“An Invitation for Disaster”—Embracing the ‘Double Failure’ of Improvisation

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In this paper I consider the representational¹ and relational aesthetics of “improvisational moments,” a term I am using to encompass both the moments of encounter between improvisers and audience members and the art that arises from these encounters. These moments cannot help but be evaluated—both relationally and representationally—by all stakeholders. In drawing attention to these two (often overlapping) facets of improvisational performance, it is not my intent to establish a binary between them. Instead, I wish to suggest that relational and representational outcomes are two hazy aspects of improvisational moments that will almost certainly provoke a reaction to and subsequent evaluation of the event in those involved in such moments. From such engagement a judgement of whether or not these improvisational moments have succeeded (are welcomed), or failed (do not meet desired expectations), almost certainly arises. An examination of failure in improvisation is of interest to both performers and scholars of improvisation due to the likelihood that many (if not all) improvising artists have encountered improvisational moments that they have judged failures. Because there are two areas of expectation by which improvisational moments can be judged, those being roughly defined in terms of representational and relational aesthetic standards, improvisational moments can be said to doubly fail. Art forms with a greater interest in a relatively static product over process can fail aesthetically, whereas an art form such as improvisation with additional relational concerns can fall short of both a desired representational aesthetic as well as a relational aesthetic. Both failures together—a combination that I am calling a “double fail”—may result in doubly painful affective consequences that could impede performance. In this paper, I will show that though the emotional consequences of a double fail can be detrimental (to both the well-being of the performer and the creative outcome), failure is also generative in that it provides new experiences for critical reflection that can also become incorporated in the planning and process of future performances. Improvisation’s double fail is doubly generative, and this paper will show a new analytical perspective on this process.

Improvisation as a relational art form is concerned with the moments of encounter between two or more artists. As Daniel Fischlin and Ajay Heble note with regard to improvisation in a musical context, “[m]usical practices in which improvisation is a defining characteristic are social practices” (11). Improvisational practices ask about the amount and depth to which co-improvisors listen to one another and how they create new moments based on perceived cues. The relational aesthetic of improvisation is also concerned with socially-related factors such as the amount of performance time one performer claims and how a performer claims it; does she/he, for example, gesture more largely than other actors, or play more softly than other musicians, or paint over someone else’s work? Such relational concerns are in contrast to an evaluation of improvisation based solely on an aesthetic evaluation of the artistic outcome or product. These artistic products and their representational aesthetics are also subject to evaluation. Peter Blouw argues in his 2010 paper on relational aesthetics and musical improvisation that “the field of aesthetics is unlikely to abandon the examination of process-oriented creative works anytime soon” (8). Blouw’s statement contends that aesthetics have been and remain of concern to the “process-oriented” field of improvisation, despite its preoccupation with social dynamics (8).

In addition to the products of improvisation at times failing to meet popular standards of what is both desirable and appropriate, art-making in improvisation can be said to succeed or fail based on the quality of the social interactions that occur in creating improvised art. For example, in defining improvisation as “a human activity that gains value exactly from the fact that it constructs no version of hierarchy or competition, no ensnaring conventions or intrinsically detrimental value judgments,” Alan Durant is describing a set of relational standards, and thus the means by which relational aesthetics can fail (270). If an improvisation creates a “version of hierarchy” it fails. This type of failed improvisation could describe a hierarchy in which performers receive more or less social prestige or power based on how adept they are at maintaining successful relationships in the improvisational community of a performance. Therefore, improvisation as a “relational art,” being process and not product oriented (Blouw 2), is still subject to the expectation of a desired outcome.

Participants in improvisational art-making can learn to see failure as a creative process by adopting an attitude of accepting and working with a failed event. When improvisers embrace such a methodology of acceptance, the process and products of failure can be generative. By this I mean the participant chooses to acknowledge the occurrence of an improvisational moment which fails—either relationally or representationally—and to incorporate such a moment into the overall performance. This methodology can also be deployed during performance moments that are not meant to be “improvised” but which require a performer to create an in-the-moment response, such as when unexpected events occur in the middle of a scripted performance (e.g., a dropped line of text or a technical malfunction). A methodology of accepting and working with failed events can also be as subtle and internal as an improvising musician playing a note that sounds “dischordant” or jarring to her ear, and choosing to integrate it as a part of the performance. This kind of episode takes failure and transforms it into a generative moment—not a moment

requiring the musician to berate herself or to go back and attempt to re-play it. As Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment (a UK theatre company that uses improvisation in both the devising process and in live performance) writes, “[i]n our work, the dancing body often appears ridiculous. It’s rarely triumphant, soaring, elegant, acrobatic or overly pleased with itself. And the dance, such as it is, is often an *invitation for disaster*” (“Tim Etchells on performance,” emphasis mine). By accepting this invitation through an incorporation of improvisational failures, an anti-canonical aesthetic results. This type of aesthetic begins to redefine what is acceptable and even desirable in art and art-making, and emerges if improvisers choose to view failed moments as new variations or types of improvisational events that enrich and expand the canon of creative processes and products. The welcoming of such creative processes (i.e., instead of rejecting or attempting to circumvent them) is also of interest to performers looking for ways in which to manage the negative affect that can result from an experience of failure. If a performer labels a failed event as one of many permutations of an improvisational moment, as opposed to reading the moment as a “fail,” the affective consequences of failure will likely be reduced.

Even when a performance “fails”—when it “flops,” a “wrong note” is hit, or something unplanned or unwelcomed occurs, some “thing” has been generated. While many performers are concerned with improvisational moments that “work” or “succeed,” (i.e., moments that are welcomed and desired), some performers actively court failure and are inspired by what such a courtship can produce. Tim Etchells is a performer who sees the pursuit of failure (rather than the pursuit of what is relationally or representationally expected or desired) as a prompt for a bountiful creative practice. Etchells admits to being “fascinated with *the excess produced by error or by failure—that ‘failure’ [...] also has a creative force or aspect to it*” (*Notebook* n.p., emphasis mine). He speaks specifically about failure in live performance: “[i]n live work I’m very much drawn to *the way that error or the struggle of the speaker makes something visible—I suppose I think that the subject becomes visible in a particular (open, transparent) way thanks to the force of error or rupture*” (*Notebook* n.p., emphasis mine). Etchells implies that when improvisational moments do not work as expected or planned, a space is created for that which is not anticipated. In this space, perhaps, a performer may be present to the art which is arising, where there is a purposeful “refusal of ‘easy harmonization’” (Heble 27). Further, as Eddie Prevost writes of musical improvisation, “risk and doubt” (355) (i.e., risking failure and doubting a successful outcome is possible) are essential for improvisation. What is also essential, I argue, is a willingness to take up the threads of *whatever* emerges from a moment-by-moment presence. As author and performer Sarah Jane Bailes writes of her own creative process, “[d]istracted comes easily, and when it does I pay attention” (“Distracted”). Bailes’ description speaks to a manner of shaping in which a higher level of uncertainty is invited. This would be contrary to a maximally planned and controlled, highly cerebral, and goal oriented work ethic. With the latter approach, I argue the opportunity to be present to a (relatively) uncensored, spontaneously generated creative product is virtually non-existent due to a low tolerance for unpredictability.

The conscious creating of a performance environment that invites and supports failed improvisational moments heightens failure’s generative abilities. Performing artist Jon Foley Sherman writes that Jacques LeCoq’s pedagogical techniques included the honouring of failure. LeCoq saw improvisational failure as something generative that “opened up another world” (90). He directed his students specifically to these moments and fostered their interest in this place. Foley Sherman writes of one of LeCoq’s teaching sessions:

We had expected the presentation to teach us how to stage place and tell a simple story; instead, we witnessed Lecoq *improvising an encounter with our work*. He *came to it open and accepted its propositions without objecting to their departure from his assignment*. (90, emphasis mine)

This kind of environment allows “mistakes” to enrich the body of work and the total artistic product created. The artists of Forced Entertainment similarly prefer that their shows include a “feeling that anything might happen” (“How We Work”). For this company, “accidents” are important devising and performance elements worthy of analysis. To foster an aesthetic which allows for and studies failure, Forced Entertainment continually push themselves outside of “the known” (Etchells, *Certain Fragments* 52), and most likely, outside of what is affectively comfortable.

An Exploration of Failure through Performance

In order to practically examine the double fail of improvisation and how it functions in a theatrical context, I gave a performance on 22 March 2013 as part of a variety show. The evening consisted of six performances lasting seven minutes each and ranging from comedic acts to choreographed dance to live painting. My performance, described below, was minimally devised to allow space for improvisational moments to occur.

In terms of advance preparation, I examined Tim Etchells’ twenty-six “Types of Failure”² (“Home”), which I decided to refer to during the performance. Because my performance was concerned with failure, I planned to refer to the list during my act and to cross off all the ways in which I felt the performance was “failing” as they happened (i.e., to cross these items off the list during the performance itself). I also decided to have several questions prepared to ask

the audience in order to directly interact and co-improvise with audience members. These questions were taken from one of Forced Entertainment's shows entitled "Quizoola." "Quizoola" is a performance consisting of two performers asking each other questions for several hours. The lists of questions are generated before the show and are not seen by the performers until the moment of performance. On the Forced Entertainment website there is a list of questions that have been used at previous "Quizoola" performances ("So Many Questions"). I wrote down a list of approximately a dozen of the questions (selected at random) in order to be able to use them during my act.³

I planned to do the show as a character inspired by the emcee featured in a clip of the Forced Entertainment show entitled "The Thrill of It All." This show is a vaudeville-style performance that fails to uphold the standards of the genre while progressively "unravel[ing]" and "stray[ing]" ever further from the point ("The Thrill of It All"). The emcee character in the clip introduces the show while speaking in a voice altered to sound as if she has been inhaling helium gas. She repeats "hello, hello and welcome" tentatively and over and over; her brittle smile, wide eyes, and crouched posture suggesting she is frightened. She is an alarming caricature of the polished "television presenter" trope. I planned to take on some of her characteristics, and decided I could easily adopt a higher pitched, less-than-confident sounding voice and a nervous-seeming manner, in an attempt to fail as a confident stage presence.

This performance was inspired by the idea of the double fail of improvisation and was meant to practically explore some of the theoretical concepts I have thus far examined in this paper. I will describe relevant aspects of the performance and follow this with an analysis meant to link the praxis back to the theoretical discussion.

22 March 2013

I had asked in advance for a wireless microphone—as I walked onstage at the beginning of my performance, I flipped it on but it wasn't working. I thought about restarting somehow, but I was already in character and felt a strong impulse to continue with the performance in this way. What emerged for me was a continuous and awkward smiling at the audience, and it felt to me like a first connection, a first "call and response" with the audience. The microphone eventually came on, but the episode of connecting with the audience in a slow, non-verbal way (through smiling) felt exciting—it felt to me as if there might be more co-creative energy to be mined here. The "microphone incident" inspired me to go back and forth on and off stage twice more, each time to grab objects I had supposedly forgotten (a pen and a piece of paper, both of which were actually in my pocket). Both times I continued to smile, saying only that I had forgotten something. The audience responded positively with laughter and applause both times.

There was a moment of discomfort near the end of my performance when I asked a woman in the audience to answer one of my questions and she didn't have anything to say. She had seemed eager to respond when I asked the audience "what's the greenest thing you can think of?" so I came over to her and put the microphone near her face. She smiled but was mumbling, "I don't know." A pop-culture reference came to me, and I asked her if she wanted to "phone a friend." She continued to fumble, and at this point I felt panic rising and my connection to her closing down. I believe I was panicking and cutting off my connection to her because I felt a knee-jerk sense of "I don't know what to do in this moment" as well as the necessity to say something witty in order to make the moment interesting and funny. She finally did say something quietly that I could not understand.

What I did next seemed to have "worked" in that it garnered some laughs from the audience. I decided to end the moment with this woman by playing it out of control, laughing maniacally as if she had said the funniest thing I had ever heard. I then said "now that was the funniest thing I ever heard!"—knowing that the majority of the audience had no idea what the woman said and might be frustrated by what I was doing. Not knowing how to transition out of this moment back into the performance, I kept laughing and walked off stage. I did so without turning back. It was some time before the emcees realized that I was finished, and through it all the audience energy felt positive and I heard plenty of laughter.

During the performance moments I describe above, there were several failed events that proved generative of new artistic products. These failed moments were unplanned and unanticipated, and meant I needed to improvise "with" them. At the beginning of the performance, for example, when the microphone would not turn on, there was a moment when I felt embarrassed and awkward. I believe this was my affective response to the performance (already) failing to meet my expectations of how it was "supposed" to unfold. In retrospect, my decision to embrace this moment and to follow my impulse to remain in character allowed for the "first connection, [the] first 'call and response,'" and the "slow, non-verbal [connection] (through smiling)." Even though this moment failed with respect to a representational aesthetic that asks for a control and seamlessness, the choice I made resulted in the inspiration for the creation of the performance elements involving the pen and paper. As Tim Etchells writes, "[w]e have to accept our failure, or we may not even begin" ("In the Silences" 36). The failure of the moment involving the microphone, once accepted by me, prompted my risking to improvise the new moments which proved entertaining for the audience. These moments of pleasure for the audience (and for me) were able to occur in no small part because I felt

open to embracing failure. In doing so, I felt an awareness of where the audience was willing to go creatively and sensed “there might be more co-creative energy to be mined.”

As I have mentioned, creative “mistakes” are important to the generating of new artistic products. In deciding not to engage fully with the woman in the audience out of a fear of failing—a fear of not knowing in that moment how to be witty or funny—I ceased to be open to the exchange between us. In deciding to cut off our interaction by using my power as “performer,” I bent the co-created improvisational moment selfishly. Instead, I could have chosen to speak to or engage with the woman further, despite the fact that it may not have been “funny.” In this case, my fear of representational failure led to a relational failure. What occurred, however, was still an improvisational moment despite its failing to support an effective relational aesthetic. Given that George Lipsitz, for example, writes of jazz as a form which “privilege[s] relentless innovation over static tradition” (qtd. in Heble 8), I can choose to view what emerged at the end of my performance as innovative, even though I failed to keep an open connection with the audience and ended the performance abruptly.

Further, just as in a group improvisation where participants can support and re-interpret the offerings of individual members who make mistakes in performance (Nicholls 97-8), an audience like the one I experienced helped me to feel positive about my work on stage and facilitated my ability to see my failures as generative. They provided supportive feedback by laughing and smiling loudly and often. The fact that I failed “doubly” over the course of my performance—both relationally and representationally as I have described above—was something I can now regard as a learning experience that generated new outcomes. By choosing to embrace “the incorporation of process, accident and mistakes on stage,” and by preparing only very minimally for my performance, I chose “the disappointed outcome as a methodology” (Bailes, *Performance Theatre* xvii).

Conclusion

In this paper I offer a new critical perspective on how failure can be generative across improvisational modalities and can contribute to the praxis of performers. I have outlined how improvisational moments are evaluated with respect to both their relational and representational aesthetics—the field of improvisation is concerned with how such moments are created as well as the nature of the artistic products that result. Because there are these two areas of evaluation that apply to improvisational moments, there are also two ways in which they may fail to meet desired and/or expected outcomes. This paper demonstrates that ultimately this double failure can be doubly generative of new creative products.

This work is relevant to the field of improvisation as these new creative products can lead to the development of new artistic forms. As Heble writes of musical forms such as bebop, artistic forms which are now standardized could have, at one time, been considered dissonant or to have failed aesthetically (172). When new forms arise out of improvisational moments that fail according to popular representational and relational standards, they begin to redefine potentially highly commodified definitions of art and art-making. When art-making standards incorporate and value failed moments, the definition of what is considered skilful and virtuosic also shifts to be more inclusive of difference.

From my work on this paper a series of questions for further inquiry emerged. In the field of adaptation theory, for example, the question of fidelity is an important one (see for example Hutcheon 6-7 and MacCabe 7-9). The relationship between an adaptation and its source work is many layered, and adaptations are analyzed (and often evaluated) by the degree to which they are “faithful” to their source works. How adaptations are made as well as the products that evolve from adaptation processes can fail to be faithful to their source material. These adaptation failures expand the source work and feed the “infinitely permutating intertext” that the source work and its subsequent adaptations become (Stam 57). Could an examination of the generative nature of failure prove a useful critical lens for adaptation theorists? Could such an examination serve to move the field of adaptation further from the question of fidelity?

Topics for further inquiry in the study of improvisational failure include: What might it be like to begin an improvisation with the intent to court “the ugly”? When is failure “just failure”—when is it appropriate to acknowledge the disappointment, anger, and frustration of failed improvisational moments without attempting to “accept” or analyze them? In any attempt to understand failed moments logically, how much of the intangible or unknowable about improvisational encounter is lost—and might such an attempt at understanding interfere with the way in which a performer encounters future failures in an embodied manner?

Notes

¹ In this paper, I use the term “representational aesthetic” (tentatively) as a means to gesture to the nebulous aspect of the total aesthetic response that may be triggered by the concrete artistic outcome or product (such as notes played or colours used in a painting).

² The list entitled “Types of Failure” is given on the website without context or explanation, and includes such items as “tardiness,” “uncertainty,” “doubt,” “fear,” etc.

³ Other questions on the “Quizoola” list include “When did you stop believing in Father Christmas?”, “Was Bruce Springsteen born to run?”, and “What blood type are you?”

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