

Doing intracultural theatre

by Andrea Milde

The Tamasha theatre company in London has developed a theatre practice that focuses on the cultural identity of the actors. Their practice is about drawing out the specific world (culture, language, etc.) that the actors enjoy bringing into the working process, whether it's beat box, a Bollywood dialogue, another language, or a dance routine. For Tamasha, anything the actors want to bring into the process can be used as a tool to help them find a way to be open in the creative working process and—as a consequence of being open—find the pleasure to play.



Author and director during *The Arrival* (photo: AM)

A rope-artist slides with great swings of her body down a rope, producing a subtle sound that is accompanied by an actor warming up with a song in the Umuahia dialect of Igbo (spoken in south-east Nigeria). A team of technicians smoothly and swiftly dismantles a metal construction; even so, the noise overpowers the author's and director's discussion about the latest script changes, but they don't seem to take any notice. "Can we begin?", asks director Kristine Landon-Smith. A rehearsal is about to start.

Tamasha has developed a particular way of working that has attracted increasing numbers of young and aspiring drama practitioners, who are curious about Tamasha's intracultural and actor-centred theatre practice. What are the features of intracultural theatre? For Tamasha's two artistic co-directors, Kristine Landon-Smith and Sudha Bhuchar, 'intracultural' means "looking at the relationships between cultures within a shared nation state

such as Great Britain”, says Kristine Landon-Smith, “and looking at the commonalities as well as the distinctiveness of these”. She adds that their particular practice also draws on the work of people such as Rustom Bharucha. Rustom Bharucha, a writer and theatre director based in Calcutta, has been influential on Tamasha’s approach. Bharucha¹ understands “by the ‘intracultural’ [...] those exchanges within, between, and across regions in the larger framework of a nation”. He also points out that “in our search for ‘other cultures’ we tend to forget the cultures within our own boundaries, the differences which are marginalized and occasionally silenced in our imagined homogeneities”. This understanding of ‘intracultural’ is shared by Kristine Landon-Smith and Sudha Bhuchar, and expressed in their productions, such as *A Yearning* (1995), in which Lorca's play *Yerma* was transposed to a Punjabi community in Birmingham.

In what way is their theatre-making actor-centred? For Kristine Landon-Smith (KLS) this means carefully setting up improvisations for the individual actors. Drawing on the actors’ interests, she uses improvisations to help them find a way into the scene. Whatever phase of working with the text the actors are in, KLS wants them to keep up the improvisation mode (“to keep their improvisation heads on”) that they’ve been developing.



Rehearsal during *Bilquis Bibi* (photo: AM)

She describes Philippe Gaulier, the comedian and performance teacher who emphasises the importance of the joy of play, as a theatre practitioner who

¹ Bharucha, Rustom (1997), *The Drama Review* (1997), p. 31.

has had an enormous influence on her approach. In line with Gaulier, for KLS the pleasure of play is essential in the theatre making process. Something she doesn't want the participants in the drama process to do is to focus on a role or on a script at too early a stage, as in her experience this makes them shut themselves out of the exploratory creative working process.

I look and see who the person is, what their habits are, how they communicate, and what they enjoy using in the rehearsing process. I encourage and help them to draw out something which is about them individually, and which they enjoy bringing into the process. (KLS)

In the rehearsals and workshops it becomes clear that popular culture often plays a role for actors, but this could be anything, from a rap or a dance routine to using their phone or speaking in another language. "It's all useful as long as the actors bring themselves to the play", says Landon-Smith. "I don't want actors to put anything on, such as an accent they don't actually feel connected to. They need to feel that it has something to do with them." Landon-Smith encourages and challenges the actors to bring themselves to the play, and to play with their own language and cultural resources, by specifically setting up improvisations for each actor or small groups of actors.

Setting up an improvisation

London. A theatre studio on the fifth floor. During the Actor/Director Laboratory, an intensive five-day workshop for actors and directors, a short monologue has just been presented to the whole group, as part of a pair-work (one director and one actor) exercise, followed by a round of reflection and feedback. The actor and director get to speak first, then other workshop participants join in the discussion. The next step is to explore alternative ways of putting the same monologue into a scene. Landon-Smith is happy with the work that has been demonstrated to the forum, and, as part of the workshop, it's her turn now to work with the actor on the same piece, a Shakespeare monologue².

² It's a monologue from the play Othello by William Shakespeare (Act 5, scene 2) . Set in a bed chamber in the castle. Desdemona lies in bed, asleep, when Othello enters.

The first thing Landon-Smith does is to prepare the working process by arranging the set up of the scene. She gets a sports mat, and asks another workshop participant (actress T) to lie down on the mat, so the actor will have a real person to interact with.

Landon-Smith starts working with the actor (the distance between them is about 3 meters) on the piece by giving him some brief instructions, but then quickly engages in a more casual and personal conversation.

Participants are: D = director Kristine Landon-Smith; A = actor in his early 20s, T = actress in her early 20s; (???) = question marks in parentheses indicate parts of speech that couldn't be clearly identified.

example 1, phase 1 (audio-track 1)

01 D: ok now what I want you to do is right I want you to come in
02 A: mm

02 D: and in your what is your accent? you're a London accent
03 A: London

04 D: it's London? ok so uuh so can you just talk to me a
05 A: yeah

06 D: bit in your London accent? yeah soo how did you get here this
07 A: yeah

08 D: morning? yeah
09 A: (???) I took the bus the one four two (???????????)

In the example above, director Landon-Smith (D) briefly frames her activity as a directing-activity (“what I want you to do” and “I want you to come in”) and announces for the actor (A) and other participants that the workshop exercise has started. Once she has established the general frame for the following acting activities, she moves on to more specific aspects such as the actor’s way of speaking. She asks the actor to say something using his everyday way of speaking (“can you just talk to me a bit in your London accent?”), which has the effect of making the actor feel confident and relaxed with the language use in the exercise. After the actor briefly indicates (“yeah”) to the director that he is OK with *how* he speaks in the exercise, the director moves on to *what* he speaks about (“how did you get here this morning?”). By setting the keys³

³ ‘Key’ means here the directions that provide information for spoken text and which function just as the clefs, the sharps or flats in music that tell you in what key the music needs to be played. (cf. Milde,

(similar to musical keys) for the actor's manner of speaking (*how*) and the content of his speech (*what*), the director provides support for the actor in the first phase of the exercise. She makes him feel comfortable and supported by the other observing participants who find his story amusing and entertaining. This task appears to be easy for the actor, indicated by the actor immediately starting the exercise without any hesitation and by the flow of his speech (“?? I took the bus...”).

Once Landon-Smith has made sure that the actor has comfortably settled into the first phase of the exercise and that his communication is flowing, she provides the actor with a way of boosting his confidence and pleasure to play. She engages him in a conversation about something she has seen him excited about earlier that day: his new smartphone.

example 2, phase 2 (audio-track 2)

01 D: and now you're coming back with the new phone you bought which

02 D: you just love it's got all the apps

03 A: it's got everything (???)

The actor has been telling the director, and other participants, in his accent how he got to the drama workshop that morning, when the director introduces a new topic (“and now you're coming back with the new phone you bought”). The director brings in a new topic (new phone) at a moment when the actor's speech is still flowing and before he has exhausted the preceding topic (transport). In this phase of the exercise the director is still helping the actor to prepare for the actual improvisation and to gradually gain more confidence. We can also see that Landon-Smith goes a step further, beyond establishing the fluidity of the actor's speech and making the actor feel safe within the exercise. She now encourages the actor to talk about something she knows he is interested in and has some knowledge about (the new phone he bought), which is her way of involving him more in the play.

Once the actor has become more confident and personally involved in the play, Landon-Smith moves on to the next phase.

Andrea (2007): Directing and the Role of Instructions, in: *The International Journal of the Arts in Society*, pp. 9-10).

example 3, phase 3 (audio-track 3)

01 D: or what is it exactly you do?
02 A: how I sample music? first first I listen to a
03 D: yeah yeah yeah
04 A: song and I pick up certain beats I like and I keep that in mind
05 D: [...] like do you have to do it yourself? yeah go on so like yeah
06 A: yeah
07 D: if you're hear something and
08 A: (?????) (beat box) Pa·ta ta pa ta ta Pa·ta ta pa ta ta
09 D: and then that and
10 A: yeah Ts·ts ts ts- ts ts Ts·ts ts ts- ts ts ts Pa· tsts
11 D: and then do you record that? you're doing it? oh cool
12 A: yeah yeah

In the third phase of setting up an improvisation for this particular actor, KLS asks him to not only talk about something he feels comfortable with (“what is it exactly you do?”), but she also asks him to demonstrate beat boxing (“yeah go on so like”), which is an activity that she has seen him enjoying earlier. We can see that the director helps the actor to get involved by encouraging him to bring in his interests (e.g. “do you have to do it yourself?” and “do you record that?”) and, very importantly, by helping him find and develop a personal tool that he can use in the improvisation.

In the final phase of setting up the improvisation (example 4), director KLS now provides the keys (similar to musical keys) for the improvisation, by drawing on what both, actor and director, have just developed in the preceding phases of the working process.

example 4, phase 4 (audio-track 4)

01 D: right ok so what you're going to do you're going to look at her
02 D: and that's fine or not and you're just going to be that guy doing a bit
03 D: of your beat box thing ok? aand yeah when I clap⁴ you're gonna go
04 D: to text ok? but it's going to be that guy who does that beat box
05 D: thing [...] a London guy done doing Shakespeare ok?
06 A: m-m

⁴ Change regarding cue: After first improvisation the director asks the actor to start with the text whenever he is ready.

In example 4 we can see how the director moves to the next phase and frames her activity—that is giving instructions to the actor—as a directing-activity (“what you’re going to do” and “you’re going to look at her”), just as she did it in the beginning of the first phase (“what I want you to do”, example 1). The instructions she gives, in particular the first element of the instructions (“what you’re going to do”), mark the end of the exploratory period and announce that the next phase—the improvisation—is about to come up. In this phase (phase 4) KLS provides the keys for the actor’s following acting-version⁵ (“you’re just going to be that guy doing a bit of your beat box thing”), which involves all elements the director and the actor have been building up: the actor’s manner of speaking (*how*: the actor’s everyday London accent), the content of his speech (*what*: drawing on content of Shakespeare text), and using the tools he just developed (beat box).

The director arranges a cue with the actor (“when I clap you’re gonna go to text ok?”), so he will know when to move from doing an improvisation to doing an acting version of the Shakespeare text. She finishes the instructions by encouraging him to keep his way of interacting (“but it’s going to be that guy who does that beat box thing” and “a London guy done doing Shakespeare. ok?”).

After having seen a couple of brief improvisations, the director gives some final instructions (example 5) before the actor begins his improvisation and acting version, supported by actress T, responding to the actor’s interactions. Each actor sits at one end of the bench.

example 5, phase 5 (audio-track 5)

01 D: soo uuhm so you’ve had that conversation you said you’ve slept with

02 D: my best friend she’s plunged into silence and you start your bloody

03 D: beat boxing and you come back at the end

04 A: Pa·ta ta pa ta ta

05 A: Pa·ta ta pa ta Pa·ta ta pa ta Pa·ta ta pa ta

06 T: really!? is that the answer to everything?

⁵ Acting-version means the version of an actor enacting a text.

07 A:	Pa·ta ta pa	Pa·ta ta pa ta	
08 T:		why do you do this	every time anything

09 A:	it is the cause!	it is the cause	my soul
10 T:	comes up?		ok we need to talk

In example 5, the director gives some final instructions to the actor by briefly providing him with a summarised version of the scenario (“you’ve had...”, “you said you’ve...”, “she’s plunged...”, “you start...”, “you come back...”) they have been working on. The scenario the director gives is simple, involves a concrete real-life situation, and the instructions are straightforward in their meaning. The actor begins the improvisation with a full and melodic sounding beat box—compared to the beat box he has done in the previous phases—and then, in response to the intentionally challenging comments by the actress (“why do you do this every time anything comes up?”), moves into the acting version (“it is the cause”), which remains interwoven with the beat boxing.

After that several other groups present their work, and KLS works with the other actors in a similar manner.

Tamasha’s technique (examples 1-5)

This exercise, which we have looked at in examples 1–5, was carried out in the context of a five-day intensive training course for actors and directors. Landon-Smith’s technique of working with an actor is based on gradually building up the keys (e.g. *how* to speak) and tools for the scene. The very individual tools (in this case beat boxing) are used to help this particular actor to move smoothly from improvisation into enacting the relevant text.

The director works towards the improvisation which then leads straight into the acting-version. The improvisation is initially interwoven with the acting-version, but with the aim that the improvisation will at some point no longer be necessary. The director sets the keys by giving specific instructions for the improvisation, so that the improvisation will follow the relevant theme and will help the actor and other participants to see the connections between the improvisation and the enacting of the text.

The director draws out the actor’s everyday interests and activities as

well as features of his cultural identity for use in the process and to get him involved. Based on observations the director has made beforehand, the director invites the actor to bring in some of his interests and cultural context within the context of a playful chat.

The text shows Othello, who is angry about Desdemona. The director creates a similar but contemporary scenario that could be situated in real life and shows a young man who is angry about his girl-friend for similar reasons. The director explores, together with the actor and participants, the emotional dimension of that scenario in order to make the text accessible and interesting for all participants.

Asking the actresses to be themselves

Tuesday morning, 10am. It's the second day of a four-week theatre play production in North London. The director Landon-Smith has shown the stage design model to the actresses and observers and explained how it was developed. She has given them a summary of the working process and activities from the day before, and the actresses, director and observers have carried out a warming-up exercise. The actresses have just finished reading a section from the script, which is set in present-day Pakistan.⁶ The next step is to develop this section into a scene.

Participants are: D = director Kristine Landon-Smith; A1 = actress 1; A2 = actress 2; A3 = actress 3; ? = person couldn't be identified.

example 6, (audio-track 6)

01 D: great ok so uuhm right just put your text aside for the moment

02 ?: mm

03 D: uuhm right what it is I want to do is I just uhm

In the example above (example 6), director Kristine Landon-Smith asks the actresses to put their texts aside and arranges the set-up for the scene. She quickly gives feedback ("great ok") at the end of the actresses' reading of the script to confirm that they are going to work on what they have just been

⁶ The play *The House of Bilquis Bibi* is written by Sudha Bhuchar, and is adapted from F.G. Lorca's play *The House of Bernarda Alba*.

reading. She pulls two sofas into position, asks the actresses to sit in particular places, and starts giving them instructions for an improvisation.

At first, KLS indicates indirectly that they are going to work on an improvisation, by asking them to put their texts aside (“put your texts aside for the moment”), and only later on tells them directly that she’d like them to do an improvisation. She briefly frames her activity as a directing-activity (“what it is I want to do is”) and announces for the actresses that the working process has started. Once she has established the general frame for the following acting activities, she moves on to setting the keys for this improvisation by providing a scenario (example 7).

example 7, instructions for first improvisation (audio-track 7)

[...] = some parts of conversation were skipped.

01 D: right ok so you're all actors and uuhm [...] this is part has come up
02 D: and you've all been recalled about two or three times and it's
03 A?: (giggling)
04 D: pretty mega ok? and you've all had your sort of third recall and they've
05 D: asked you to wait out here and uhm [...] you sort of know each other
06 D: you're all Asian actresses ok? [...] (to actress 1) you feel you feel
07 D: a little bit bitter and edgy [...] you you're a bit older than the others
08 D: and you just you keep missing out ok? [...] (to actress 2)
09 A1: m
10 D: you're quite new to the business and you're still quite optimistic right? ok?
11 A2: yeah
12 D: (to actress 3) you're uhm you're uhm you're also optimistic

In example 7 we can see how KLS moves on to *what* the actresses are supposed to do in the improvisation (“ok so you’re all actors”) and also to *how* they are supposed to speak, namely just as they usually speak in their everyday life. A few moments later KLS adds another layer to the keys by telling them that in this scenario they’re all Asian actresses (“you’re all Asian actresses ok?”). The key of being Asian actresses is a fairly open key, and at this point it is still up to the actresses in what way that key will influence their interaction (how and about what). The director knows that this is an easy and

22 D: ok? [...] and so you all got Indian accents and so let's see what happens

23 D: here and your name is Vineeta your name is Mariam your name is

24 D: Shalini and your name is Youkti you all got accents

25 D: and that's it ok? (clears her throat) hm

26 A2: yeah

The director moves into adjusting the keys for the second improvisation (“next improvisation is”) and does not give much feedback at this point yet, but tells them that she will do so later (e.g. “we’ll do a couple of these” and “before we’ll have any conversations around it”). KLS starts out with rearranging the set up and changes where they sit (e.g. “can you swap with Youkti?” and “can you sit over there?”) and how they sit (e.g. “get nice and sort of comfy”). She adjusts the keys—both for the group and for the individual actresses—closer to the actual scene which they are working towards through different improvisations. As in the preceding improvisation, KLS wants the actresses to have Indian accents (“you all have Indian accents”) but without playing a particular character from the script. She wants the actresses to be—not to play—themselves in the next scenario (“you’re Vineeta you’re Mariam...”) ⁷, but this time as sisters (“you’re all sisters ok?”) who are in India or Pakistan. The question they were supposed to be worried about in the first improvisation (who is going to get the acting part?), has been replaced by the question of who is going to get married next. As before, she also provides specific keys for each individual actress for the following scenario (e.g. “you really fancy the guy that she’s getting married to” and “you think it’s great”).

In the next example (example 9) the director asks the actresses to do another improvisation, but this time to use the script.

example 9, instructions for third improvisation (audio-track 9)

01 D: ok right great that is (?) really it's very excellent

02 A4: huh? why(???)

03 A1: huh? (???)

04 D: all four of you right? you were we were watching all four of you and

05 D: all four of you are open wonderful actresses who we love ok?

06 D: [...] can you just pick up your hold on don't move

07 A?: (an actress gets up)

⁷ These are the actresses' real names, not the names of the characters or roles in the script.

08 D: I give you cos I don't really want you to change so you pick up
 09 D: your script right? [...] I want you ? we're going to play the script but
 10 D: we're going to play it we're going to use these words in THIS improvisation
 11 D: so you're still Vineeta you're still Mariam you're Shalini and you're Youkti
 12 D: you'll be sisters there's a wedding happening with her sister
 13 D: but you happen to be saying THIS ok? that's that is the exercise [...]
 14 D: except that it's not now coming to the scene and try to find the meaning
 15 D: of some [...] we want the quality of the improvisation and we want
 16 D: the quality of each wonderful open actor individually in the same way
 17 A2: yeah

In example 9 we can see how the director takes the next step in adjusting the keys for the improvisation closer to the actual scene. KLS ends the improvisation (“ok right great”) and gives the actresses positive feedback (“it’s very excellent” and “all four of you are open wonderful actresses who we love”). She tells them that she likes the way they were doing the improvisation and that she wants them to stay exactly in that mode, and moves from feedback to the instructions for the next improvisation this way. KLS asks the actresses to not make any changes regarding the way they were sitting and how they moved their bodies (e.g. “don’t move” and “I don’t really want you to change”), and to stay in the same improvisation mode they have just demonstrated. KLS then announces directly that she wants them to do something (“I want you to...”) and tells them that she wants them to use the script (“we’re going to play the script”). She then tells them how she wants them to use the script, namely to only use the words of the script and bring them into the improvisation they have just done (“use these words in THIS improvisation”). KLS points out that it’s an exercise and not a scene, and they don’t have to worry about putting meaning into it. As before, she wants them to be themselves (using their real names) in this scenario, with the difference that they’re bringing specific words into the improvisation (e.g. “you’re Shalini”, “and you’re Youkti” and “but you happen to be saying THIS”). KLS does not want them to play a role or be a character from the script. At the very end of her instructions she encourages the actresses again to keep up the

improvisation mode of the preceding improvisation. This time she doesn't focus on the way they were sitting and physically appeared in the improvisation, but she asks them to hold onto the way they acted and interacted ("we want the quality of the improvisation" and "and we want the quality of each wonderful open actor individually in the same way").

In the following example (example 10) the director interrupts the script-based improvisation to point out a problem and to briefly suggest a solution for it.

example 10, extracts of instructions for fourth improvisation (audio-track 10)

01 D: ok now one sec
02 A3: (using script) I know her fiancé has forbidden her to mix
03 D: right now just now you're when you go to the text you're slightly
04 D: closing down as an actress right? now it's very subtle this but
05 D: I we have to I have we have to capture this very early on now it's
06 D: partly because the potential that we found in that improvisation
07 D: the potential of the laugh of the this of the that of the this of the that
08 D: of any dynamic that we want the potential of that has to be in this
09 D: text right? If you let the text guide you instead of you
10 D: controlling the text you're slightly closed because you're letting the
11 D: text close you ok? do you understand that? [...] ok so what
12 D: we're going to do is we're going to do tiny little improvisation and
13 D: move into it (to actress 2) and when you're ready don't let it go on
14 D: too long when you're ready (snaps with finger) X you then
15 D: (quotes actress's text) "have you taken your medicine" and then
16 D: we know we're coming to the text [...] but you keep that improvisation
17 D: feel ok? right ok
18 A2: ok yeah

KLS interrupts the script-based improvisation ("ok now one sec") after spotting a problem. She thinks that one of the actresses has not managed to keep up the improvisation mode after using the words of the script ("when you go to the text you're slightly closing down as an actress"). KLS doesn't want her to focus on being a character in the text, but instead, she wants the

actress to be herself as an actress in the improvisation. KLS briefly explains to the actress where the problem lies and how to solve it. In order to be able to stay open and do the improvisation according to the keys, the actress needs to be in control of the text (“if you let the text guide you instead of you controlling the text you’re slightly closed”). We can see that KLS uses the specific and gradually developed improvisation as a general tool to smoothly enter the scene (“we’re going to do a tiny little improvisation and move into it [the scene]”).

After the director’s instructions (example 10), another improvisation takes place, followed by some feedback from the director and a discussion between actresses and director. After a 15-minute coffee break, more actresses join the rehearsal room. Actresses, director, and director-observers all begin the next rehearsal with about ten minutes of warm-up games. Actresses and director then go through several scenes from the same act. The process is stop-and-go, with fourteen stops, as activities such as feedback, instructions, questions and answers, and trying out set-ups and props are brought in. They also carry out a few more short improvisations with the actresses who have turned up later (as scheduled).

Additional audio-track, (audio-track 10a):

From the first day on, KLS has also been asking the actresses to use other languages in improvisations, depending on the actresses and sections of the script. On the fourth day, KLS asks two of the actresses, who are involved in examples 6-10, to carry out in French and Gujarati an improvisation that they have just done in English.

Tamasha’s technique (examples 6-10)

We have looked at examples (6-10) of a director working with four actresses. We could see that after a reading of a section of the script, KLS started working with them by gradually building up the main keys and tools within four rounds of instructions and improvisation.

The main tool KLS asks them to use in the improvisations is to be themselves as actresses, and to use the words of the script but without

putting too much meaning into it. KLS helps the actresses to gradually build up a particular improvisational mode or “feel”, which will then be used to move smoothly from improvisation into enacting the relevant text.

The working process prior to the actresses carrying out an acting-version consists of an exploratory phase involving specifically keyed improvisations that have especially been set up for the four actresses—as a group and individually—working on the scenes of this play.

KLS draws on the four actresses’ everyday interests and activities, such as attending castings and recalls, for creating scenarios that are relevant to the actresses. She also draws on features of the cultural identity of the actresses—who mostly have a South Asian background—when providing them with keys for the scenario (such as being Asian actresses).

KLS sets up scenarios for the improvisation that are closely oriented to the scenario in the script. In the script, several sisters in Pakistan wonder in different ways about which of them will be the next to get married. KLS sets up the first scenario in which the actresses—as themselves, not as characters—wonder in different ways about who will get the acting part they have auditioned for. Both scenarios show how differently four or five young women experience the same event and respond to it.

Capturing text through multilingual improvisations

East London. Monday morning. It’s the first day of a three-week rehearsal period with circus artists (who are also second-year circus arts students), actors, a writer, and a director. The aim is to collaboratively devise a piece based on a graphic novel, *The Arrival*, by Shaun Tan, which is about migrants leaving everything behind and re-inventing themselves in another country. Kristine Landon-Smith has done some work with the performers on the show prior to this rehearsal period, and has developed, together with the writer Sita Brahmachari, a general frame for the script. This morning, after a round of introductions, KLS talks about the upcoming working process and leads a warm-up game to prepare for the improvisations the performers will be carrying out.

She starts setting up the improvisation by clarifying which circus-arts students (there are eighteen in all) are performing in which circus discipline and where they are positioned.

Participants are: D = director Kristine Landon-Smith; ? = circus-arts student who couldn't be identified; P = performer.

example 11, preparing the improvisation (audio-track 11)

01 D: (answers performer) you're down yes
02 ?: (asks D) am I down or (?)? so down

03 D: (to the whole group) so basically right at the moment what what I'm thinking

04 D: of is in terms of discipline we are going to have Holly Gemma Estelle

05 D: on the hoops Anna on the rope Augusts on the straps and Ellen on

06 D: the Chinese pole but everybody so what I'm gonna to do now this

07 D: morning is I uhm we'll all take a break at some point I just

08 D: want to get the first improvisation over with basically is what I want

09 D: to do is I just want to try and capture some text right? and when

10 D: you're all in your positions uuhm so we've got the positions there

11 D: haven't we? now so basically can I just put you put you sitting next to

12 D: your position before I tell you what's going to happen (to individual performers)

13 D: so Ellen if you can (go sit?) by your pole if uuhm
14 ?: (cough)

15 D: Holly if you could could you can you go on that hoop? yeah
16 P: that one?

After carrying out several other activities, director Kristine Landon-Smith continues the working process by checking with the performers which equipment they are using (e.g. "we're going to have Holly Gemma Estelle on the hoops"). After checking the positions of some of the individual performers, she addresses the whole group again ("but everybody") and provides information on how she plans to proceed ("we'll all take a break at some point I just want to get the first improvisation over with" and "I just want to try and capture some text right?"). She then moves on to check with individual performers and the actor their particular positions (e.g. "Holly if you could could you can you go on that hoop?").

The next step for the director after going through the performers' positions is to give more information about the following improvisations.

example 12, information about the improvisation (audio-track 12)

01 D: so Ellen you're here just just (?) right ok uuuhm dA da da da da dA
02 ? : (??)

03 D: uuuhm Okezie let's say you would just sort of just here

04 D: if you don't mind (clears her throat) hm right ok
05 ? : (??)

06 D: now uhm so before you go up on your ???????? I'm just gonna

07 D: explain this I'm gonna do a I'm just gonna do a series of improvisations

08 D: ok? just to try and find some text [...] and then I'm gonna but I'm

09 D: gonna tell you about the text in a minute then I'm gonna do

10 D: some separate improvisations on the equipment

11 D: (lists people in the scenario) husband and wife drunk guy slightly posh sisters

12 D: we'll do that later

KLS has just finished sorting out the performers' positions' (e.g. "so Ellen you're here") when she tells the group about what she plans to do next. She informs the cast that she will carry out a series of improvisations in order to capture some text (e.g. "I'm just gonna do a series of improvisations ok?" and "just to try and find some text"), which the writer, who is present at the rehearsal, will develop into a script. KLS then moves from focusing on the positions of the performers to focusing on the content of the performers' playing. She begins to list the people she envisages in the scenario of the following improvisation (e.g. "husband and wife" and drunk guy").

In the next extract (example 13) we can see how the director gives the performers different keys for the improvisation. She then invites the performers to bring in other languages they speak, which will be integrated into the improvisation and contribute to the development of the script.

example 13, instructions for the improvisation (audio-track 13)

01 D: so I got Estelle Estelle you're going to be on a hoop with the baby
02 D: (?it's well to have a baby?) right? and Gemma is also your daughter
03 D: and Gareth is your husband who said we have to leave our country

04 D: ok? you're so as you are you did not want to leave and then she

05 D: is like this so you are in French and occasionally you're saying

06 D: to Gareth you know look how awful this is write if I do not come

07 D: ok? so I'm just gonna I'm gonna just give you some text mode?
08 ?: (coughs/clears her throat) hm hm hm

09 D: (to actor) you are you are obviously you left Nigeria you're Igbo

10 D: so we have to change the names here cos he's Igbo so we have to

11 D: to change Tunda and Al (to two performers) and then you're mother and

12 D: daughter with Niamh ok? (to two performers) you're the Spanish people

13 D: (to two performers) you're Polish now you do get drunk but ma- perhaps

14 D: not immediately ok? we'll see and you when you're drunk you

15 D: speak jibberish [...] (to the whole group) so the people who have

16 D: a language which are the Spanish people the Polish Antek the
17 ?: (clears his throat) hm

18 D: uhm French Estelle does anybody else have another language

19 D: in this group? sorry? no not Irish you mean actual
20 P1: Irish Irish
21 P2: Irish Niamh can

22 D: Gaelic? (to performer) and do YOU? DO you
23 P1: yeah a little bit a tiny little bit yeah
24 P3: yeah

25 D: a tiny little bit ok
26 P1: yeah Niamh
27 P2: Niamh Niamh does as well
28 P4: Niamh speaks fluent(?)

29 D: she Niamh Niamh Niamh speaks fluent Gaelic
30 P1: (?????)
31 P2: (???)
32 P3: Lisa speaks Dutch

33 D: Lisa speaks Dutch (to performer) I know
34 P5: she is Dutch she is Dutch
35 P6: and I speak Italian I am Italian

36 D: but you're not in this scene very very
37 P6: yeah oh THAT scene (??)
38 ?: (some performers find it amusing and laugh) ha ha ha ha

39 D: useful your Italian but you're not in this we need you out we need

40 D: you out ok so you're so but you do speak
41 P6: yeyeyeyeah I understood

42 D: Italian you can ?????? ?? ??? use it (to performer) so you speak Dutch

43 D: so we need your Dutch ok? soo uuhm (to performer) so you speak

44 D: Gaelic a little bit of Gaelic and so does she that's not a bad idea ok

45 ?:
(coughs) hhmhm

46 D: so uhm could you swap with Doug then right? right? (to performer)

47 P7:

48 D: so Doug you're you're with Estelle right?

49 P7: so I'm the father ok

KLS has finished a first round of sorting out the performers' positions, and now moves on to providing every performer with a general but individual key, so they know what sort of text they are aiming for in the improvisation. The director provides them with keys for their upcoming improvised text by giving them: either the particular identity they have in the scenario (e.g. "Gemma is also your daughter and Gareth is your husband" and "you're mother and daughter with Niamh"); or by asking them to speak in a specific manner (e.g. "and when you're drunk you speak jibberish"); or by providing a subtext (e.g. "and occasionally you're saying [...] look how awful this is"). All the people in the scenario are migrants from different countries who do not have a common language, but use the languages they have to communicate. The performers and the director have already decided to use Igbo, French, Polish and Spanish (e.g. "so you are in French"), and in this example KLS encourages the other performers to bring in any other languages they speak (e.g. "does anybody else have another language in this group?" and "so we need your Dutch ok?" and "a little bit of Gaelic and so does she that's not a bad idea"). Based on the languages which the circus-arts students have just brought into the improvisation, the director adjusts their positions to the new situation (e.g. "could you swap with Doug then?"). Later on, more students offer to bring in other languages.

The following extract shows some final instructions the director gives for the improvisation. She briefly points out the reason for using the different languages again, summarises the scenario and helps the performers move into an improvisation mode.

example 14, final instructions for first improvisation (audio-track 14)

01 D: and the ship improvisation is going to be in three parts so the ship travels

02 D: and this is going to be a small text improvisation of (?some time passes)

03 D: and where you all start to sort of get to know each other ok? and to

04 D: the reason why I want the language people largely to do it is because I

05 D: ultimately we are saying you're coming from foreign lands to London ok?

06 D: [...] right? I think it's slightly easier to get into the improvisation so you're all

07 D: going to come to these positions at the moment you're not going to be on

08 D: your equipment because we're just trying to capture the text so

09 D: what you're gonna do is you all gonna go over there let's say you've

10 D: been on this ship you've got off you've had a bit of a relax and you've

11 D: come back on but you're like being on it for twenty-four hours and it's

12 D: like fucking hell u and maybe not twenty-four hours (she suggests a new

13 D: length of time) three hours and there's been very little conversation right?

14 D: you come back on ship starts up again and improvisation begins in your

15 D: own time don't rush into it ok? [...]

In this example (example 14) we see an extract of the instructions the director gives the performers before they start the first version of this particular improvisation. KLS briefly points out that the practical purpose of this improvisation is to find some text (e.g. “this is going to be a small text improvisation”), and explains why they’re using different languages (e.g. “the reason why I want the language people largely to do it is because I ultimately we are saying you’re coming from foreign lands to London”). She also provides some background information (e.g. “you’ve been on this ship you’ve got off” and “there’s been very little conversation”) for the scenario they’ve been working on. The instructions are aimed at making the performers understand—within the scenario—what they have been through and how they feel when they start the improvisation. The background information KLS has provided functions as a key for the general condition and mood of everyone in the scenario.

After the performers have carried out the first version of the text

improvisation, KLS gives them some brief feedback. She then moves on to providing more specific keys for the individual performers' texts and use of other languages for the next version of the same text improvisation.

example 15, instructions for new version of text improvisation (audio-track 15)

01 D: ok ok so so so so just this is great ok so uhm
02 ?: ?????
03 ?: ?????

04 D: I'm just gonna I'm just going to this th I think that was good that was
05 D: very very nice right? and this is this is gonna be really useful even if
06 D: so what I'm gonna do is I'm just gonna say your name right? I like that
07 D: exchange very much we'll start with that again (she quotes from the improvised
08 D: text) *the clean dedede no sorry you ask her no dedede finish nothing*
09 D: more ok? then I'm gonna say somebody else you know uhm
10 D: uuhm and an I might say Antek and Jonathan ok? now if I say
11 D: Ant Antek and Jonathan then you need to say something to him in Polish
12 D: right? and even if you're abusing him cause you're slightly drunk
13 D: whatever I don't mind and he's a bit but I don't mind how (?) so I would
14 D: just slightly orchestrate it so and then if you if you if you if you if I say
15 D: if I if I say Estelle ok? then when you find a conversation right? uhm
16 D: can you (responding to something regarding the position) *you're with Niamh yeah*
17 D: can you and so if I then give you should I say you you're gonna sing a
18 D: song but can you say something like uhm can you try and take the
19 D: conversation outside your family group? so maybe in French you then say
20 D: to Kat (suggesting text) uh *why don't you play with my daughter you girls*
21 D: *look bored* or something so that that so that actually the conversation
22 D: never is just like in little dedededede we're trying to get a conversation
23 D: between all of you going ok? so then if I say Gareth then maybe in
24 D: Gaelic you might say to him (suggesting text) *you know you know any English*
25 D: *words?*

KLS stops the improvisation after they have carried out some different conversations and gives them some brief feedback (e.g. "this is great" and

“that was very very nice right?”). The performers have carried out conversations and used the languages they had decided on. KLS now takes the next step and starts introducing them to her way of shaping the conversations a bit more (e.g. “so what I’m gonna do is I’m just gonna say your name right?”). The performers know generally what to do, and KLS provides them now with more detailed information about the length of some of their contributions (e.g. “*the clean dedede no sorry you ask her no dedede finish nothing more ok?*”), about the timing and the cues (e.g. “If I say Ant Antek and Jonathan then you need to say something to him in Polish right?”), about the development of some of the conversations (e.g. “can you try and take the conversation outside your family group?”), and also about the content of the text she would like them to produce in a different language (e.g. “so then if I say Gareth then maybe in Gaelic you might say to him (suggesting text) *you know you know any English words?*”). In this extract we can see how KLS provides more detailed and specific keys for individual performers and for groups of two performers. The way the director gives instructions to the performers during the improvisation in order to structure and shape the overall improvisation is a sort of conducting, as she times the cues for the performers’ contributions; this could be called ‘live instructing’, as she gives the instructions while the improvisation is taking place.

Tamasha’s technique (examples 11-15)

In the above examples, we have looked at the director’s instructions and the initial preparation process for a multilingual text improvisation, carried out in the context of a three-week collaboration between Circus Space and Tamasha theatre. KLS was working on setting up a short multilingual improvisation to capture some text, which would then be developed into a script based on a graphic novel.

She used different languages in this production in order to create a scenario about migrants arriving in London without knowing any English or sharing a common language. Apart from the actor, who was cast, KLS didn’t know before the initial meetings if the circus-arts students would bring in any

other languages. Apart from the languages she and some performers decided on during the initial meeting prior to the main rehearsal process, the director only found out during the rehearsal period what skills and interests she would be drawing on (example 13).

Apart from bringing in other languages, KLS also drew on other skills the students had, such as singing, playing an instrument, or performing various circus arts. For some scenes, some performers were also teaching other performers songs in different languages. KLS (example 11-15) uses keyed improvisations, which she prepares very carefully and in some detail, to capture text for the show (and script).

The essential phases in this working process seem to be the initial preparation, the first version of the improvisation, and the following feedback and instructions. After the initial preparation phase, she starts out with an improvisation that is generally keyed (example 13), and in the following round of feedback and instructions, she adjusts those keys by providing more detailed information for individual performers. She provides adjusted and more specific keys by giving instructions for the length of contributions, the timing and cues, the development of conversations in the scenario, and also about the content of the text. It's a way of gradually turning the improvisations into acting-versions.

Conclusion

In the above examples (1-15) we've looked at the rehearsal periods of three different Tamasha productions (a workshop for actors and directors; a theatre play production; and a collaborative circus arts and theatre production) in order to find out about what is going on in Tamasha's intracultural theatre practice. How is Tamasha's intracultural focus, which involves aspects such as "looking at the relationships between cultures within a shared nation [...]" and "including their diverse communities [...]", embedded in its actual working process?

The main features of Kristine Landon-Smith's theatre practice are intertwined with and inseparable from keyed improvisations, as opposed to open improvisations. Keyed improvisations are the fundament of KLS's way of

working and provide the framework for rehearsals and drama exercises, which lead to the acting-versions (scenes). Within the keyed improvisations, we can make out the main feature of KLS's intracultural theatre practice: encouraging individual actors to be themselves—as a valuable resource—with all the depth of their personality, their skills and interests, and bringing their cultural identity into the working process, whatever their background. Drawing on the actors' cultural and language context (such as beat boxing, singing in Igbo, or chatting in Gaelic or Polish), she uses the framework of the improvisation for capturing text, developing keys and tools, and finding a way into the acting version.

About the author

Andrea Milde is a rehearsal researcher and applied linguist at the interface of spoken communication and the arts, with expertise in the field of conversations in rehearsals, performance and other artistic creative processes. In her PhD (University of Sheffield, 2006) she investigated the transition from artistic written text (scripts) into artistic spoken text and developed an approach to the analysis of spoken artistic productions—a method for researching drama processes and theatre practice. She has carried out several research projects on spoken communication and spoken text production during drama and radio-play productions, and her special field is the communication between actors and directors. She also works as a drama consultant (<http://www.linguistics-in-drama.com/>), and is currently Visiting Scholar at the Centre for Language, Discourse & Communication, DEPS, King's College London.