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*What is the role of intuition in the process of  
improvisation?*

*A closer look at the working methods of Forced Entertainment,  
Gob Squad and Marble Crowd*

Monika Kiburyte

**Lokaverkefni til BA-prófs  
Listaháskóli Íslands  
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Vorönn 2021**

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Lokaverkefni til BA-prófs frá Sviðshöfundabraut

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## **Abstract**

In order to answer the question: *What is the role of intuition in the process of improvisation?*- this essay begins with a personal need and search for an explanation of the mysterious and mystical element of intuition. This journey tries to explain the importance of improvisation as a creative strategy in devised theatre. Additionally, in psychology the well known theory of the state of *flow* has been looked at carefully. The benefits of this mental state for the creative process are then identified.

Improvisation and intuition as creative practises are looked at closely. Through these lenses, successful contemporary theatre collectives: Forced Entertainment, Gob Squad and Marble Crowd have been examined carefully. A well documented process allows us to track and name the vital elements in all these collectives and identify their different approaches. Lastly, their methods were compared by finding similarities and pinpoint differences.

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## **Introduction**

The pure joy of the creative process can hit when you at least expect it. In my case, it happened during the last year of studies. It began with a workshop led by Marble Crowd, a collective that is relatively new in the field of performance here, in Iceland. They managed to put on a spell on me. One of their grand performances "Moving Mountains" (2018) was shown in the National Theatre. It seemed that every decision was based on pure improvisation. My eyes could not identify how many ideas were already planted in the process, and how many were just spontaneously made each moment. This confusion fascinated me.

During their workshop, the whole process and approaches seemed exactly what my mind and body were craving for. The creative process was perfectly balanced. During the workshop, their approach was based on improvisation and the final result was built from the scenes that were carefully selected. The feeling that was left after showing was so great that I wanted it to last forever. It seemed that this collective planted a nourishing feeling in me.

The same method and approach was applied in my graduation piece. I just had a topic and material - love letters. The whole structure of this piece was created through improvisation. The small puzzle pieces were gradually assembled into a big picture. Though, not everything went smoothly during the creative process. Suddenly, when I needed to explain and answer the main questions: why, to whom, where and so on, I strongly felt that the joy of this process was slowly disappearing. I started to question what could be the reason behind it. Why must everything make sense and have an explanation on stage? It seemed that suddenly all the nourishing feelings that I felt before slowly disappeared.

As far as I am concerned, one of the factors that brought the greatest feelings into this process was following my inner voice, or intuition. Not filtering yourself and your actions, just following a spontaneous route. The route that is completely new and exciting. The route that is always leading you to the unknown. The route that could be also dangerous. The route that could be completely wrong. The route that is similar to a stage of dreaming. The route, where you are not alone. The route, where you feel capable of doing everything. The route that gives you an extra sharp sense. The route is addictive, and You want it never to end.

Personal experience led me to an unanswered question - *What is the role of intuition in the process of improvisation?* The aim of this essay is to broaden the current knowledge in performing arts on the link between intuition and improvisation.

To my understanding, intuition lacks a deeper understanding. This paper begins with an attempt to identify and frame *intuition*. The next chapter investigates the idea of *state of flow* and importance of it while creating. For the purpose of this essay an analytical approach is used to get a deeper grasp of how it works practically. For that, three contemporary collectives: Forced Entertainment, Gob Squad and the already mentioned before, Marble Crowd are closely looked at - mainly through the lens of improvisation as a creative strategy. Last but not least, all three collectives are compared.

This essay is a venture to celebrate a vital layer that is not clearly visible to the audience.

## 1. On intuition

The word *intuition* demands a certain understanding. According to the dictionary, intuition (lat. *intueri* - consider) is the power or faculty of attaining direct knowledge or cognition without evident rational thought and inference.<sup>1</sup> From my standpoint, intuition is a perception of possibility: the acquisition of information not by directly observing, reasoning or concluding the world, but by the direct emergence of an idea. Additionally, perception of truth can be based on imagination, empathy, processing previous experience at the subconscious level.

For the father of analytical psychology - Carl Jung, intuition is ““perception via the unconscious”: using sense-perception only as a starting point, to bring forth ideas, images, possibilities, ways out of a blocked situation, a mostly unconscious process”.<sup>2</sup>

Some people would mix intuition with a sixth sense, inner voice or flair. We can also find other synonyms for intuition, such as instinct or insight<sup>3</sup>. For a deeper understanding, we must distinguish intuition from instinct and insight: “an instinct is a reaction that is innate, for example, shutting one’s eyelid automatically in response to a puff of cold air. It is important to distinguish the two concepts by the fact that, contrary to instincts, intuition represents learned behavior.”<sup>4</sup> And regarding insight: “Insight means seeing into the structure of a problem or issue. Clearly, one can achieve insight into a problem in an intuitive manner.”<sup>5</sup>

It seems to me that intuition often sounds like a phenomenon that does not know how to manifest itself in our lives. Mostly, it appears suddenly and unexpectedly. Moreover, intuition is a connection with one's inner self, which is often overshadowed by external noise, impressions, thoughts or emotions.<sup>6</sup> In my judgment, it seems quite easy to confuse what intuition is telling you with thoughts affected by emotions. When there is a feeling of fear, some doubts arrive: "do not do it, you would not succeed", "I have too little experience, so it's better not to do that" and so on. Alternatively, if we are in a good mood, we overestimate our

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<sup>1</sup> Dictionary by Merriam-Webster, accessed 19 April 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/intuition>

<sup>2</sup> Carl Gustav Jung. *Psychological Types* (Princeton University Press, 1971), 25.

<sup>3</sup> Matthew D. Lieberman “Intuition: A Social Cognitive Neuroscience Approach,” *Psychological Bulletin* Vol.126, nr. 1 (2000): 110, accessed 6 May, 2021, <https://www.scn.ucla.edu/pdf/Intuition.pdf>

<sup>4</sup> Robin M. Hogarth, “Intuition: A Challenge for Psychological Research on Decision Making,” *Psychological inquiry* Vol.21, nr.4, (2010): 339, accessed 20 April 2021, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25767206?seq=1>

<sup>5</sup> Hogarth, “Intuition: A Challenge,” 339

<sup>6</sup> Rollin McCraty, Maria Zayas, “Intuitive intelligence, Self-regulation, and Lifting Consciousness”, *Global advances in health and medicine*, Vol.3, nr.2 (2014): 58, accessed 6 May 2021, <https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC4010961/>

strength, expecting more from the world than it can provide at the time. It seems that intuition can be lost in everyday worries, creating an internal imbalance in which it is difficult to separate intuition from a mix of emotions. It should be *heard* regardless of mood, and manifests in a state when the mind and emotions are calm.<sup>7</sup>

My thought is that we all have intuition in us, but not all of us are guided by it or able to hear it. From my experience, it is difficult to hear the voice of intuition. Moreover, intuition is better when a person is in tune with himself and the world around him: being in solitude with oneself and the ability to be here and now, in the present moment, observing and feeling the environment is perfect for cultivating your intuition.<sup>8</sup> Meditation is a great way to train your listening. It distracts you from external noise and helps to concentrate and understand feelings, thoughts and hear your inner voice.<sup>9</sup>

The idea that women are better with tuning and feeling her intuition is not always correct.<sup>10</sup> However, women have more opportunities to feel it because they are more sensitive to the environment. Women are more affected by emotions than logic, and men are more logical than emotional. A man may feel the intuition, but he will not follow it because it may sound illogical to him, but that does not mean that men are weaker in finding their *true voice* than women.<sup>11</sup> The strength of intuition manifests itself when the mind and feelings cooperate.<sup>12</sup>

Intuition can turn into paranoia when a person's incorrect intuition is overpowering other feelings. Also, the transformation of intuition into paranoia can be caused by a person's personality to notice more negative things in life more than positive elements. Because of these characteristics, more attention is paid to the threat and how to avoid it. Then thoughts dictated by bad moods or fears, mistrust can become a self-fulfilling prophecy. It means that the person is paying more attention to those environmental factors that confirm the "bad feeling".

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<sup>7</sup> Patricia Farrell, "The power of female intuition", *Webmd*, 10 August 2012. Accessed 6 May, 2021. <https://www.webmd.com/balance/features/power-of-female-intuition>.

<sup>8</sup> Rollin McCraty, "Intuitive intelligence, Self-regulation, and Lifting Consciousness".

<sup>9</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology of optimal experience* (New York: Harper Perennial, 1990), 103.

<sup>10</sup> Patricia Farrell, "The power of female intuition".

<sup>11</sup> Grant Soosalu, Suzanne Henwood, Arun Deo, "Head, Heart, and Gut in Decision Making: Development of a Multiple Brain Preference Questionnaire", *Sage Journals*, (2019), accessed 10 May, 2021, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/full/10.1177/2158244019837439>.

<sup>12</sup> Patricia Farrell, "The power of female intuition".

Recently in society, the term *counter-intuitive* got the spotlight and became more fashionable.<sup>13</sup> There is a danger to mix or blend intuition with allowing us to construct knowledge for common sense. It means that intuition is suggesting a normalized response to a problem. The moment of being mysterious is suddenly gone. Moreover, in this concept, intuitive decision becomes something close to traditional thinking, which is opposite from the nature of intuition.<sup>14</sup>

After all, intuition has many ways to manifest in our daily life decisions. It is important to emphasise its mysterious and mystical connotations. Regarding all the explanations analysed before, it is clear that intuition is an ally with our subconsciousness, previous experiences, sensitivity towards the environment and yourself. To be clear, intuition appears instantly when we actively take part in the world around us. Intuition is a speedy, integrated sense (or judgment), appearing without the effect of our rational thought. In the next chapter a deeper understanding and importance of intuition in the process of improvisation is examined. Immediately, the need to investigate improvisation is here, which leads us to the third chapter of this essay. But before that, I believe, it would be clever to have a deeper look at the state of flow. The quality of this state is increased engagement and improved performance, that leads toward fruitful creativity.

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<sup>13</sup> Simon Murray, "Keywords in performing training," *Theatre, Dance and Performance training* Vol.6 (2015): 49.

<sup>14</sup> Simon Murray, "Keywords in performing training".

## 2. The state of *flow*

Hungarian-American psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi devoted most of his life to the study of the phenomena of happiness. He left a unique mark in the field of positive psychology by developing the theory of *flow*. In the author's words, flow is a state when we lose our sense of time, and forget all worries, anxieties, and fears.<sup>15</sup> We feel completely immersed in what we are doing: we forget our physical needs, time, and our environment as if we are going beyond our limits. This state is accompanied by self-confidence and inner clarity - we feel what we need to do and how - flow is thus characterized by a sense of pleasure and a high, effortless concentration.<sup>16</sup>

According to Csikszentmihalyi, the theory of flow can be applied in different areas of life - at work, study, and leisure. The main principle is motivation and dedication.<sup>17</sup> Any favorite activity can bring a sense of flow. This experience leads to a feeling toward resistance of wanting to go back to reality. The more often we feel the state of flow, the less vital energy is wasted and the more joy we experience.<sup>18</sup>

To my understanding, thoughts dictate feelings: "When I set a goal to find out why some are able to feel happy and others are not, I started researching two groups of people. The first - those who lost everything in life, including health and loved ones, but did not give-up. They discovered a new meaning in life, new stimuli to improve, and became happier than those whom fate seemed to pamper. The second group is creative people: artists, musicians, writers, scientists. When they were immersed in their activities, the whole outside world disappeared. They were in a special condition, similar to drug intoxication," writes Csikszentmihalyi.<sup>19</sup> Many performers would admit an addictive sensation while performing.

Flow usually occurs in the phase of challenging but personalized activities. The actions seem effortless and automatic, although concentration and a high level of control is there. The objectives are clear and unambiguous feedback on performance is obtained. This condition is characterized by a low fear of evaluation from others. Perceptions of time may have changed as well.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology*, 4.

<sup>16</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology*, 71.

<sup>17</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology*, 139.

<sup>18</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology*, 163.

<sup>19</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology*, 154.

<sup>20</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology*, 66.

The state of flow can be experienced in a variety of activities, from playing chess to climbing mountains.<sup>21</sup> Although these activities may be very different, the state of flow itself is described similarly. However, there are individual differences in how often and how intensely this condition is experienced. The propensity for a state of flow is positively related to self-esteem, self-awareness and perceived opportunities.

The trait of awareness (competence, order, duty, goal pursuit, self-discipline, prudence) is positively related to a state of flow. Most likely, this connection is seen because high awareness involves emotional and motivational mechanisms. In addition, highly aware people are more likely to spend extra time mastering and challenging their tasks.

To sum up, the flow is a mental state, where you fully dive into your beloved activity. The sense of time is disappearing, high concentration is dominant. The world around you suddenly vanishes. Is highly associated with creativity, productivity and high level of results. From my own experience, there is nothing more gratifying than the time spent on stage with motivation, enjoyment and curiosity. Like any state, that leads toward euphoria, flow could also be dangerous and cause side effects. Again, like with everything, balance must be reached. Additionally, Csikszentmihalyi claims that the state of flow can be reached by working with other people.<sup>22</sup> And as we know, theatre or performance practice is circulating not only around one person. It greatly includes others.

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<sup>21</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology*, 91.

<sup>22</sup> Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi, *Flow: The psychology*, 183.

### 3. On improvisation

To my understanding, theatre always was and is will be group work, where the pursuit of a common goal unites people. In conventional theatre, the hierarchy is visible: the director and playwright take a vital role in it.<sup>23</sup> In the 1970's to provoke and change this type of relationship, in the peak of other liberating movements (women's rights, anti-war, hippie), artists tried to challenge the traditional form of theatre.<sup>24</sup> Here, we meet the rise of so-called *devised theatre*: "It is determined and defined by a group of people who set up an initial framework or structure to explore and experiment with ideas, images, concepts, themes, or specific stimuli that might include music, text, objects, paintings, or movement."<sup>25</sup> In other words: a form of theatre, where the starting point is not an interpretation of an already written text but an idea born from the collaboration between a group of people.<sup>26</sup>

The essence of devising is collective work.<sup>27</sup> According to British researcher Sally Mackey, the principles of collective work are:

- to experiment with style;
- to actualize social, cultural or political issues;
- to integrates other art forms;
- to question the traditional role of the spectator as a passive member;
- to experiment with non-traditional theatre spaces and places;
- to promote the multifunctionality of the performer.<sup>28</sup>

Because of the non-existence of a leader, the role of the performer involves broader participation in different processes, such as improvisation, research and open discussion.<sup>29</sup> Performers become devisers or vice versa.

The importance of improvisation as a creative strategy has already been seen in ancient collective forms, such as *Commedia dell'arte*: "Many forms of improvisation theatre today claims to be progedy of commedia dell'arte, but perhaps the most similar is "interactive theatre" in which characters, plots and setting are pre-established, but the performance

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<sup>23</sup> Alison Oddey, *Devising theatre a practical and theoretical handbook*, (New York: Routledge, 1994), 4.

<sup>24</sup> Alison Oddey, *Devising theatre a practical and theoretical handbook*, 8.

<sup>25</sup> Alison Oddey, *Devising theatre a practical and theoretical handbook*, 1.

<sup>26</sup> Alison Oddey, *Devising theatre a practical and theoretical handbook*, 162.

<sup>27</sup> Deidre Heddon, Jane Milling, *Devising Performance. A critical history* (New York: Pelgrave, 2006), 4.

<sup>28</sup> Sally Mackey. *Practical Theatre – A Post16 Approach*, (Cheltenham: Stenley Thornes, 1997), 114.

<sup>29</sup> Alison Oddey, *Devising theatre a practical and theoretical handbook*, 65.

unfolds through improvisation interaction with audience members and particular situations”.<sup>30</sup> The commentary is on political and social life and a structured frame of performance, but essentially, improvisation is the key which led this form to leave a mark in the history of theatre.

In the book *Improvisation in drama, theatre and performance: history, practise, theory* improvisation analyzed not only in the frame of theatre, but more as a social, political, therapeutic element and the primal human mode of operating. “Improvisation is not just a style or an acting technique; it is a dynamic principle operating in many different spheres, an independent and transformative way of being, knowing and doing”.<sup>31</sup> Another description of *improvisation* is “a productive and performative mode of behaviour”<sup>32</sup> which allows us to assume that improvisation is also a principle of human behavior, leading towards personal development and creativity.

To my knowledge, postdramatic collectives use complex forms of improvisation. The act of acting and creating is happening simultaneously, where performers take the role of creator. While this coalition brings a feeling of freedom in creative decisions, at the same time, it raises the level of stress. Moreover, acting based on improvisation brings a great challenge: how to make the greatest decision in a short amount of time. From my own experience, the right amount of stressful situations/moments helps me to concentrate and reach desirable results while performing.

In addition, improvisation as a creative technique, raises non traditional approaches towards collective work. It requires a smooth and effective interaction between the performers on stage. Elimination of the director brings a flat structure, where everyone creates collectively and shares responsibility<sup>33</sup>. The case has been made that the *group mind* brings a higher amount of intelligence: “In the world outside the improv, the more minds are involved in an undertaking, the lower intelligence of the group (...) The situation is very different with improvisation. We already know that people have incredible individual capacities. Unlike the real world, however, when a number of players are on stage, their intelligence is actually increasing.”<sup>34</sup> This draws attention to the strong value of

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<sup>30</sup> Wesley Vander Lugt, *Living Theodrama: Remaining Theological Ethics* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2014), 88.

<sup>31</sup> Anthony Frost, Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in drama, theatre and performance: history, practise, theory*, (London: Red globe press, 2016), 3.

<sup>32</sup> Anthony Frost, *Improvisation in drama, theatre and performance: history, practise, theory*, xi.

<sup>33</sup> Alison Oddey, *Devising theatre a practical and theoretical handbook*, 65.

<sup>34</sup> Jeanny Leep, *Theatrical improvisation: Short form, long form, and scheidt- based improv* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 85.

improvisation as a creative strategy: the most original results collectives can reach, where the role of a leader or director (who expresses his/her) visions does not exist.

Through the form of improvisation, participatory layers of the audience are activated.<sup>35</sup> A unique approach toward the audience challenges the dramaturgy.<sup>36</sup> Instead of thrifting from written material, performers find inspiration in the “here and now”: when a linear story does not exist, the drama can be seen as clay in the performer's hands.

It would be hard to disagree that intuition plays a significant role in the process of improvisation: “Within the improvisational process used by theatre companies across various types of devising practices, there is a remarkable repetition of the idea of intuition as a structuring element of that process.”<sup>37</sup> It is important to address that intuition functions inconsistently within improvisation in the devising process: “Intuition, instinct, and aesthetic choice are vital elements in any devising process, which can never be directly taught or learnt.”<sup>38</sup> It appears that intuition is an inseparable component of the devising approach.

To sum up, devised theatre was born from a need to manifest traditional text-based theatre to liberate and create equality between participants. Devising is all about participation, motivation, creativity, forming and selecting ideas. Collective work is thus the foundation of devised theatre. Through improvisation, collectives construct their performances, where improvisation is understood as a transformative method that leads towards authentic decisions in the creative process. In devising, the role of intuition can be identified. It is a significant element, which can't be taught or learned. Here we meet the need to explore three different wildly successful collectives: Forced Entertainment, Gob Squad and Marble Crowd, with the task of looking deeper into their unique and successful approaches through the gaze of improvisation colliding with intuition.

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<sup>35</sup> Deidre Heddon, *Devising Performance. A critical history*, 93.

<sup>36</sup> Deidre Heddon, Jane Milling, *Devising Performance. A critical history*, 221.

<sup>37</sup> Deidre Heddon, *Devising Performance. A critical history*, 9.

<sup>38</sup> Deidre Heddon, *Devising Performance. A critical history*, 151.

## 4. Contemporary collectives

### 4.1 Forced Entertainment

The British collective *Forced Entertainment* is one of the brightest theatre groups globally, raising the most burning questions and issues in the field of contemporary theatre. The Sheffield-based troupe has been active since 1984 and has toured many stages and festivals worldwide with its performances. The ensemble consists of six leading creators: Tim Etchells (artistic director), Robin Arthur, Richard Lowdon (artist), Claire Marshall, Cathy Naden, Terry O'Connor.<sup>39</sup>

The reason why all six people gather together is to “explore and explode the genre, the narrative and the theater itself”.<sup>40</sup> Just after graduation, eight friends who were studying and experimenting together knew that this was not the end of their journey. The first glimpse of using intuition approached in their wish to form a collective. In the interview for *Aesthetica Magazine*, Tim Etchell said: “I think we were lucky, in a way. We were friends who met at University. We made various things together whilst studying and from that experience we had the intuition that there was a dynamic conversation, that there were projects we could make together, questions that we could approach. That intuition proved to be correct – that was lucky! We could just as easily have been wrong.”<sup>41</sup>

Forced Entertainment usually does not work with a pre-prepared text. Creating their performance begins in the rehearsal hall: discussing ideas, browsing costume boxes, trying to create dialogues, listening to music, improvising various scenes before something starts to shape.<sup>42</sup> Some of the presented works are a continuation of a previous work. Forced Entertainment are fans of recycling and reusing their material. In general, their creative methods can represent the slightly messy and chaotic, at least initially.

Improvisation plays a significant role in collective work for a group that represents devised theatre. Forced Entertainment is the advocate of a mix of *pure* and *structured/applied*

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<sup>39</sup> “Sheffield's Forced Entertainment win International Ibsen Award”, BBC, 18 March 2021, accessed 30 April, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/entertainment-arts-35833592>.

<sup>40</sup> “Sheffield's Forced Entertainment win International Ibsen Award”, BBC.

<sup>41</sup> *Aesthetica*, “Interview with artistic director of Forced Entertainment, Tim Etchell”, *Aesthetica Magazine* (2014), accessed 24 April 2021, <https://aestheticamagazine.com/interview-director-forced-entertainment-tim-etchells/>.

<sup>42</sup> TheCornerShopPR. 2016, 16 September, *Forced Entertainment's Tim Etchells on 30 years of work & winning a landmark Ibsen award*, accessed 24 April 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3bjVQIsiCs>.

improvisations. The essence of pure improvisation is freedom, with no rehearsals or scripts.<sup>43</sup> For the structured improvisation that Forced Entertainment uses, following the rules is a key element.<sup>44</sup> As they say, each member is a kid on a playground ready to play the game.<sup>45</sup> Nevertheless, the game requires discipline. Most likely the rules should be easily identified for the audience. But as a good player they need to be in tune with each other, not to create and play their own game suddenly. It is also not about being a good performer, but a good performing team.<sup>46</sup>

In my experience, improvisation as a creative tool requires trust between the performers. However, with trust comes the risk of failure. Moreover, artistic intuition as a move invites risk to come along. Luckily, grateful failure is more than welcome in this collective. Tim Etchells' unique vision for investment reveals an element of the vulnerability of the performer: "Investment is the line of connection between performer and their text or their task. When it works it is private, and often on the very edge of work. Like all the best performances it is before us, but not for us. (...) To be bound up with what you are doing, to be at risk with it, to be exposed by it. As performers we recognise but cannot always control these moments - they happen, perhaps, in spite of us. Investment is slippery and evasive and it isn't often found where we'd expect it (...) Investment happens when we're hitting the new ground, when we don't know, where we can't say, when we feel compromised, complicit, bound up, without recourse to an easy position".<sup>47</sup> Investment makes performers dedicated and foolish at the same time with the greatest ambition to risk everything for a better performance and for a better relationship with the audience. Risk, on the other side, can be a bit more tricky: "Risk is the thing we are striving for in the performance but not the thing we are looking for. We look for something else and hope (or pray for the gods we don't believe in) that risk shows up. We know it then we see it, I'm sure of that. Risk surprises us, always fleeting - we are slightly out of control."<sup>48</sup> It seems risk is an unavoidable element in the process of improvisation. Either it can lead to success or burn up all the confidence.

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<sup>43</sup> Roger Dean, Hazel Smith, *Improvisation Hypermedia and the Arts since 1945*, (London: Routledge, 2013), 56.

<sup>44</sup> Judith Helmer, Florian Malzacher, "Not even a game anymore" *The theatre of forced Entertainment*, (Berlin: Alexander Verlag, 2004), 173.

<sup>45</sup> TheCornerShopPR. 2, *Forced Entertainment's Tim Etchells on 30 years of work & winning a landmark Ibsen award*, video, accessed 24 April, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w3bjVQIsiCs>.

<sup>46</sup> Judith Helmer, Florian Malzacher, "Not even a game anymore" *The theatre of forced Entertainment*, 174.

<sup>47</sup> Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments* (New York: Routledge, 1999), 49.

<sup>48</sup> Tim Etchells, *Certain Fragments*, 49.

For the sake of exhausting the material on stage, plenty of repetition is needed. Repetition is a tiring process: mentally and physically. In this way, physical memory is created. The more different moves and situations you experienced, the more your body is likely to know how to act. Forced Entertainment are not interested in creating characters, but also not in staying themselves. Something in between is desired. Some critics claim that this collective is too authentic.

Duration pieces help to dive into the decisive elements of improvisation. In their first duration piece, “12 am. Awake & Looking down”(1993), one single scene of the previous performance was expanded to a period of eleven hours. Clear rules and frame played the key elements. Of course, the preparation for the challenge requires many hours spent in the rehearsal room: improvising, reflecting, selecting and then improvising again. Nevertheless, with that comes a great gift: “Having lived and worked together for years, Forced Entertainment performers’ instincts were honed so now they were able to quickly grasp an opportunity and mood as they arose on stage, and then either intensify or counteract them”.<sup>49</sup> It would be interesting to hear a deeper contemplation from Forced Entertainment on the word *instincts*.

Like in a mundane life different synonyms are leading intuition and devising process in not an exemption: “However, somewhat paradoxically many practitioners, whilst insisting on the play of chance and randomness, of ‘fondness’ and just ‘using what comes up’, simultaneously apply the term ‘intuition’, employing phrases such as ‘waiting for things to happen’ or ‘knowing when something feels right’ to explain processes of devising. Thus Etchells, reflecting on the ‘accidents’ of devising, stated that though ‘nobody really intended it. . . everybody knows when it happens that it’s a really perfect thing for you to work with’.”<sup>50</sup> Furthermore, numerous contemporary theatre collectives have managed to find a particular terminology for mysterious aspects in the creative process: Back to back theatre calls it *dual or double consciousness*; Sleepwalk collective calls it *perfect harmony and awful clarity*; Padmini Chettur calls it *spectacularity and performativity*.<sup>51</sup>

For the performance “The Coming Storm” (2012) multiple stories have been analyzed, where repetition plays a significant role, Tim Etchell admits: “The first space that we worked in had a piano in it, which was incorporated into the show. Inevitably, if

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<sup>49</sup> Judith Helmer, Florian Malzacher, “Not even a game anymore” *The theatre of forced Entertainment*, 174.

<sup>50</sup> Deidre Heddon, *Devising Performance. A critical history*, 198.

<sup>51</sup> Teresa Brayshaw, Anna Fenemore and Noel Witts, *The Twenty-First Century Performance Reader*, (New York: Routledge, 2020), 9.

something's in the room, it's not long before somebody starts to fiddle with it. We work a lot on gut feeling and the fact that something is funny or upsetting, but we don't know why. There's a lot of intuition involved." Here, we meet a clear recognition toward intuition at least in the first stages in the creative process.

After all, being a successful collective, Forced Entertainment did not reach glory without hard, continuous work. With many hours spent in the rehearsal room, with open discussions around the material, the collective mind (group mind) formed a specific language that is clear to the members of Forced Entertainment. As noted before, Forced Entertainment acknowledges the term intuition and the importance of it in their creative work. Initially, performance makers have been guided by it to form the collective. As Forced Entertainment uses and already knows, material is a starting point and the group tries to exhaust it with a numerous amount of improvisation. Here we see the inevitability of learned behavior. Previous experience is one of the bases of intuition. Forced Entertainment draws awareness to vulnerability and the factor of risk. Risk and investment comes along with improvisation in one package. Moreover, immediate feedback and discussions around the material is a signal of the state of flow. Furthermore, the sense of reward and satisfaction, the love for what they do also kept Forced Entertainment active in the scene for more than 30 years.

## 4.2 Gob Squad

Gob Squad is a group of visual artists (none of them have a traditional theatre background) from the United Kingdom and Germany, formed in 1994. This collective creates performances, installations and video art. Naming Berlin as their creative home, the artists present their work in various spaces: offices, shops, train stations, car parks, hotels, galleries and theaters.<sup>52</sup> Through the language of film, television and popular music, Gob Squad explores the complexity of the absurd life. Immersive theater and the principles of the collective mind are featured in their performances.

For contemporary theatre practitioners, it is rather normal to break the fourth wall by inviting the audience to play a significant role in performance making.<sup>53</sup> The spectator is also given a unique role - he/she is encouraged to go from being a passive observer to becoming a kind of co-creator.<sup>54</sup> Participating in an *immersive theatre* piece the viewer is only allowed to control or modify the environment of the piece in a certain way. At a level that does not jeopardize the further course of the performance.<sup>55</sup>

The method of improvisation in a practice of Gob Squad is used.<sup>56</sup> One of their popular performances, “Super Night Shot” (2003), toured around the globe. It is presented in the form of a game.<sup>57</sup> Each time this performance is different, and the main reason why it happens in that way, is because of improvisation. Before running out of space the performer has no clue how those 60 minutes will be: maybe they will be greeted with a smile or with a curse, all the technology may fail or the worst - nobody will agree to be *the hero*. In the process of improvisation with the audience, performers must be gentle and caring about other people. The Gob Squad once had this task: “Be at home in the city. Be open for what is there. Slow down, don’t have a goal, don’t hold back, and don’t avoid eye contact with strangers. Come into eye contact with passers-by.”<sup>58</sup>

Vulnerability towards endless possibilities in an immersive piece makes the performer tune with a situation that he/she is in: “Therefore, the main preparation for me is to engage

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<sup>52</sup> Gob Squad, *Gob Squad Reader*, (2015), 3.

<sup>53</sup> Gob Squad, *Gob Squad Reader*, (2015), 67.

<sup>54</sup> Gob Squad, *Gob Squad Reader*, (2015), 96.

<sup>55</sup> Gob Squad, *Gob Squad Reader*, (2015), 54.

<sup>56</sup> Oslo international acting festival, 2016, 07 June, *Day 3 Oslo International Acting Festival 2012: Gob Squad - Post-dramatic theater*, accessed 01 May 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xrrFzXY108s>.

<sup>57</sup> Oslo international acting festival, *Day 3 Oslo International Acting Festival 2012: Gob Squad - Post-dramatic theater*.

<sup>58</sup> Gob Squad, *Gob Squad Reader*, (2015), 100.

myself internally within the improvised sections: to be relaxed, to be attentive to others, and to listen. In the beginning this uncertainty in the improvised scenes made me very nervous. Now I know that it is best when one simply lets everything calmly unfold”.<sup>59</sup> Here, we meet manifestations of the state of flow, where the mind and body is calm.

Moreover, improvisation as a creative strategy in the form of immersive theatre requires the performer to find instant solutions. Immersive theatre is highly dependent on the imaginations and openness (artistic thinking) of the performer in which the viewers are participating.<sup>60</sup> Regardless of the characteristics or expression of the genre the images created by the performers must be both convincing and flexible.<sup>61</sup>

Here, again, we meet the risk and factor of failing in the act of improvisation. The possibility of it: “Risk has become an integral part of our work. The unforeseen and those elements that we cannot plan and are not able to predict and make up a large part of what interests us about Performance and Arts. In our work, we often seek out encounters with passers-by, an interaction with the audience, and the conditions and contingency of the streets. We do it because we want to surprise and challenge ourselves, and we want to grow and develop as artists and performers.”<sup>62</sup> Gob Squad openly acknowledges this factor. Instead of scaring it away, risk becomes a driving force to move forward.

Unfortunately, after investigating Gob Squad’s working methods I did not manage to find a single direct identification for the term intuition. In my opinion, there is a possibility that intuition intertwines/hides under several terms or techniques: rhythm, tempo, impetus and pauses. “In order to lend rhythm to this “reality” and our improvised games we use the set and pre-arranged moments in time as a means of bringing all of the performers together in small choreographies or composed images or small moments of rest. To the audience member, these set moments occur surreptitiously, which is why the synchronization looks “as if by magic” to them. We call these moments “magic moments” or “harries”. This term was originally a code word which helped us to refer to this agreed moment within the improvisation without it being understood by the audience”.<sup>63</sup> In the interview Gob Squad admits, that when the performance is “in trouble” the method to solve it comes from playing with pauses, tempo, rhythm, and impetus: “In order to retain some form of control over the

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<sup>59</sup> Gob Squad, *artistic webpage*, accessed 15 May 2021, <https://www.gobsquad.com/about-us/confessions-of-a-collaborator/>.

<sup>60</sup> James Frieze, *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*, (London: Palgrave Macmillian, 2017), 133.

<sup>61</sup> James Frieze, *Reframing Immersive Theatre: The Politics and Pragmatics of Participatory Performance*, 148.

<sup>62</sup> Gob Squad, *Gob Squad Reader*, (2015), 34.

<sup>63</sup> Gob Squad, *Gob Squad Reader*, 32.

situation and to incorporate a dramatic structure, the performers almost subconsciously avoid moments of emptiness and boredom in the same way they avoid the breaking of taboos and rules. They take care of tempo, rhythm, impetus and pauses in this way, depending on the course of the evening. It is important that the performers have a broad scope of actions at their disposal in order not to be forced into using just one. At the same time, however, they must apply the required openness to be ready to react to external impulses that might come their way.”<sup>64</sup>

Again, we meet only Gob Squad’s explicit terminology and language. Although the element of magic can be associated with intuitive decisions, it is unclear if this collective would see it in the same way. While reading their “Gob Squad Reader” on collective work and approaches in their work, I did not manage to find a single word that clearly identifies the word intuition. It allows me to speculate and draw a conclusion about the lack of awareness regarding this term. To my understanding, intuition possibly hides under tempo, rhythm, impetus or pauses. Intuition requires to be in tune with oneself, when mind and body are in collaboration. The members of Gob Squad acknowledge the importance of openness, flexibility and calmness regarding reaching better creative results. In this layer, the attempt to reach a state of flow is visible. The factor of risk is playing an important role for this collective. An open interaction with the audience leads toward many different unplanted endings. This element is a driving force for Gob Squad and a matter for artistic growth. As for many postdramatic collectives, the act of improvisation is the main brick in the creative process of Gob Squad.

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<sup>64</sup> Teresa Brayshaw, Anna Fenemore and Noel Witts, *The Twenty-First Century Performance Reader*, 244.

### 4.3 Marble Crowd

Marble Crowd is a collective, consisting of five artists: Katrin Gunnarsdottir - choreographer, Saga Sigurðardóttir - choreographer, Sigurður Arent Jónsson - performance artist, Vedis Kjartansdóttir - dancer and Kristinn Guðmundsson - visual artist and performer. The collective has been actively engaged in the theatre scene for more than a decade.<sup>65</sup>

The starting point of their creative process is usually choosing a specific landscape or mood that they are willing to investigate.<sup>66</sup> As most of the contemporary collectives their practise is generated on improvisation, dialogue, analysis and common agreement. To understand and get a deeper look into their creative process, two members - Saga and Sigurður were interviewed.

To begin with, Saga and Sigurður emphasise and acknowledge the importance of the intuitive layer. It percolates in every step of their performance. They agree that intuition is something that comes unconsciously. It comes through listening to the background and untouchable desires. According to Saga, intuition is a *liquid that we sit in together*. Through the method of organising thoughts, ideas, and moments of inspirations Marble Crowd constructs the idea of guided/structured intuition.<sup>67</sup>

Additionally, one of the practices that Marble Crowd is cultivating is to deepen the listening of intuition, its voice. This practise can continue even till the moment of live performance on stage: the moment of inspiration while performing can appear to be offering more unknown/unexperienced decisions. According to Saga, she was aware of it when the last time they performed “Eyður” in the National Theatre, here in Iceland. It is interesting to notice that artists cannot identify one specific layer that intuition would dominate. It is a thread that continuously leads throughout the whole process.<sup>68</sup>

Moreover, Sigurður brings to awareness that intuition can be confused or mixed and interpreted with a total free mind process (doing something out of the blue). During the interview, he emphasizes an already familiar idea to us: intuition appears when you, a

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<sup>65</sup> Tara Njala Ingvarðottir, “Five Friends, Five Fools, Five Artists: Marble Crowd Is Moving Mountains”, , *Reykjavík Grapevine*, 29 November 2018. Accessed 8th May 2021, <https://grapevine.is/icelandic-culture/2018/11/29/five-friends-five-fools-five-artists-marble-crowd-is-moving-mountains/>.

<sup>66</sup> Tara Njala Ingvarðottir, “Five Friends, Five Fools, Five Artists: Marble Crowd Is Moving Mountains”.

<sup>67</sup> Saga Sigurðardóttir and Sigurður Arent Jónsson, Marble Crowd, interview with author.

<sup>68</sup> Saga Sigurðardóttir and Sigurður Arent Jónsson, Marble Crowd, interview with author.

performer, trusting the experience and process, through unfiltering and uncensoring yourself you reach the feeling of flow.<sup>69</sup>

Both members express a slightly different personal relationship toward intuition: Sigurður cannot separate intuition from hard work; on the contrary, Saga states that intuition can be a romanticized idea. She strongly feels that like any other muscles it can be trained through practise: “one thing is to have a muscle, the other one, know how to use it”. She agrees while trying to put to words the meaning of the intuitive process, and frame it in understandable language, explaining leads to quite foggy terms. She raises the idea of a need to explain it. According to Saga, intuition is much faster than our wording. Explanation can bring down the mystifying and mysterious element of it. To Sigurður's understanding, the audience, while witnessing the performance is not seeking for a clear explanation, they are interested in their own interpretation and understanding. They seek for a deeper connection.<sup>70</sup>

Improvisation as a creative frame brings not only creative freedom, a nourishing environment or desirable results. It can show a bit of a sour side. Marble Crowd admits that the main criticism that reached them about their work is the lack of reflection on nowadays burning topics in their performances.<sup>71</sup> Though one of the collective principles is to reflect on political and social situations, we can see that Marble Crowd investigates the ideas, stages, feelings that have been intuitively brought.

Moreover, working in a collective requires an existence of a vital layer - compromise. When every member is a co-creator, a common agreement is needed. With it comes a certain amount of sacrificing a personal vision for the sake of a bigger purpose. Additionally, Marble Crowd seeks that understanding would be made through witnessing the actions on stage. It brings the layer of being self-absorbed, self-centered on stage. Though, the main goal is to invite the audience to experience the same journey, improvisation, as a form, can bring a challenge. It becomes harder every time to find the hidden keys for the instant audience's invitation.<sup>72</sup>

This interview showed a strong awareness of intuition in Marble Crowds's collective work. Both members could clearly express the importance and what it means to them personally and in a collective work. For Marble Crowd, intuition plays a vital role in the process of improvisation and structure around it: from choosing a landscape for further investigation to live performance on stage. The practise of listening to intuition is a common

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<sup>69</sup> Saga Sigurðardóttir and Sigurður Arent Jónsson, Marble Crowd, interview with author.

<sup>70</sup> Saga Sigurðardóttir and Sigurður Arent Jónsson, Marble Crowd, interview with author.

<sup>71</sup> Saga Sigurðardóttir and Sigurður Arent Jónsson, Marble Crowd, interview with author.

<sup>72</sup> Saga Sigurðardóttir and Sigurður Arent Jónsson, Marble Crowd, interview with author.

exercise for the Marble Crowd. The collective is not denying the mysterious elements of intuition. The aspect of previous experiences is also seen as a part of intuitive decisions on stage. Marble Crowd constructs an idea of structured intuition through the act of improvisation. The need for wording and putting intuition in the context of language is questionable. Moreover, it is important to separate intuition from free movement practise. Sigurður, a member of Marble Crowd, believes that the state of flow helps him to hear intuition. The element of trust is important in the act of improvisation. It was useful to hear not only the glamorous side of improvisation as a creative strategy, but also the obstacles that modern theatre collectives are facing nowadays: the inevitable amount of sacrificing your personal vision, self-absorption and self-centeredness on stage for a collective idea.

## 5. Comparison

This deeper investigation on two main threads: intuition and improvisation in the practice of three collectives - Forced Entertainment, Gob Squad and Marble Crowd, made a clear understanding of how collectives are putting different emphasis and attention to different layers in their collective practices.

To start with, we can identify the unifying point: Improvisation as a creative strategy in three collectives as a standing ground. Flat structure, group mind, listening, openness, instant reflections and discussions after improvised scenes, unites these three collectives. As we described before, the term improvisation is understood as a transformative method that leads devising groups toward unique decisions in the creative process. Regarding it, all three collectives are raising the awareness of risk, investment, trust and vulnerability in collective work. Both Forced Entertainment and Gob Squad admit that risk, though not very welcome in their process, is fuel for artistic development. Regarding improvisation, trust is one of the key elements. Through the act of improvisation, performers get familiar with each other, bringing the essential layer of trust. Gob Squad is well known for their interactions with the audience. Breaking the fourth wall requires performers to be flexible and open to spontaneous decisions. A look at these creative processes revealed how vital improvisation is for postdramatic collectives. This specific strategy leads toward more creative and bold decisions. Through long-term collective work and experimenting on stage, Forced Entertainment and Gob Squad built unique language and terminology, for example, *harries* (Gob Squad). To have a fruitful session of improvisation, a certain state of mind needs to be reached.

Regarding the state of flow, members of Marble Crowd clearly identify the need of it. Lost track of time, high amount of concentration, reachable tasks, and motivation is an element of a great session of improvisation, where the performers find themselves fully immersed in what they are doing. Instant comments and analytical discussions approach unites all three collectives. It is a sign of the state of flow. To remind yourself what flow is, that is a mental state where we forget all worries, anxieties, and fears, where we lose the sense of time. A member from Gob Squad admitted that relaxation in her body allows her to reach more effective results and be open for productive interaction with other performers. The state of flow is one the keys to reach happiness. It seems that all collectives truthfully enjoy performing and creating new material. I believe that happiness has something to do with the fact that all these collectives exist for more than a decade.

It was helpful to notice the different understanding of the role of intuition. Intuition is a speedy, integrated sense (or judgment), appearing without the effect of our rational thought. It is closely intertwined with our previous experiences. Forced Entertainment leaves us with an understanding that intuition is an acknowledged element in this collective. For example, in their performance “The Coming storm”, intuition is actively used while improvising. For Gob Squad and Forced Entertainment, highly regular rehearsals have been a part of the creative process. In this way, learned behavior is allowed to form. Furthermore, Gob Squad avoids this terminology and most likely it is consciously or subconsciously hidden under other terms: rhythm, tempo, pauses or impetus. In contrast, Marble Crowd strongly integrates structured intuition in their process, with a precise wording of it. This collective approach towards intuition, involving the practise of deepening their hearing allows us to see the vital role of intuition in their improvisation. Although having a clear understanding of intuition and the importance of it, the members could not deny the elements of fogginess regarding it when asked how they would describe the term, and even questioned the need for this description.

To sum up, improvisation as a creative strategy unites all three devising collectives. The importance and recognition of intuition is identified explicitly in only two of them: Forced Entertainment and Marble Crowd. Furthermore, Gob Squad through a long time existence as a collective formulated their own unique language, where intuition could hide under other terminology. A sign of the state of flow is visible in all collectives, through the willingness of the performers to be engaged in their activity, seeking for moments where ego vanishes and moments of happiness are reached.

## 6. Conclusions

This essay provided a chance to look a bit deeper into the process of three different collectives and allowed me to find some answers to my burning question. I could sympathize and relay their - either unwillingness to explain the role of intuition in improvised performance, or simply their alternative way of framing improvisation with regard to intuition. The term intuition has a complex explanation. Instinct, inner voice or flair is a synonym for intuition in common life, but in the theatre world - rhythm, tempo or double consciousness can also be understood as a form of intuition.

It is important to spread the knowledge that improvisation is not only a technique for acting, but also a widely used creative instrument. We can associate improvisation with intuition. Two from three analyzed collectives identified it and emphasized the importance of it while creating. Moreover, listening to intuition while improvising provides access to unique results. To make improvisation more fruitful, the state of flow creates the ability to concentrate with more clarity, dedication and motivation, where the sense of time simply vanishes. Improvisation requires a skill to be able to exist on stage without pre-arranged text, willingness to invite the audience in the process. The state of flow helps to turn off your inner-critic and manage the stress levels while performing.

Last but not least, while writing and contemplating this topic, some other questions accumulated in my head: Why do performers seek to explain and frame magical or mysterious, untouchable layers? Why does the same feeling or experience have a different tone and association for different contemporary collectives? Different terminology/language? Maybe it is a clever decision to leave the mysterious, magical and untouchable layers to be without an attempt to explain it or put it into ordinary language.

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