"No more brain than a stone": Hints of Extempore Performance in Shakespeare's Plays

Anikó Oroszlán

Recently, it has become a critical commonplace that theatre and society as well as cultural processes can be analyzed in terms of each other. Social sciences use the metaphors of theatre and drama to describe spectacular social events such as rituals, festivals or games—see, for instance, the works of Erving Goffmann, Victor Turner, Dwight Conquerwood and Milton Singer. Human behaviour and habits are also frequently defined as performance; the best known example is probably Judith Butler's concept of gender performative.[1] Very different, however, is the manner in which these approaches treat the relation between power/rules/hegemony and the freedom of the agent who performs. Nonetheless, it is very characteristic that while certain social theories use the metaphors of theatre and performance, others insist that human acts can better be described as improvisation.

Improvisation, similarly to the notion of performance, has recently become a central issue in the humanities. It has been used as a term to describe not only theatrical actions, but also everyday practices. As R. Keith Sawyer, professor of psychology and education argues, instead of "performance," "improvisation would be a better metaphor for our everyday conversations." Humans learn to extemporise while role-playing in their childhood, and throughout their lives they continuously face the tension of improvisation and script, while there is a natural drive to behave and speak creatively (Sawyer). Elsewhere Sawyer writes that even if it is a common belief that improvisation does not require pre-written scripts, it is also obvious that improvisers—even clowns—"draw on ready-mades—short motifs and clichés—as they create their novel performance" (157). In other words, actors who act extempore use a "shared body of conventions, techniques, and historical knowledge" as they create their performance (Sawyer 157).

Within the context of theatre, improvisation is a type of performance in which the performer, partly based on the actual situation or the audience's requirements, arranges actions or lines on the spot. It is a continuous and serial decision-making process at the same time, since the actor or the musician has to observe the reactions both of

---

1   The roots of performance theories—just to mention the ones referred to the most often—can be found in the works of Erving Goffmann (*The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*, 1959), J. L. Austin (*How to Do Things with Words: The William James Lectures Delivered at Harvard University in 1955*, 1962), John Searle (*Speech Acts: An Essay in the Philosophy of Language*, 1969) and Victor Turner (*Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society*, 1974). Later performance or performance-related scholarship includes Judith Butler (*Performative Acts and Gender Constitution*, 1988; *Gender Trouble*, 1990) defining gender as a "practice of improvisation within a scene of constraint"; and also Pierre Bordieau (*Outlines of a Theory of Practice*, 1972) with his concept of "regulated improvisation."

his partner and of the spectators in order to take the next step. Improvisation—both in music and in theatre—is usually identified as a skill which can be taught and developed, as evidenced by a series of methodology books published in the USA after the 1960s.[2]

Improvisational theatre has had its successors and followers since the 1960s. For instance, the opposition between externally controlled stage presence and self-determined acting is detectable on the contemporary stage, in which, from the 1980s on, there seems to be a demand to see "the full range of human expressiveness: shapes, sounds, silences, and this form; the human body itself" (qtd. in Keefe and Murray 45). Such theatrical endeavours, which concentrate on the human body in acting, are often defined as "physical theatre," a form which appears to give preference to physicality compared to traditional storytelling and drama. Since clownery and mime are often mentioned among the predecessors of improvisational (and physical) theatre, one can safely link early modern clowning to improvisation (even if, for instance, physical theatre has its own problems of definition).[3] Extemporisation is often related to comedy and inordinate clowning, probably because it is also understood as a performance which does not use any scripts. Moreover, realistic and immediate circumstances lend themselves more naturally to the development of humorous situations.

In this essay referring to the different interpretations of extempore performance, I intend to analyze examples of staged improvisation in Shakespearean plays. Obviously, to do this, I can only rely on drama texts, thus, my argumentation has to cope with the usual anomaly of approaching a performance: its ephemeral and volatile nature. Still, I would like to demonstrate that both early modern theatre-makers and the enemies of theatre were concerned with improvisation, and their attitudes are various. Extempore behaviour was held either to be an unregulated demonic force or a special, creative skill with which reality can be perceived more deeply. Although I believe that one can find (staged) extempore scenes in all plays, my examples—alongside other contemporary sources—will be taken from *Hamlet* and *Twelfth Night; or What You Will*.

Improvisation in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century performance was a remarkable, characteristic feature of comic players of the age. It had a crucial function in many types of performance activities from jigs to extempore verses on given topics, quips, dances or street ballads. But when understood broadly, it can refer to the direct interaction with the audience or to overcoming unexpected situations on stage, such as forgetting lines. To some extent, extempore manners also represented the actor's rebellious attitude

---

2   The best known authors and authorities are Viola Spolin (*Improvisation for the Theatre*, 1963) and Keith Johnstone (*Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre*, 1979). Spolin, the inventor of "theatre games," is said to be the initiator of the first American *improvisational* theatres. The British playwright and director Johnstone founded his group The Theatre Machine in London, and worked on the theory and practice of "Theatresports" in England and Canada. (Theatresports is a dynamic and energetic improvisatory interaction and also a form of training between the actor and the audience, which is likened to sports events because of the method of evaluation and its competitiveness.) These new forms were started in reaction to the dull and lifeless theatre repertory in the 1970s. Notwithstanding, the findings and results of improvised theatre has also had a great impact on social sciences as well as education and pedagogy.

3   Edgar Landgraf mentions that the practice of improvisation on stage in music became banished from high art, because it is related to the distinction between eternal and transitory comic forms. Since improvisation is held to be fleeting, it is also suppressed from official artistic considerations (Landgraf 5).

against social rules as well as textual authority. According to contemporary references, players were outcasts of low social rank who pretended to be something more. John Cocke describes the "Common Player" in John Stephens' collection *Satyrical Essayes Characters and Others* in the following way:

> He doth conjecture somewhat strongly, but dares not commend a play's goodness, till he hath either spoken, or heard the epilogue: neither dares he entitle good things good, unless he be heartened on by the multitude: till then he saith faintly what he thinks, with a willing purpose to recant or persist: so however he pretends to have a royal master or mistress, his wages and dependence prove him to be the servant of the people. When he doth hold conference upon the stage, and should look directly in his fellow's face, he turns about his voice into the assembly for applause's sake, like a trumpeter in the fields, that shifts place to get an echo. The cautions of his judging humour (if he dares undertake it) be a certain number of saucy rude jests against the common lawyer; handsome conceits again the fine courtiers; delicate quirks against the rich cuckold a citizen; shadowed glances for good innocent ladies and gentlewomen .... (qtd. in Wickham et al 179-80)

According to the lines above, Cocke believes that the player is more interested in holding the audience's attention than in replying to the dialogue of his fellow actors on stage. He is both proud and shameless, since "he dares laugh in the midst of a serious conference, without blushing" (qtd. in Wickham et al 180). Cocke's rhetoric bears similarities to contemporary antitheatrical treatises on style and on word use. William Prynne in his *Histriomastix: The Player's Scrouge* (1633) states that human identity provided by God "may not be exceeded: so he [God] requires that the actions of every creature should be honest and sincere, devoyde of all hypocrisie, as all his actions and their natures are" (159). Associating the actor with the instability of meanings is a characteristic feature of the Puritan attacks on the stage. Prynne in his treatise also characterizes actors as if they always behaved out of control, since "they act such parts, such pranks, yea, use such gestures, speeches, rayment, complements, and behaviour in Iest, which none but children, or mad-men, do act, or use in earnest" (174).

Irregular manners were, thus, associated with actors both with regard to their stage practice and their social life. Stage players—especially those performing with travelling troupes—are often equated with rogues, vagabonds and beggars not only because of their supposed low social status, but also because of their extempore performative gestures. Marketplace and street entertainment was basically a crucial part of early modern comedians' performance style. Richard Tarlton often played in taverns and inns, while probably Will Kemp's most famous performance was his morris dance from London to Norwich. Neither of these theatrical actions demanded a concrete script, and they were most likely based on improvisation to a great extent.

In the Renaissance, extempore acting was considered to be a crucial part in the methodology of the commedia dell'arte players as well. It is a well-known fact that Italian actors used brief plots and sketches to develop the performance, and also that there were short comic improvisatory dialogues called *lazzi*, which served to entertain the

audience between dramatic scenes.[4] But while Italian improvisation was rather a kind of composition which actors created from their classical literary works, everyday speech and commonplace books, for English actors extempore acting meant disconnection from literary theatre (Henke 227-28). According to Andrew Gurr, improvisation in the English theatre covered three major activities: composing rhymes for exits and endings of speeches, the mocking repetition of what the other character said, or punning on the others' words (29-33). These examples are detectable not only in playtexts/scripts, but also in jigs, jests and street ballads.

Since there is evidence of contact between English and Italian players in the Renaissance period—although there is no direct proof that Elizabethan actors improvised in the manner of commedia dell'arte—it is natural that their styles and techniques are often compared. A brilliant example of this is the ninth scene of *The Travels of the Three English Brothers* by John Day (1607), in which Will Kemp, the famous English comedian and an Italian Harlequin engage in an improvisational battle.

In the English context, improvisation had both negative and positive connotations. As for disapproval, it is enough to recall Hamlet's lines that instruct the actors not to let clowns "speak no more than is set down for them" (3.2.45). It is possible to interpret improvisation as if it demonstrated uncontrollable (physical and verbal) behaviour against modesty, which might encourage others to also act without regard for social rules. If we consider contemporary examples, we can see that it was especially the comic actors who epitomized the skill of improvisation and rebelled, even if in antitheatrical tracts, comic and tragic actors were not clearly differentiated.

Yet extemporization is not an anarchistic action, but a creative attitude, which offers a sense of accomplishment and a chance for wise contemplation to those who practise it. Nevertheless, because of its uncircumscribable nature, it is comparable to the notion of performance as defined by theatre studies. So if we wish to define and analyze early modern improvisation, we face the same problem that arises during the interpretation of early modern theatrical performance. What we can mostly rely upon are dramatic texts, scripts and written documents that harbour clues regarding extempore manners, while we have to accept the fact that the reconstruction of performance is not possible.[5]

As I have mentioned, one of the best-known examples of early modern improvisation is an episode from John Day's drama, *The Travels of the three English Brothers* (1607). In the play, Will Kemp, the comedian visits the main character, Sir Anthony, in Venice, where they meet an Italian harlequin and his wife. Sir Anthony

---

4   The singular form is *lazzo*, but in the English context it is usually the plural form, which is used as if singular. Although English and Italian theatre are often contrasted on the basis of producing or lacking prewritten texts, we can see that this differentiation is oversimplified. While English theatrical practice was far more than staging written scripts, commedia dell'arte produced a wide range of literary dramatic texts.

5   It was the Italian theatre historian Marco de Marinis who reshaped the notion of the document and documentary history arguing for the "contextual analysis of theatre events" (50). By recommending a thorough examination of all related sources, he applies the method of theatre semiotics to historical observation and—relying on Febvre's, Block's, Zumthor's, Foucault's and Le Goff's criticism of documentation—claims that the document is an object, which is not discovered but created by the historian (De Marinis 50). In his view, every detectable source can be a document if the historian recognizes its relevance.

asks the actors to act out a scene together. The players start to arrange the dramaturgy of the scene—in which Harlequin's wife is seduced—and although they never begin to play the actual scene, the performance is completed: Kemps makes a witty show of fooling his Italian fellow. While during the preparatory discussion Kemp has already played the seducer, Harlequin is unnoticeably transformed into a Pantaloon, i.e., a "jelous coxcomb" (scene ix, 102).

What happens here is that within the framework of the play, a real-life situation and a theatrical scene are compounded. Kemp performs the tempter without taking up the role conspicuously, and he also presents the clown persona, as usual. He is already "in role" just before the real play starts. Moreover, it is quite invisible and apparently natural that he is performing at that moment: it seems that he has been playing himself. In the case of improvisation, it is quite common that comic actors play upon their different personalities/stage personas. In *The Second Part of Henry VI*, for instance, Will Kemp playing the character Jack Cade is referred to as follows: "I have seen / Him caper upright like a wild Morisco / Shaking the bloody darts as he his bells" (3.1.363-65). Kemp, the famous morris dancer and comedian, thus, is interpreted by the audience as a player, a character as well as being a dancer.

Kemp's unconformity and his undetected dramaturgy call attention to the following facts: improvisation, in a broad sense, might represent uncontrollable behaviour compared to social norms. Also, it bears some kind of irony in the sense that the performer, with his extempore behaviour mocks patterns that are usually considered to be normal. What is more, the improviser always pretends to accommodate to general social rules, although in truth he is acting against them. This might be the reason why extempore acting is an enemy to well-regulated and orderly acting, and the improvising player is an outcast both in the theatre and in society.

Jonas Barish, in his significant study, analyzes Ben Jonson's ambiguous relationship with spectacle as the manifestation of antitheatricality within the theatre. Barish calls Jonson Shakespeare's "psychological antithesis" when stating that he had a deep suspicion towards theatricality as a form of behaviour (133). Jonson as a determined author certainly had a negative attitude toward performance for its ephemeral nature, which is obviously also a characteristic feature of improvisation. In Shakespeare's plays, we can also find seemingly negative allusions to comic acting and improvisation. At the same time, as Thorton S. Graves states, the ability to improvise, being associated with cleverness and wit—such as in the case of oratory—was an important skill for literary men as well as for clowns (431). In theatre, however, extempore acting was mainly attributed to the clown, and whenever a non-comic actor attempted it, he was considered to be clownish, as we shall see in *Hamlet*. Extempore performance is, on the one hand, held to be a source of humour, in which the enjoyment comes from breaking the (dramaturgical) rules dictated by the text or the scene. On the other hand, extemporization is always associated with chaotic and amoral behaviour. Hamlet's famous lines below, when he instructs the travelling players, might refer to Will Kemp.[6]

---

6   This is affirmed by David Mann (66) and Meredith Anne Skura (Skura 57), as well as Robert Weimann (Weimann 101).

> HAMLET. And let those
> that play your clowns speak no more than is
> set down for them; for there be of them that
> will themselves laugh, to set on some quantity of
> barren spectators to laugh too, though in the
> mean time some necessary questions of the play
> be then to be considered; that's villainous, and shows
> a most pitiful ambition in the fool that uses it. (3.2.43-50)[7]

It is possible to interpret Hamlet's speech as if it were an indication of Will Kemp's (or any clown's) unpleasant habit to ruin the dramaturgy with his interruptions. In Hamlet's opinion, when the comic player improvises, he distracts the audience's attention from "some necessary questions of the play," which would be important to perceive. The clown, however, "villainously" makes the audience laugh, thus, they will not pay attention to serious acting and to the narrative of the play. This can be brought into parallel with the actor's/theatre's sinful intention to distract the good Christian from business or family duties.

Another aspect of Hamlet's speech that I want to emphasize here is that extempore acting is the fool's "pitiful ambition." This view is quite similar to what antitheatricalists echoed with reference to actors in general: they are exhibitionists, vain, bumptious, and eager for applause. Hamlet's words might be read as an ironic reflection on this issue as well. These lines can be contrasted with another well-known theatrical speech in *Hamlet*, which elaborates on the decorum of proper and fine acting.

> HAMLET. [S]uit the action to
> the word, the word to the action; with this
> special observance, that you o'erstep not the
> modesty of nature; for anything so o'erdone is
> from the purpose of playing, whose end, both at
> the first and now, was and is, to hold, as 'twere
> the mirror up to nature. (3.2.20-26)

Here, Hamlet applies the basic rules of oratory to acting when he insists on reconciling action (outward movements) and diction (fine speaking). This suggests that it was an expectation towards the actor to accommodate his bodily gestures to his speech, i.e. to the requirements of the dramatic character and the text. From this quotation, it seems that early modern acting was required to follow the regulations of contemporary rhetoric, and that in the theatrical hierarchy it was the playwright's intention which was primary. Improvisation was the enemy of dramatists and contemporary "stage

---

7 Certainly, this is only one possible interpretation of Hamlet's lines, especially when one considers the differences between Q1, Q2 and the Folio versions. In Q1, Hamlet's monologue on clownery is longer, and it is quite clear that while he is criticizing and mocking extempore manners, at the same time, he is acting the same way. For further references (and for a thorough comparison of this scene in the three texts), see Pikli 119-40, especially 129-32.

directors" (like Hamlet), since it might "o'erstep the modesty of nature" and could not fulfil the real purpose of playing. That said, a performance on the early modern stage is inconceivable without a certain amount of improvisation, since, for instance, no reliable scripts were available nor systematic rehearsals held. So it is probable that Hamlet's (Shakespeare's) words put forward the rules of oratory with the intention of legitimizing early modern acting as an art form. It is quite unthinkable that Hamlet argues seriously against improvisation, especially because during the play, he presents clownish manners by pretending to be mad. Even if his feigned insanity is planned, his sentences appear to be extemporized. When, for instance, Polonius asks Hamlet if he knows him, he answers, "Excellent well, you are a fishmonger." (2.2.174), appearing to speak in the guise of a fool: simply, yet in an eccentric and ambiguous way. Later in the same scene, when he talks to Rosencrantz and Guildenstern, he answers their sentences with an extemporal attitude.

> ROSENCRANTZ./GUILDENSTERN. We'll wait upon you.
> HAMLET. No such matter; I will not sort you
> with the rest of my servants, for, to speak to you
> like an honest man, I am most dreadfully at-
> tended. But, in the beaten way of friendship,
> what make you at Elsinore?
> ROSENCRANTZ. To visit you, my lord; no other occasion.
> HAMLET. Beggar that I am, I am even poor in
> thanks; but I thank you: and sure, dear friends,
> my thanks are too dear a halfpenny. Were you
> not sent for? Is it your own inclining? Is it
> a free visitation? Come, come, deal justly with
> me: come, come; nay, speak. (2.2.278-91)

The fact that Hamlet compares himself to a beggar suggests that he is a "common player" here. The beggar was a common metaphor for early modern actors, since the way a company awaits applause at the end of the play is similar to the beggar's spontaneous plea for pennies. What is more, beggars were ranked as outcasts in society, just like actors, and also they often performed in order to get more attention and pennies.[8]

The mering of chaos and humour as crucial elements of improvisation is also observable in Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, the play which I am going to analyze in the latter part of my paper. Here, the character and the behaviour of Malvolio–with his feigned gentleman-like manners–might exemplify the antitheatrical attitude discussed above. Malvolio the steward is a vain and conceited "gentleman" (5.1.287) without

---

8   There are many beggar scenes in *Tarlton's Jests*. In one of them, the last word is always that of the panhandler, since he can smartly answer Tarlton's rhyme when the player gives him two pence (*Tarlton's Jests* 16). Tarlton and the beggar seem to be partners and fellow players in this episode, the beggar can even imitate the exact rhyme of Tarlton's lines. In another scene, the player tries to trick a poor man–even if the beggar asks for a penny first–by cheating away his last cent and buying ale. The old man, who, in this way, unintentionally invited Tarlton for a drink, saying that "where I was borne, that hee that payes for the drink must drink first," finally drinks all the ale (34).

means, giving him a double identity where he is at once nobleman and servant. He longs to become "Count Malvolio" by marrying his mistress, and his plans are the following:

> MALVOLIO. I will be proud, I will read politic
> authors, I will baffle Sir Toby, I will wash off
> gross acquaintance, I will be point-devise the
> very man. I will not fool myself, to let
> imagination jade me, for every reason excites to
> this, that my lady loves me. She did commend
> my yellow stockings of late, she did praise my
> leg being cross-gathered; and in this she mani-
> fests herself to my love, and, with a kind of
> injunction drives me to these habits of her
> liking. I thank my stars I am happy. I will
> be strange, stout, in yellow stockings, and cross-
> gathered, even with the swiftness of putting on. (2.5.176-88)

Malvolio with his spectacular presence in this scene is aware that he is (or is going to be) perceived just like an actor on stage. For this reason, self-possession and controlled gestures belong to his physical toolkit, which he uses to create the image of the confident, masculine, patriarchal, and decent statesman. This attitude, as well as his refined speec, may remind us of contemporary descriptions of the outstanding orator and actor, as well as of the perfect courtier, who "must accompany his actions, his gestures, his habits, in short, his every movement, with grace" (Castiglione 30). This stipulation might in turn call to mind Hamlet's words analyzed above.

In contrast with Malvolio's speech, Feste the clown's sentences represent ease and freedom, which stem in part from the characteristics of the fool figure. The fool (and its stage relative, the clown) is strongly related to the court jester who, with his ripostes, counterpointed noble attitudes and prudent comportment. He also functioned as a critic and a satirical commentator of the social system. Noticeably, not only dramatic characters but comic actors in the early modern theatre also used this tradition intentionally and effectively. A famous example is Richard Tarlton, whose court jests show that he occupied a high position in the social hierarchy thanks to his wit. With Queen Elizabeth, for instance, the ordinary royal-jester relationship allowed Tarlton to often ridicule persons and events in her majesty's noble environment.[9]

In act 1 scene 5, Olivia asks Malvolio's opinion of Feste, and Malvolio points out the "infirmity, that decays the wise, doth ever make the better fool" (1.5.81-82). In his reply, Feste, as often happened in the interaction of a nobleman and a fool, returns the

---

9 In *Tarlton's Jests*, there is a famous episode when Tarlton criticizes the amount of beer the Queen allows him to drink: "[H]e counterfaited a drunkard, and called for beere, which was brough immediately. Her Majestie, noting his humor, commanded that he should have no more; for, quoth shee, he will play the beast, and so shame himselfe. Feare not you, quoth Tarlton, for your beere is small enough. Whereat Her Majestie laughed heartily, and commanded that he should have enough" (*Tarlton's Jests* 5). Besides the fact that Tarlton plays the court jester here, this scene reinforces the fact that drunkenness was a well-known and oft-used personal/performative tool of the comic actor.

verbal insult with distorted elements of the same phrase: "God send you, sir, a speedy infirmity" (1.5.83),. Malvolio, for sure, is not well-born, but it is his wish to gain a title. Feste's sentence is typical, but exemplifies his ability to extemporize at the same time. So when Olivia addresses Malvolio again, he says:

> MALVOLIO. I marvel your ladyship takes delight in
> such a barren rascal: I saw him put down the
> other day with an ordinary fool that has no more
> brain than a stone. Look you now, he's out of
> his guard already; unless you laugh and minister
> occasion to him, he is gagged. I protest, I take
> these wise men, that crow so at these set kind of
> fools, no better than the fools' zanies. (1.5.88-95)

The case on "the other day" mentioned here could have been an interactive tavern impromptu, which was a common form of early modern comic performance of the age. Similar episodes can be found in *Tarlton's Jests* (1613) as well as Robert Armin's *Quips Upon Questions* (1600). They usually follow a question and answer format, where the point is to give a witty reply to a situation or the other performer's comment while the audience takes delight in the conversation. This pattern is often used by clowns and fools in early modern plays, as I have already pointed out when discussing the cases of Feste/Malvolio and Hamlet.

Here, what Malvolio reckons is that if Feste is not offered an "occasion", or not laughed at, he cannot come forward with humorous puns. In other words, he suggests that improvisation is not a creative act; the player always needs some vulgar topic or sentence to react to. Yet Feste has lost the verbal match with an "ordinary fool" who had "no more brain than a stone," which means that he is no more than a pitiable buffoon. Nevertheless, the audience, which is amused by the dialogue, is also likened to "fools' zanies."[10] Thus, Olivia's conceited steward looks down on both players and spectators, thereby embodying the antitheatricalists' attitude discussed above. His unnatural "noble" behaviour and his feigned rhetoric—which might be understood as a parody of "excellent acting," courtly manners or oratory—can be contrasted with the incalculable and seemingly disordered acting style that was typical of comic actors.

Feste, the fool was probably played by Robert Armin. Armin's other dramatic roles most likely included Touchstone, Carlo Buffone, Lavatch, Thersites, Passarello and the Fool in *King Lear* (Wiles 145). He was a literate clown and a dramatist; thus, we might suspect that he neglected real theatrical improvisation, because it is contradictory to authorial power. However, most of his written work thematizes fooling and clownery, often in a speculative way. He joined Shakespeare's company at the Curtain around

---

10 The mention of "zanies" is a reference to early modern Italian theatre, where it designated the trickster (servant) character as coming from the countryside. In English plays "zanies" is often the synonyms for bad actors, rogues or charlatans. See, for instance, Berowne's lines from *Love's Labour's Lost*: "Some carry-tale, some please-man, some slight zany, / Some mumble-news, some trencher-knight, some Dick, / That smiles his cheek in years, and knows the trick / To make my lady laugh when she's dispos'd / Told our intents before" (5.2.464-68).

1599 and followed them to the Globe as well. In *Tarlton's Jests*, we find reference to how he became the "adopted sonne to Tarlton." According to this story, however, their mutual attraction originated not in a common (physical) performance, but in Tarlton reading Armin's verse—written about an insolvent customer of his master, the goldsmith—on a wainscot:

> O world, why wilt thou lye?
> Is this Charles the great! I deny.
> Indeed Charles the great before,
> But now Charles the lesse, being poore. (*Tarlton's Jests* 22)7

Tarlton answered this rhyme with his own, and symbolically adopted Armin so that he could "enjoy [his] clownes sute after [him]" (23). This episode suggests that the two players were in strong collegial relationship due to their ability to extemporise.

Armin's (i.e., Feste's) verbal skills are perceptible in act 3 scene 1 of *Twelfth Night*, when he meets Viola/Cesario in Olivia's garden. In this accidental encounter, Feste plays music, and they start to converse about ordinary things. Just as in all everyday conversations, this episode is based on the participants' improvisation. In other words, Shakespeare's play dramatizes an extempore interaction which could even have happened in real life. Merging the impression of everyday talk and improvisatory (and theatricalized) jesting might suggest that as for the fool's identity, role play and civilian comportment cannot clearly be distinguished. Moreover, being aware of the fact that early modern dramatic roles were destined for particular actors, one might have the feeling that the player's (Armin's) own gags and ideas were used for writing this scene.

Later, however, they plunge into a more philosophical discussion of the nature of words when Viola says "they that dally nicely with words may quickly make them wanton" (3.1.17-19). If one interprets this sentence as referring to acting and social behaviour, it might mean that decent and polite words, although they are attractive, do not always transmit real values/the truth. Feste replies that "words are very rascals since bonds disgraced them" and "words are grown so false" (3.1.24-25, 27), which might indicate both the impossibility of faithfully documenting improvisation and the uncertainty of truth/reality. In a broader context, all this, of course, may be connected to the liminal status of Viola in the play, which Feste seems to be aware of. Viola, given her strange circumstances, has to extemporise a lot, which Feste might recognize, since it is his fundamental mode of existence. He is the "corrupter of words" (3.1.42) to Olivia; that is, he is able to turn anything "outward" in order to present its other side. Viola gives a very precise description of this when she says:

> VIOLA. This fellow's wise enough to play the fool,
> And to do that well craves a kind of wit:
> He must observe their mood on whom he jests,
> The quality of persons, and the time,
> And, like the haggard, check at every feather
> That comes before his eye. This is a practice
> As full of labour as a wise man's art;

> For folly that he wisely shows is fit;
> But wise men folly-fall'n, quite taint their wit. (3.1.68-76)

The comparison of wisdom and foolery fits very well into the context of contemporary fool literature, of which Robert Armin, with his *Foole upon Foole* (1600, 1605), was also an acknowledged representative.[11] At the same time, this summary shows that proper jesting—that is improvisation, which might result in the successful management of everyday life—requires the careful observation of others. No wonder that in plays, it is generally the fool who possesses profound and thorough understanding of the events and characters.

It seems that those Shakespearean characters who have deep insight into human nature—including the ones discussed in the present paper—tend to be blessed with the talent to improvise. This skill, however, always meets with the reprehension of others, who often criticize these characters in the name of proper/decorous behaviour. Regarding the context of early modern antitheatricality, one might agree that extempore manners represent those performative activities that—because of their irregular, uncontrollable nature—were disapproved of by the contemporary attackers of theatre. Nevertheless, extemporization is a characteristic feature of our everyday practices in general. Thus, I believe that the comic actor's performance might be a metaphor of ordinary people's strategies to react to the socially and ideologically embedded position in which they find themselves. As I see it, life is inconceivable without humour, irony and a hint of foolery.

Works Cited

Barish, Jonas. *The Antitheatrical Prejudice*. Berkeley, LA and London: U of Chicago P, 1981. Print.

Castiglione, Baldesar. *The Book of the Courtier (1561)*. Ed. Daniel Javitch. New York and London: Norton, 2002. Print.

Day, John. *The Travels of the Three English Brothers (1607). Three Renaissance Travel Plays*. Ed. Anthony Parr. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1995. Print.

De Marinis, Marco. "Történelem és történetírás." Trans. Kinga Dávid and Katalin Demcsák. *Színház-szemiográfia. Az angol és olasz reneszánsz drama és színház ikonográfiája és szemiotikája. Ikonológia és műértelmezés 8*. Ed. Katalin Demcsák and Attila Kiss. Szeged: JATEPress, 1999. 45-87. Print.

Graves, Thorton S. "Some Aspects of Extemporal Acting." *Studies in Philology* 19.44 (1922): 429-56. Print.

---

11 The term fool literature refers to a collection of satirical essays in the early modern period in Europe. These texts thematize the different archetypes of fools, jesters and vices, and they aim at criticizing the awkwardness and absurdity of contemporary society. The best known pieces are Erasmus' *Encomicum Moriae* (*In Praise of Folly*, 1509) and Sebastian Brant's *Das Narrenschiff* (*A Ship of Fools*, 1494).

Gurr, Andrew. "Shakespeare and the Actors of the Commedia dell'Arte." *Studies in the Commedia dell'Arte*. Ed. David J. George and Christopher J. Gossip. Cardiff: U of Wales P, 1993. 1-47. Print.

Henke, Robert. "Orality and Literacy in the Commedia dell'Arte and the Shakespearean Clown." *Oral Tradition* 11.2 (1996): 222-48. Print

Keefe, John, and Simon Murray, eds. *Introduction to Physical Theatres. A Critical Reader*. London and New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.

Landgraf, Edgar. *Improvisation as Art: Conceptual Challenges, Historical Perspectives*. New York: Continuum, 2011. Print.

Mann, David. *The Elizabethan Player*. London and New York: Routledge, 1990. Print.

Pikli, Natália. "The Prince and the Hobby-Horse. Shakespeare and the Ambivalence of Early Modern Popular Culture." *Journal of Early Modern Studies. Volume Two. Shakespeare and Early Modern Popular Culture* (2013): 119-40. Print.

Prynne, William. *Histrio-Mastix: The players scourge, or, Actors Tragaedie, divided into two parts : wherein it is largely evidenced, by divers Arguments ... that popular stage-plays ... are sinfull, heathenish, lewde, ungodly spectacles, and most pernicious corruptions ... and that the profession of play-poets, of stage players, together with the penning, acting, and frequenting of stage-plays, are unlawfull, infamous and misbeseeming Christians*. London: Printed by E.A. and W.I. for Michael Sparke, and are to be sold at the Blue Bible, in Greene Arbour, in little Old Bayly, 1633. Print.

Sawyer, Keith R. "Improvisation and the Creative Process. Dewey, Collingwood and the Aesthetics of Spontaneity." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism. Special Issue: Improvisation in the Arts* 58.2 (2000): 149-61. Print.

—. "The Improvisational Performance of Everyday Life." *Journal of Mundane Behavior* 2.2 (2001): n. pag. Web. 8 April 2014.

Shakespeare, William. *Complete Works*. Ed. W. J. Craig. Oxford: Oxford UP, 1966. Print.

Skura, Meredith Anne. *Shakespeare the Actor and the Purposes of Playing*. Chicago and London: The U of Chicago P, 1993. Print.

Tarlton's Jests and News Out of Purgatory: With Notes and Some Accounts of the Life of Tarlton (1613). Ed. J. O. Halliwell. London: Printed for the Shakespeare Society, 1844. Print.

Wickham, Glynne Herbert Berry, and William Ingram, eds. *English Professional Theatre, 1530-1660. Theatre in Europe: A Documentary History*. Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2000. Print.