

ImproGestalt®



Foreword from Teater InSite

Before Teater InSite's performance of Dödsdansen 3.0 (2018), we invited director and gestalt therapist Eva Wendt to help us develop our roles using exercises and experiments inspired by the gestalt method. It was a new and unique experience and marked the beginning of a close collaboration.

Eva Wendt's method, ImproGestalt, combines improvisation, text work, movement, and gestalt methodology. The method aims to increase joy, courage, and relational awareness in theatrical work.

InSite's focus on interactive, site-specific, and immersive encounters with the audience has made ImproGestalt a very useful tool to achieve the genuine presence required for both the audience and actors to feel immersed in the same narrative and shared presence.

Working with Eva Wendt has also shaped significant parts of InSite's own method, where we begin each project with exploratory, creative, and democratic work. This has generated an empathetic work process and created a better working atmosphere.

With support from the Swedish Arts Council, InSite has the opportunity to publish this booklet on ImproGestalt so that more performing artists can benefit from the method.



Best regards, Ikka, Matthias och Amanda



Eva Wendt – A Personal Introduction

As a newly graduated director during my training at the Gestalt Institute of Scandinavia in 2013, I, together with eight other performing artists, founded SPECT scenkonst. We borrowed the stage at Månteatern in Lund and started developing what would become ImproGestalt. Since then, I have been the artistic director of the group, and with state, regional, and municipal support, we have produced a wide range of performances. I also direct in other theater groups and institutions and work as a consultant and therapist using the gestalt method.

What draws me to theater, above all, are the moments when the rehearsed slips out of the frame and cracks open. Something personal and deeply human becomes accessible in the actor when all the artifice becomes simple and immediate. At that moment, I experience something beyond just the parts, something more, and this never ceases to fascinate me. In my work, I explore, among other things, whether it is possible to evoke or create the conditions for this kind of life on stage. Some actors seem to have access to this in an apparent way. Is it talent? Does it happen by chance? Does it require a special kind of courage? Can it be trained?

My way of invoking this magic is to create methods and frameworks within which one is assisted in stumbling into the present moment and accessing their innate creative intuition. Within us lies a whole arsenal of unconscious, spontaneous, and beautiful intelligence. I believe that one can use their personal life and experiences to enrich the creation of performances in the most astonishing ways—both as material and as a resource in the process and on stage.

For this work, a sustainable working community is needed where there is safety, joy, and creative courage. Theater as a working environment and industry is often insecure and uncertain on many levels. I believe that the ethics, intention, and relationships within a work play a significant role in what is presented to an audience. It matters.

In parallel with creating performances, within the framework of SPECT scenkonst, I have had a training forum with actors in ImproGestalt. This continuous work has led to a natural foundation for potential collaborations in new productions.





.ImproGestalt

In the commedia dell'arte tradition, I saw that improvisation drew strength from the mask and helped expose both the character and the actor, giving life to the work. The actor takes a significant personal risk in such a vulnerable presence. I wanted to investigate whether the actor can go further by consciously working with their resources and obstacles on a personal level. This became the initial idea of combining improvisation with gestalt methodology in ImproGestalt. The method evolved into a dynamic combination of text work, movement, improvisations inspired by Viola Spolin's Theatre Games, and deeper personal work with gestalt methodology.

The work includes a personal and relational level, which means awareness and work on how the actor functions in the process, embodiment, and connection with fellow actors and the audience. The group process follows clear frameworks where all kinds of relational and creative challenges need to be acknowledged and handled with professional methods.

Theatre Games

Theatre Games is Viola Spolin's educational system for training in scenic improvisation, with a focus on spontaneity, presence, and connection. It is not about improvisation for entertainment, but rather a methodical approach to reach creative qualities in acting and the performing arts as a whole. Spolin's non-judgmental view of the individual significantly reduces performance anxiety, fear, and shame. The exercises are an inspiration for the work in ImproGestalt, both in training and in the performance.

Two of the techniques involved in the work are focus and the leader as a coach.

Focus

One of Theatre Games' central concepts is focus. In each exercise or game, there is a shared point of concentration—the exercise's goal for the actors and the coach. By devoting their full physical and mental attention to the focus or "ball," spontaneous, irrational, and unexpected elements can emerge. *"Keep your eyes on the ball!"* (Spolin).

Coach

In Theatre Games, the coach, leader, or director is an active voice in the improvisation, giving impulses while the players use the input that is useful to them. The leadership becomes transparent and a clear function that helps and reminds the actors of the focus. I carry the coach's approach with me when I lead or direct and often use Spolin's coaching phrases, such as *"Mirror what you see, not what you think you see!"* or *"Follow the follower!"*



Gestalt Methodology

Gestalt theory and philosophy, as part of ImproGestalt, clarify the personally developmental, therapeutic value of scenic improvisation. On the other hand, the deeper personal work supports the actor's courage and ability to be in touch with themselves and thereby broaden their range. The craft and practice of creating theater and the more therapeutic work with self-awareness are seemingly parallel tracks that intersect and intertwine in ImproGestalt.

Gestalt methodology, whether in a personal or therapeutic context, is a relational approach where the meeting, connection, awareness, responsibility, and the present moment are central pillars. These are valuable skills also in acting. The difference lies in the purpose. Although the work with ImproGestalt has therapeutic effects, which I believe is true for all forms of artistic expression, the purpose in theater work is to create a profoundly vibrant performing art.

Neurons and Improvisation

Neurological research now shows that we have a wealth of knowledge and abilities that lie beyond the reach of our conscious, explicit knowledge. Discoveries about for example mirror neurons can explain how we can physically empathize with what happens to another person. This increases our understanding of how we can non-verbally interpret and adapt to actions, such as in dance, or the ability to hit a moving soccer ball. We just know what will happen next.

Working with improvisation, intuition, and spontaneity means making the implicit, unconscious knowledge explicit and conscious. The same goal applies in therapy to access the implicit knowledge with increased awareness and thus create greater self-awareness and self-esteem for the client.

Example: An example of implicit knowledge and intuitive/non-verbal communication in ImproGestalt is when an actor has a "shadow," another player, with them on stage. The "shadow" provides physical impulses that the actor incorporates into their actions, influencing the emotion and intention in their lines. This becomes a physical focus given by the fellow actor in the moment without words. The goal remains to keep the actor so engaged in the present moment that they don't have time to think about their performance or portrayal. The present moment becomes acute. The actor is also liberated from some external perspectives and responsibilities, which seems to be freeing. Sometimes, the "shadow," when observed from the outside, appears to be a subconscious or another part of the personality.



Training and Frameworks

The work with ImproGestalt® occurs on three levels: ensemble exercises, spontaneous gestalt work, and deep personal reflection.

1. Ensemble Exercises

Ensemble exercises take up a significant part of each rehearsal day and include movement, improvisation games, and reflections. Exploring how the players relate to themselves and the group is crucial for collaboration. It provides deep and broad knowledge about others, both creatively and personally, which becomes essential for the quality of improvisational acting.

In gestalt therapy, there is a term called "confluence," a kind of boundaryless blending with another person or a group. If one feels compelled to adapt and it becomes a rigid pattern, it is unhealthy. In ImproGestalt, we talk about "creative confluence," a state of consciously shared creation where, at times, one can give up their individual expression or story.

Exercise:

"Follow the follower!" (Spolin) is a kind of mirroring exercise. Players switch roles as the leader and the follower, faster and faster until both are following and leading simultaneously. This focus can be applied to entire scenes when we want the players to release their individual perspectives and become fully present with each other.

Finding the balance between following the group and preserving one's integrity and authenticity is challenging. This sometimes leads to personal therapeutic work, for example, exploring why we can't express our needs and set boundaries.

2. Spontaneous Gestalt Work

When actors consciously refrain from trying to control portrayal and drama-turgy, the unexpected and immediate can happen, going beyond preconceived notions of form and content. It also includes the audience, who seek meaning in what unfolds.

In this context, improvisation is not about inventing or coming up with funny gimmicks, but about the courage to embrace real uncertainty and trust that creation happens through focus. It involves a deeply challenging loss of control that requires trust.

In improvisations with clear frameworks and focus, the text is freed from a filter of planned portrayal and interpretation and emerges in a different way. It becomes embodied by the actor, opening up a shared experience with fellow actors and the audience. The expression hits a more collective level that doesn't hinder the ego. In the church, it is said that the priest becomes "like a vessel" for God's word. Here, the equivalent is the actor and the author's text.

3. Deep Personal Reflection

In relation to the scenic work, the close creative collaboration, ImproGestalt focuses on personal reflection and awareness for each individual. What actually happens to me on stage and what is it about? What hinders me, and what can I do about it?

Example:

During a rehearsal of a scene, an actor got stuck in performance anxiety and became completely blocked. We worked therapeutically with her history of needing to be the best, to be funny, and for whose sake she needed to be that way. She accessed her aggression, and it ended with the whole ensemble expressing to the imaginary audience how it feels to be watched, judged, and the emotions it can evoke. It was tremendously liberating and fun, and the experience became a trick we could use when performance anxiety arose. Everyone knew what lay behind the peculiar exercise and had a connection to the depth of that experience.



Performance Work

What attracts an audience to improvisation is knowing that what happens is not planned. It is thrilling, and the players become the audience's representatives as they take risks, make mistakes, and "survive." On a deeper level, they show their vulnerability and perhaps touch upon collective shame, yet they survive. It is deeply satisfying for both players and audience when someone takes a risk, is seen, and captured when mistakes occur, and the players together integrate what has happened in the scene. When the present moment is impossible to control, an authentic presence is created that allows for participation.

Improvisation in a performance is held within the framework of the scene, created by the ensemble and director, based on the content and how it can be translated into physical action. The idea is to keep the actor so focused on the task that they don't have time to worry about performance or external perspectives. Sometimes, the situational framework includes physically extreme obstacles to cooperate on, which are integrated into the scene with the text.

Exemple:

We worked on a scene from *"The Mapmaker's Sorrow"* by Chris Lee, where a character was supposed to make the other (a politician) fall asleep. We connected them with a long, thick rubber band that they had between them while playing the scene. The band had to be stretched at all times, and everything that happened had to be integrated into their relationship. The work evolved so that the relationship between the actors felt acutely close, tangible, and suddenly deep. This was expressed through the text and their spontaneous actions in the exercise.

In creating performances, the work with ImproGestalt seems to lead to both a personal and collective artistic expression. Some concepts have emerged to give space for new discoveries.

Scanning

Scanning is an individual status description, a "clinical" reading of what is happening in the body, head, and space, spoken out loud to the audience. We have used scanning as an introduction to performances, where the players give and take focus, interrupting each other's "monologues" while speaking to the audience about what they are experiencing in the moment.

Exempel

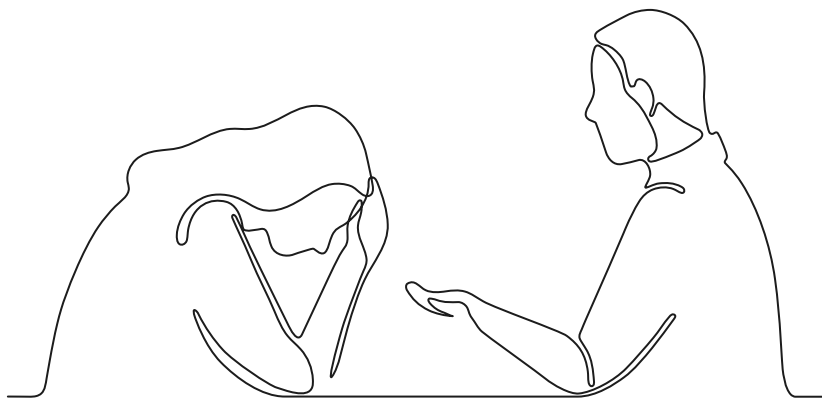
In *"Krya, när livet ger dig citroner,"* the actors took breaks and scanned their current state while sitting among the audience and then continued the scene. The actors didn't know how long they would stay in the scanning but had to find it together. At one point, the audience responded, and the feeling was that the entire audience was checking in with themselves at that moment.

Situational Framework

The fiction described in the script is the "as if" the actors relate to. Within the universe and events of the text, a "situational framework" is created, which is the game that the actors play, the task or focus developed. The players have a common task that they prioritize while playing the scene. What then arises is integrated into the interaction and the text. The outcome of the work with the situational framework varies significantly each time.

Exemple:

We worked with a scene from *"The Mapmaker's Sorrow"* by Chris Lee, about a crashing marriage where the couple drinks themselves into a stupor while having a prolonged argument. As a situational framework, twelve glasses of water were placed in different locations on the stage, and the focus was for all of them to be emptied. The action was to be improvised, integrated into the scene, and not repeated the same way twice. This led to a vibrating scene with a series of surprises for everyone in the room. We all felt the captivating tension created by the actors not knowing where the water would go, and they had to solve it together while still arguing. It became quite wet..



Triolog

SPECT scenkonst has created several performances with what I call "trialog." The actors memorize the same text, a monologue, and perform it with the focus that at any moment, one of the others could take over and seamlessly continue speaking. During the performance, each scene also had a situational framework.

Example: In the performance *"Gunnar utan filter"* there were three actors, all playing Gunnar's monologue with changes in focus and situational

frameworks. When Gunnar is on a date and sitting at a Chinese restaurant feeling embarrassed, suddenly and improvisationally, the actors start feeling embarrassed about each other, even though they are the same character.

When Gunnar then goes to the restroom, only two out of the three can follow, and the third remains in the awkward silence with the date. Inside the restroom, Gunnar looks at himself in the mirror. The actors, standing opposite each other, have the task of giving and taking focus with the text but also of seeing each other in the mirror. This creates short moments of spontaneous, physical mirroring. The two actors start getting irritated by it, and soon, a rather aggressive conflict arises, spontaneously and unexpectedly, and they become genuinely angry with each other, just as Gunnar is angry with himself.



Creativity & Sustainability in Performing Arts

The starting point in this work is that a working community characterized by a willingness for honest, authentic relationships leads to sustainability, which values the individual's psychological and physical well-being.

Even in conflicts within the ensemble, the energy can be directed towards the common project if there is safety and sincerity in communication. It is not enough to say that there should be an "open-door policy"; there needs to be awareness and knowledge about the process. In my experience, when this working community functions, the work becomes vital, and the entire personal range can be used for the creative work that is the focus. The deep work with the gestalt method addresses what blocks, steals energy, and risks blocking the creative process.

ImproGestalt in Other Contexts

Many people outside the creative field believe that creativity is some mysterious ability that only some possess. Someone said that creativity is about connecting things in a new way. I believe it is also a question of self-image, how one sees oneself. Do I have the right to give myself that space, to be creative?

When I work outside the theater in other contexts, I can use the playfulness and experimentation of theater to encourage change. Collaboration, taking risks, and dedication are fundamental prerequisites for creating a theater performance, and I believe this interconnected ability is valuable in many contexts.

Exploring, enduring, and functioning in uncertainty is a way of relating to life and creation. We cannot know everything. It is not always easy, but that is our condition. I want to respond to what actually is, not what I think or believe should be.



About Eva

Eva is a director, trained at the Malmö Theatre Academy (2002-2004), and has a 4-year education in gestalt therapeutic method (2012). She has freelanced as an actor and director for 30 years, and besides working with Teater InSite, she has directed performances at Teater Terrier in Malmö, Upsala Stadsteater, Byteatern in Kalmar, and Malmö Opera. She is also the artistic director of SPECT performing arts, which is based on Eva's method ImproGestalt®. Eva has directed, among others, "Gunnar utan filter" by Bob Hansson, 2016, "Krya, när livet ger dig citroner" by Stina Sturesson Svansjö, 2017, and "Resonans" by Eva Wendt, and others, in 2022. In her own company CoAct, she works with supervision/therapy and leads courses in communication and development/leadership within organizations. She also works with artistic competence development.

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