free of any half-step intervals. I would also keep rhythms simple and melodies coherent. The next phrase will reflect the *middle* of the BMET form. This is where a musician can be encouraged to add musical tension. The blues or diminished scales are two options, out of many musically tense elements, that could be introduced along with more complicated rhythms to build tension. No matter which elements improvisers choose to use, they can develop those elements during the second phrase (middle four bars of a form), and resolve them in the last phrase. Similar to a BMET scene in improv comedy, the *end* can take a solo into a resolution, or parallel tragedy by increasing the tension. The *tag* is optional, since it is comical in nature, but can be satisfying for the audience when used in jazz. For example, a *tag* in a jazz solo can refer to previously heard material in the solo, and may add a sense of resolution for the listener.

There are many variations in BMET, including other narrative devices such as prelude, flashback, flash-forward, etc. These variations might add

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to or change the order of the BMET. Another exercise I propose to

educators uses simple stories from nursery rhymes or folklore. For this

exercise, one might ask a student to portray the story of *The Three Little*

Pigs, following the BMET structure, during a solo. This can lead to

interesting interpretations, especially when students emulate the "huffing

and puffing" that occurs in the middle of that story. The BMET structure

has been used by improv comedy troupes all over the world (Macgowan

& Melnitz, 1955). However, each troupe has a unique way to teach its own

version.

Narrative Techniques Pertaining to Chicago

If one considers Louisiana to be the birthplace of jazz and blues,

then Chicago is where the art form developed during its infancy. During

the *Great Migration*[1], many poor African Americans moved North to

Chicago, bringing with them their music and style (Shadwick, 2007).   By

the 1930s, jazz had blossomed into an art that revolved around the

improvised solo. Louis Armstrong and his *Hot Five* and also his *Hot Seven*

bands from Chicago made significant contributions to jazz music's

evolution. Armstrong developed the New Orleans style, which is

characterized by small intermittent solos, into the Modern Style of jazz.

One characteristic of the Modern Style was improvised solos that last for

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[1] The *Great Migration* was the movement of over one million African-Americans from the South to the North, West and Midwest from 1910-1930. Reasons including education, employment and the hope of escaping racism were all motivators for the move.

many choruses. Chicago eventually became the birthplace of many other musical styles from "Chicago blues" to "soul" to "house." All of these styles revolved around improvised solos in one way or another.

In my opinion, there are parallels between the development of jazz and the development theater during these years that were not coincidence. Theater was becoming experimental, as seen in both performance and teaching practices of the time. In the early 1930s, drama instructor Viola Spolin emphasized teaching theater through improvisation.

Spolin grew up in Chicago in the early 1900s, and during the Great Depression she studied with Neva Boyd. Boyd was using improvised games to teach skills and language to immigrant children that were learning English. Spolin, and later her sons, took this idea of learning through improvised games, and developed a teaching approach to theatrical skills. By the 1950s, Improv Comedy had become a booming success. One of Spolin's sons, Paul Sills, would go on to create Chicago's famous comedy troupe *The Second City*, from which many of the famous film and television comedians of the past 50 years got their start (Thomas, 2009).

The techniques that are used by *The Second City* troupe for creating "scenes" can be adapted to jazz pedagogy. According to Spolin, a primary goal was to use games that would extract actions and words from an individual's *intuition*. However, intuition alone would be chaotic without structure. Throughout her book, a wide range of games is created to address different facets of improvised theater. Some were games on character traits, while others focused on props and scenery created using only one's body movement. For the purpose of this paper, these approaches have been narrowed to games based in narrative.

The first of these games is *Yarn*, a game created by Spolin to break up stories into individual sections (Spolin, 1963, p. 179). The game is played with three or more players and one leader. The first player begins a story until the leader points to the next player. The leader can choose to point to the next player at any time. When chosen, the next player has to immediately continue the story from where the first player stopped. The pattern is repeated until the story is finished. Because of its simplicity, this game can easily translate to a typical jazz band rehearsal.

During a jazz rehearsal, a director can play this game with any members of the ensemble. The director is the leader of the game and has the power to choose which players go in what order. To make the game interesting, the director should try to surprise the group by picking

random lengths of time that each performer is allowed to solo. The goal

for each soloist in turn is to make a logical addition to the solo that has just

ended, and not to start entirely new material.   The concept is that

students make logical contributions to the larger improvised solo (story).

The exercise may help students listen more sensitively and connect their

ideas to those of others. After a few attempts, the director may repeat

this exercise, each time shortening the time for the solos, thus increasing

the difficulty of the game.

Another game Spolin created was called *Poetry Building* (p. 180). In

this activity, the students make separate piles of cards that have nouns,

pronouns, adjectives, verbs, and adverbs. These piles are shuffled, and a

student picks one card from each pile. They are then asked to make a

poem using the words on the cards.

When applied to jazz improvisation pedagogy, the teacher may

simply change what is on the cards. Each pile could now label musical

elements, such as scales, patterns, modes, quotes, and licks. The other

procedures of the game remain the same. A student would choose cards

and attempt to make an improvised solo by combining the elements that

are on each card. The game may sound simple, but it was Spolin's belief

that children and adults learn best using fun games of intuition with simple

rules. These sorts of games offer a valuable resource to help students to perform solos that are logical and progress like a story.

Narrative Techniques Pertaining to Canada

Keith Johnstone was born in Devon, England in 1933. He worked with the Royal Court Theatre actors, developing many of his theories about teaching and improvisation. He has spent his career as an author and educator of improvised theater, creating many well-known, established organizations, including *Theatersports.* As an author, the books of his "Impro" series have gained him worldwide popularity as a scholar on the subject of improvised theater. His views on narrative explain that improv and storytelling must avoid free-association and, whenever possible, use reincorporation to help make stories interesting (Dudeck, 2011). This focus on reincorporation, where previous elements of the story are brought back later, is a central theme to his books. He states:

> The improviser has to be like a man walking backwards. He sees where he has been, but pays no attention to the future. His story can take him anywhere, but he must still 'balance' it, and give it shape, by remembering incidents that have been shelved and reincorporating them. Very often an audience will applaud when earlier material is brought back into the story. They couldn't tell you

why they applaud, but the reincorporation does give them pleasure. Sometimes they even cheer! They admire the improviser's grasp, since he not only generates new material, but remembers and makes use of earlier events that the audience may have temporarily forgotten. (Johnstone, 1979, p. 116)

This focus on reincorporation has similar elements to the aforementioned "jibba jabba" of character development. Johnstone even says that the more elements you can reincorporate into a narrative, the better.

A specific activity from Johnstone's first book, *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* (1979, p.118), may serve better to illustrate one way to teach this concept to jazz students. Johnstone's activity comes in two parts. First, students are grouped into pairs. Student A is asked to provide a set of disconnected material, such as individual statements, rather than a logical story. For example, student A might say, "The time is 4 o'clock. Bart, the alligator, was hungry. Fish are blue." Student B then takes this material and turns it into a logical story, reincorporating as much as he can from student A. In this activity, the goal is not to imitate, but to develop a story incorporating material from the previous student's seemingly unconnected statements. So, student B might say, "At 4 o'clock, Bart the alligator ate a blue fish." The second part of the activity has each individual student do both parts A and B, instead of with a

partner. In this stage of the game, students are creating the disconnected material as well as putting it into a story. For jazz students, the activity can be similar, but the students would be building a musical solo. Instead of sentence fragments, students would combine seemingly disjointed melodic fragments or licks (first with a partner and then alone) to develop cohesive solos.

Another example from Johnstone's book is a game called "word at a time." This is a simple game designed to build a story. This game can be played with as few as two players or with as many players as there are available. Students take turns adding only one word at a time to a story. Fast pacing is the key to making the game intuitive. For jazz students, the game would be similar, but with minor changes. Rather than build a story one word at a time, jazz students would build a solo, one note at a time. The one addition I would make to the rules for jazz students is that they cannot repeat the previous note that has just been played. This will help to maintain the active listening that is lost when changing from telling a story with words, to building a solo with notes. Otherwise, a student can pick a note ahead of time, rather than act on the note that was just played. The goal is to engage students in reacting to what they have just heard in a logical way. Students can be limited to play in certain modes or scales as a means of adding more structure to the game. The game

can be varied by having a student play two or three notes before moving on.

Demonstrated by the examples above, improvising a theatrical narrative and improvising a jazz solo can be approached as remarkably similar tasks. As such, the techniques to teach them could be similar. With this in mind, jazz educators might want to pay close attention to these and future developments in improvised theater, and try to incorporate these techniques into their own classrooms.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion

Recent trends in jazz education leave out the teachings of narrative and character and jump directly into imitative skills. This sparks a question: are these the best skills that are being taught today in jazz pedagogy, or are we trying to have our students run before they walk? This document has attempted to establish a link between theatrical improvisation techniques and jazz improvisation pedagogy and to provide a few practical examples of the way in which the former might be useful to the latter. Two main approaches to theatrical improvisation have been discussed—narrative and character. The narrative approach focuses on adapting improv comedy techniques from Spolin, Johnstone, and my own personal experience to create exercises that have practical application in jazz improvisation. The section on character reviewed historic techniques of the Commedia dell'Arte, and examined the differences between *impersonation* and *imitation.* Exercises have been adapted for the teaching of jazz improvisation based on examples from the Commedia dell'Arte and my own experience in these fields.

Jazz educators may consider whether current jazz improvisation pedagogy tends to focuses too much on imitation. The exercises in this paper are intended as a guide for jazz educators looking for alternative

approaches. The goal of these approaches is to improve the instruction of improvisation, as well as the quality of the solos themselves. The implications of these techniques will become more evident as educators put them into practice.

Looking forward, further research on this topic might include studies measuring the success of these techniques in the classroom with varying age groups. Additionally, researchers might test the effectiveness of the other aspects of improv comedy, beyond narrative and character. These might include sub-scene communication or others from the "big seven" discussed earlier in this paper. An international study might also discover interesting parallels or differences with cultures around the world and their approaches to improvisation. It is my hope that this paper will lead to further research, which may aim to improve and expand the ways educators approach jazz improvisation.

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