

Clive Barker

## In Search of the Lost Mode: Improvisation and All That Jazz

Years ago, NTQ co-editor Clive Barker was tantalized by a passing and lost reference on a radio programme to a source of inspiration for musicians of the Be Bop generation: this had showed them 'a way forward by taking them away from music based on chords and riffs to music based on modes'. Can acting aspire to an analogous state to the improvisations of jazz musicians, in which spontaneity is modulated by the discipline of true respect for the ensemble? Drawing on his own experience as an actor with Theatre Workshop – whose orchestration came close to that of jazz – and on teaching actors to break down inhibitions through the work described in his seminal *Theatre Games* (1977), Clive Barker looks towards a 'next step' in actor training and rehearsal techniques. This would work towards integrating the controlled freedom of jazz with the results he knows can be achieved through his own work with actors – the creation of 'great and beautiful physical poetry in small rooms'. Oh – and can anyone offer a lead towards that elusive book which inspired the jazz musicians of the 'forties?

SIR ARTHUR SULLIVAN, of Gilbert and Sullivan fame, wrote a drawing-room ballad, beloved of old-time baritones, called 'The Lost Chord':

Seated one day at the organ,  
I was weary and ill at ease,  
And my fingers wandered idly  
Over the silent keys.

I knew not what I was doing,  
Or what I was thinking then,  
But I struck a mighty chord  
Like the sound of a great Amen.  
Like the sound of a great Amen.

Or that's how I remember it – mainly by way of several scurrilous parodies.

The vaudeville star Jimmy 'Schnozzle' Durante had a take-off of this song – not strictly a parody, as the tune was completely different (with vaudeville, it's hard to say original). Durante would cry to the band, 'Give me a chord.' They would play. 'Dat's de wrong chord. Gimme another chord', which was also the wrong chord. Eventually he would cry, 'Gimme another chord', and get, 'Dat's de right chord.' The song, and I wish I had it now, was called 'The Night We Found the Lost Chord'.

I remember a rehearsal, the last time that Theatre Workshop remounted *The Hostage* in 1971 or 1972, which was more or less an audition for some film producers, and the rehearsal wasn't going right. It wasn't that the actors didn't know what they were doing, or were not working properly, but the scene wasn't right and the note was given: 'You're hitting the wrong note. Try another note.'

I can't remember whether anyone actually hit a note on the piano, and the film contract didn't materialize, but I don't blame that on not finding the Lost Note. There were more important things wrong for that to be any excuse; and the event got muddled in a fantasy in my mind of Groucho Marx, or was it Schnozzle Durante, saying, 'You're playing the wrong note. That's still the wrong note.' And so on. Which brings us, *via* Victorian recital music and the best of vaudeville, to an unsolved problem of acting.

Every director should know that you can't ask an actor to play mood or atmosphere. It's against all the rules of acting. Yet every director will probably have come to a point in rehearsal when you know that you can't ask an actor to play mood or atmosphere, but that is what you want. The scene is

somehow in the wrong key, and you can try to suggest that, since we all know or think we know what the difference is between major and minor. (I'm not sure that I do.)

Directors have at times had musicians at warm-ups and in rehearsals to play music or make sounds to induce some kind of mood. In my experience this does not go down well with actors: it smacks of infant school classes in Music and Movement, which go along with being a tree or a bird. Somewhere in his Bristol lectures of 1952–53, published as *The Actor's Ways and Means*, Michael Redgrave points to a short cut by experimenting with breathing patterns, presumably self-inducing the effects normally produced in response to the tone and rhythms of the music. I can't see this getting very far. It is getting close to 'Give me another chord' and being a tree.

'Pant a bit sharper.' 'Breathe a bit heavier.' It is true there is a connection between emotion and breathing; but trying to use breathing instrumentally seems to me to draw the actor into unsupported and generalized emotional self-abuse. I tried it in drama school and that was the result for me – somewhere on the scale from sadism to masochism. I couldn't contact the other actors while practising my emotional breathing.

But there can be little doubt that music does induce mood in the audience. The film, now, makes great use of such factors. Would *Gladiator* have been successful without the music? It is probably useful to put past theatre in perspective by recalling the lavish scores which composers such as Sibelius, Grieg, Mendellsohn, structured round plays, some great, some wooden historical melodramas. But I'm straying from the point, which is not the place of music in theatre, or (a short step from that) in musical theatre, but the rehearsal and the process of improvisation. Let's get back to that.

### The Lost Mode

Some years ago I was driving down the M1 with the car radio on, listening to a programme of jazz. I was interested in the music since it was Be Bop, but I wasn't listening very intently to the comments in between

the pieces, I didn't have a piece of paper and a pencil handy, and I would probably have got arrested if I had tried to write down what had been said; but at one point in the journey the presenter had made a statement to the effect, as far as I could clutch at what remained in my consciousness before it began to elude me, that a book had been written which had circulated in New York in the 1940s round Charlie Parker, Dizzie Gillespie, and others of the Be Bop generation on the nature of musical modes. And it was this that showed them the way forward by taking them away from music based on chords and riffs to music based on modes.

I have buttonholed many musicians over the years and asked them what this book was. Musicians are even more of gypsies than actors and from time to time I pass my contacts and they wave to me and say they're working on it, or they think they know what the book was, but so far, in many years, it has failed to materialize. It becomes important when you realize that the oldest theatre anecdote we have concerns Euripides rehearsing the chorus for one of his plays, when one of the actors giggled or sniggered, at which, or so the story runs, Euripides berated him, saying, in his own way of course, 'You must be an idiot to laugh in the mixolydian mode.' The oldest story we have is of an actor corpsing during a serious passage. He struck the wrong note.

However strange they may be to actors and directors, modes are common currency among musicians. The entry in *The Oxford Companion to Music* runs to three pages, and is too long and technical to reproduce here. But it is made quite clear that modes are not keys:

All our major keys are, except for pitch, precisely alike; a listener with an excellent ear cannot tell one from another. . . . The difference between the various modes is not one of *pitch* but of the order in which fall the tones and semitones. The difference between one mode and another is not the kind of difference which exists between C major and D major but that which exists between C major and C minor or D major and D minor, i.e. a difference of the arrangement of tones and semitones, and hence, necessarily of the width of some of the other intervals. It may be called the difference of

*flavour*, so that the a keen ear, well accustomed to modal music, should be able to tell in what mode a piece of plainsong or a piece of early harmonized music lies.

Now that more student actors are able to play instruments, and there are even courses for actor/musicians, the possibility of working through modes holds out more focused opportunities for 'hitting the right note' in rehearsal or in improvisation. With professional actors, it would promise an escape from generalized Music and Movement into an area of technique, and might even be an aid to continuity in the processes of learning and the early periods of rehearsal by helping to preserve continuity from one stage to another. The Euripides story shows that the Greeks were used to working in modes. Text could be influenced by musical considerations. There are many possible sidelights which could be explored. For us, now, it is better to work on something which has an intellectual and scientific basis than to rely on playing recordings of Samuel Barber's *Adagio* or Elgar's *Nimrod* variation to induce mood or atmosphere.

### Orchestrated Spontaneity

Little has been written or expounded on connecting drama and music at any higher sort of level. We all know how Beethoven's Fifth Symphony 'goes', but none can say, in terms of dynamics, how 'To be or not to be' 'goes'. There is much more latitude for the personal approach in prose, and even verse, than there is in instrumentalism, and Shakespeare didn't leave us any annotation to his scores. Nevertheless, there have been and are actors who look for the music of the speech, and we are all clear, even if only in a hazy way, that the range of interpretation is not limitless, and that actors not infrequently get lost playing the wrong notes – or, as Eric Morecambe insisted, playing all the right notes, but not necessarily in the right order. In any event there would seem to be a positive case for further exploration and examination of the use of some involvement of modal music in the rehearsal or improvisation

process. The discovery by anyone reading this of the lost book of my M1 journey might materially help in this.

The theatrical analogy can be taken further into the field of jazz. Whatever other virtues it possessed, a major feature of the first Theatre Workshop production of *The Hostage* was the ensemble playing. What appeared to be spontaneous and rumbustious knock-about was a carefully controlled interweaving of rhythms and tones. Whereas most theatre companies could be compared to classical orchestras, playing carefully rehearsed orchestrations, Theatre Workshop was a jazz ensemble which required much more sensitivity in the playing. The failure to enter and play in the right rhythm or to hit the true tone was the subject of a constant series of written comments and instructions, pinned on the notice-board the next day, and from time to time of arguments backstage.

What appeared chaotic was sustained by a playing system in which every element was rehearsed but never set. The lighting-board operator was treated as a key member of the ensemble and expected to show the same sensitivity of response to the small changes and improvisations which occurred nightly in the performances of the actors playing the major roles. The result of this was a theatre of multilayered textures which were constantly in motion, over which the eyes of the audience were invited to wander and select.

Heaven forbid that anyone should ever try to repeat what they had done before. Every performance, as with a jazz combo, was re-invented on the same basis every time, within the same limits. What held everything in place was the principle that anything done in an improvisation should either invite a response from another actor or respond to an implicit or explicit invitation from them. This I see as the basis of the best of jazz improvisations as well as of theatre. However spectacular the solos of Parker, Gillespie, Davis, Coltrane, and the others are, they exhibit no sign of selfishness. They exist for the group music and not for the glorification of the individual – much more difficult than playing in a classical orchestra, but just as disciplined, and richer and more free.

The essence of jazz improvisation is that it 'happens'. Certain features can be decided in advance, which set certain limits to the scope of the music. There are certain conventions established which act to shape the improvisation – a sequence of solos can be agreed. But much more than the classical or sessions musician, who follows the instructions coded into printed scores or arrangements, the jazz musician 'makes it up as he goes along'. Yet far from this being random, improvisation is controlled and determined by quite finite factors: how well the instrumentalist knows the nature of the base material, and is able to realize the musical possibilities inherent in it; how well the instrumentalist knows the range and limits of his/her instrument; and how adept the instrumentalist is in playing the instrument.

On these factors rely the richness, articulation, and expertise of the performance. Deficiency in any area diminishes the jazz. The history of jazz is that of performers who have explored new musical possibilities of their thematic material, the possible ranges of their instruments, and lifted the technical level of their fingering and phrasing. Central to this have been the mastery of breath control and the kinaesthetic processes, which enable a performer to embark on wild adventures without preconceived intention and reflective considerations. The greater the musical knowledge, understanding, technique, and trust, the richer will be the improvisations. The same conditions apply to theatre improvisation, in performance or in exercises. The same strictures should be in place to support the actors and to define the field of enquiry, research, and articulation.

### **A Bridge from Improvisation to Text**

In *Theatre Games* (pages 124–34) I outlined the use and invention of some games to explore contacts, as actors encounter one another in space. The activities outlined are still there for actors to explore and find useful or otherwise. The underlying project in these games was to find some basis for the exploration of a dramatic situation, which could be carried over into the play (and text)

situation, without being subject to any disruption. This was based on a critique of the practice where actors get stuck in a text which they find themselves unable to physicalize, or penetrate to the feeling that should find articulation through the words, so are invited to 'put the book on one side' and to improvise freely.

Very often, removed from the tyranny of the text, actors find it surprisingly easy to let go, and often these improvisations are physically alive and spin off rich emotional projections. Two problems remain. It is very difficult to retrace the steps by which the improvisation developed. One is left with memories of feelings, but one can't remember the steps by which those feelings were invoked; and then, when one returns to the text, the words continue to get in the way.

In *Theatre Games*, the solution proposed was to structure or use basic free games, to which rules were then applied, creating a bridge from the game to the text situation. The major illustration I used was called 'The Restoration Comedy Game'. A base action was set up in which a younger son courts an heiress for her dowry. He must court in such a way that she allows him to take her money. She, meanwhile, tries to trap his arm under her own. If he takes the money, the marriage is made in London, and he can carry on his dissolute life. If she traps his arm, the marriage is made in Northamptonshire and he becomes one of the pioneers who reformed British agriculture in the eighteenth century. The rules which are applied to the basic activity are, for example, those of period dress; of touch; arising from the restrictions imposed by the scripted situation; arising from character; and, finally, from the dialogue.

Over the years since the book came out, other considerations have changed the priorities within this section of the work. In workshop and training sessions, the tendency is still for me to start with the elementary conflict games with which I approached the main aim; but I use them as warm-up games and no longer give them the importance I once did. We start with 'Finger-Fencing', and go on to 'The Coins' – where each player attempts to steal his opponent's

coin, whilst using his own coin to detract his opponent's attention.

From this we move to group activity. Each player holds the coin on his hand behind his back. The object is to move to protect your own coin while stealing those of your opponents – no running, no violence, no protecting your coin by standing with your back against a wall. The next stage is to substitute the coin with a 'tail' – a handkerchief, or one made of a few sheets of toilet paper or tissue. The game proceeds as before, but the aim is to steal your opponent's tail and protect your own. Players cannot protect their tail with their other hand. Otherwise, again, no running, no violence, no standing with back to wall.

In *Theatre Games*, this game is depicted as a model through which to explore the street scenes from *Romeo and Juliet* and the various spin-offs from that play. I would now see it as an exercise in *kinescenics*, the articulation of character relationships through movements in space. When the number of players is reduced to four and three, then the game takes on the pattern of a series of alliances and betrayals, as players seek to enter into agreements to join forces against opponents. These alliances are continually betrayed as players move in space to change the balance of forces.

### Exploring Meetings in Space

This can be seen as an important feature of theatre training. If all movement is the shift of the balance of the body's weight over stance (and this does not necessarily lead to extravagant choreography, but can literally be shifts of balance), then this should reflect the reactions and frame of mind of the character. The stage ought to be alive with small but significant shifts in the balance of the bodies, reflecting changes of attitude, agreements, disagreements, reactions to the direction of the argument, potential interventions. If this happens, then it undercuts part of the need for free-form improvisations, since the bodies are physically alive and the text begins to move. Analysis and technique go hand in hand.

Somewhere along the way, I began to lose interest in the conflict games, as they are depicted in the book, and became much more interested in the reflection of a character's changes of thought through movements in space. I took away the tails. At first this was presented as a logical progression from the conflict games and still retained more than traces of the provocation of the *Romeo and Juliet* street scenes. Actors were asked to pursue domination of other players by whatever means they found possible and successful. Only three rules were imposed and they were all prohibitive. No violence. No words. No Marcel Marceau (descriptive mime).

This playing of the game still exists if I want it. As with all these games, the rules are kept to a minimum, so that players carry no preconceptions but play as they act and react in the situation instinctively. The players are split into two groups. They do and they observe. When players have had the opportunity to play the game and to observe others playing, choices become possible. Strategies can be worked out in advance and pursued, successfully or unsuccessfully. The playing becomes more sophisticated and, at that stage, the central importance of the use of space becomes obvious – both proximity and the definition of personal space in determining relations with other people.

I have described in *Theatre Games* how this can lead off into explorations of meetings in space. This would include ways in which we determine or hide our feelings about other people; how we manipulate them, patronize them. Various metaphors in the English language express human relationships in such spatial terms – 'meeting me halfway', 'coming together', etc. – and provide the stimulus for exploration.

However important this area of working might be, I have over the years come to see that the further stage in these exercises, when all intention is stripped away, is much more productive and interesting. The principal discovery of working in this way was to lead the actors to experience being 'on centre', the action of which is clear to observe. There are two ways of approaching this stage. The first would be to go through

the line of development outlined above as far as the final stage of the *Romeo and Juliet* model, and then take away any considerations of dominance or status. The players simply stand in space and look at the other players. They are then free to move around and enjoy the contacts *that arise spontaneously* from the encounters with other players. It is also possible to move straight from the group tail games into free encounter.

It is almost inevitable that the first playing of this game will go wrong. Defences against openness will manifest themselves. People will become self-conscious when defences are lowered. People will find it difficult not to generate strategies, or to make predetermined decisions as to how they will conduct themselves in face-to-face meetings. Players will rush into activities so as to avoid letting things happen to them. People will 'act', and present externalized characterizations rather than exposing themselves. They will initiate activities, such as lying on the floor and/or pulling faces, which if practised in public would probably result in their being committed for lunacy.

### Circumstances Determining Strategies

The exposure of these 'cop-outs' helps to make players recognize ways in which they avoid meetings and direct open contact with others. Following the playing, a lot of discussion can be generated about the preconditioned and inhibited areas of our behaviour and our habitual strategies for personal concealment. The ultimate stage is to ask players to take up their places in space and only to move when some internal urge presses on them. The stress is now taken off *action*, or willed intention, and what happens is as near as we can get to total *reaction*.

Circumstances determine strategies. With some groups a slow pace is needed, playing the game over and over again until the initial stillness can be induced. Sometimes we get to the starting point too soon, and you can see the twitches in certain players betraying that they have not reached the point of 'letting things happen', 'learning, not doing'. What is of prime importance is that, until

you have reached this point of stillness, by whatever means, the exercise cannot proceed in any meaningful way.

In the exercise, the players learn many things about themselves. The first playings are like a printout of our habitual, 'instinctive' ways of reacting and relating. For this reason it is important not to set too many instructive descriptions at the start, beyond my three negatives (no talking, no violence, no Marcel Marceau). Everyone must play as it comes. After that, it is possible to make choices, as the reactions come under control subconsciously. It can be played in different keys, to use a musical analogy which might be instructive.

The results of these exercises are often startling. The interplay of individual rhythms and movement characteristics sustains interest among those observing for long periods. It is not unusual to find a later playing of the exercise sustaining for one and a half or two hours. In fact, we don't really know how long they would sustain given free range. Sessions that I lead are always set in the time they can occupy, and therefore, almost inevitably, playings are halted for simple reasons of time.

It isn't easy to describe the form of these activities. Are they performance improvisation, site-specific postmodernism? I am not sure. I am sure that several pieces we have developed could have been placed in any museum of modern art and provoked intense critical debate and appraisal. Two specific pieces of work mounted by groups from El Instituto des Belles Artes, in Cali, Colombia, are etched in my mind. I ran a week of workshops during which I was given no students, but the institute staff, with whom to work – drama, music, fine arts technicians; composers, painters, sculptors, instrumentalists, designers, make-up teachers, children's theatre specialists. The work was unusually rich from the outset because of the wide mixture of personalities and their highly developed creative sensitivities. Not surprisingly they seemed to get most out of the playing, best summed up by a painter, who said afterwards, 'Now I know where the next direction will lead me.' For me, I think

I have reached the core of performance. This is where the roots of theatre are.

For many years now I have traipsed round the world, working with different groups in secluded rooms, in out-of-the-way places. My pleasure and my excuse is that I manage to show people, at the end of a week or a fortnight, displays of their creative abilities, which they never suspected they had. People find they can create great and beautiful physical poetry in small rooms. How far this approach to acting could go is the sixty-four thousand dollar question.

### Finding the Hidden Depths

I usually, in fact always, stop at this point. I move elsewhere, greatly privileged to have shared the lives of a group of people so intimately for a short period of time. I have rarely built on this stage in the work, except in so far as I return most years to the Escuela des Formacions de Actores in Bogota, with whose founding and development I have been concerned. There, opportunities have existed for taking this work from the first year into later areas of technique.

I have never sought to take the approach further, but someone should. I have used it as a way of breaking down habitual inhibitions to meetings. How much further, as players become more confident, can we get into the depths we all keep hidden? In 1935 Gorky wondered why we never saw characters such as Medea played fully on Russian stages. How many times have acting teachers said to student actors: 'I don't believe you have reached the depths of your own cruelty, never mind that of the character.' We have seen productions of *Othello* where Desdemona was strangled because she lost a handkerchief, so mild seemed the jealousy of the Moor. The structure and approach to these exercises, through the preliminary exercises, the three rules (more could be added), and the existence of the leader, who acts as security and control, allow the actors to open up and explore the depths of their jealousy and other passions,

to find the confidence to bypass their habitual repression.

So far, the exercises have an obvious value to actor training and possibly to ensemble rehearsal. Can they yield any further value? Can these exercises act as a base on which to build other theatrical forms or uses? As a basis for improvised dance there is a distinct possibility through persistent playing. If music or sound are used, then the stillness allows the individual's response to lead to patterns of movement and relating which could place choreography as central to the group instead of being imposed on it.

In very simple ways, the variety of responses which can arise in a group of children performing Music and Movement classes has its own fascination. But more sophisticated developments are possible. Returning to my starting point, I wonder if this is more than a training method – whether we can consider the training to lead towards an improvisation ensemble; perhaps, as in the dance example, proceeding from movement without words, but eventually looking at ways of feeding in text and other dramatic conventions.

There have been many attempts within what groups call physical theatre to combine dramatic action and heightened movement, to move from one plane to the other and back during the length of the play. The processes outlined above would seem to offer some possibility of an integrated approach to play-making. The possibility of integrating these exercises with the jazz approach I touched on in the early part of this essay seems to me like standing on a hill and seeing new territory spreading out before us: a vision of a new lyric theatre, in which the dramatic and epic could be subsumed, and music, dance, and drama be intertwined in increasingly new combinations. A thoroughly disciplined and free theatre. Research and practice combined. A lot of work stands between us and this vision, but it's worth working towards.

*This article was written as a tribute to Dick McCaw on his resignation as Artistic Director of the International Workshop Festival.*