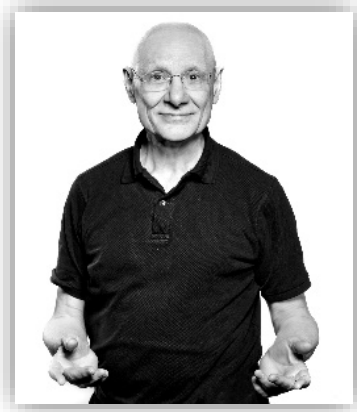


# STOP & ACT – IMPRO-THEATER AS PSYCHO-DRAMA



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## Abstract

The article presents the technique of "Stop & Act" developed by the author, a special kind of improvisational theater. It is a derivative of psycho-drama based on Jacob Levi Moreno and intended for larger groups. In improvised play, "challenging" issues, e.g. unresolved or still "pending" conflicts, interests or other explosive topics, are openly discussed and acted out in short theater scenes, without too much staging. The goals, rules, target audience, benefits of impro-theater are given in the article. The most important aspects of the "Stop & Act" were described such as: the preparation stage, the script, the game, the actors, go-go-girls, the stage, the audience, the presenter, the feedback and the investment.

**Keywords:** psychodrama, improvisational theater, pending conflicts, win-win solution, positive psychotherapy

## Introduction

Many studies show that both active and passive arts and cultural participation have a positive effect on well-being and health: for example, listening to music, reading a book, visiting a museum or dancing (Moreno, 2006), especially active participation in movement and theater activities. However, Cultural participation is not only good for our well-being, but can also prevent certain mental and physical complaints.

Children, teenagers, adults, accumulate many old and new aggressions. The consequences are well known: violence, fear, depression. An effective method to eliminate problems in a group is the "Stop & Act, a theater form, based on the psychodrama according to Jacob Levy Moreno (2006) and Augusto Boal (1974).

This theater activity aims to bring together people from the public, academic, service and volunteer sectors. It is a time to share experiences, practices and knowledge about the importance and impact of heritage and creativity in improving the mental health, well-being and resilience of people and communities.

The participants are confronted with a current problem that they have chosen themselves, but the staging intensifies the feelings, both in the actors and in the audience. A sudden "stop" causes a discussion, a positive and creative foreign substitution begins. The "play" or the improvisation is continued by the audience in an altered form.

Here we already see the further transformation of emotions by the clear mind. Negative emotions are played down and turned into positive ways of acting.

## Methodology

"Stop&Act" is a special kind of improvisational theater. It is a derivative of psycho-drama based on Jacob Levi Moreno and intended for larger groups.

A "burning" issue is discussed together by and with volunteer participants, encouraged and guided by the trainer. Everyone chooses his or her role, either as actor, as "set designer", as facilitator, organizer, writer, director, assistant, prop maker, etc. Nevertheless, everyone should play a part.

At the international conference "In search of truth and humanity in the age of war" in Leszno, Poland, in September 2022, many participants were able to enjoy the benefits of improvisational theater, offered by Jean-Marie Bottequin, expert in body language and basic trainer, Munich, Germany.



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The idea of creating "Stop&Act" impro-theater goes back to Shamil Fattakhov (Fattakhov, 2001) - a Baha'i and the founder of the "Community-Theatre for Moral Education", developer of the "Stop-and-Act" method. He lives and works in Russia and became famous through television. With his "ZIPoPO-Show" he had developed a new form of talk show. Bahá'í counseling is a special form of communication. It is based on ethical principles and involves all participants in decision-making, promoting cooperation and cohesion.

Forum theater - is a central method from the Theater of the Oppressed (Boal, 1974). In Forum Theatre, questions are raised primarily through pointed model scenes. The models are usually developed in open workshops from the generative themes of the participants. Theater of the Oppressed. Is a series of methods by Augusto Boal and was used in the 19th century for political enlightenment.

### Target audience.

The audience is the other colleagues, other participants, a school, university, etc.

### The goal.

In improvised play, "challenging" issues, e.g. unresolved or still "pending" conflicts, interests or other explosive topics, are openly discussed and acted out in short theater scenes, without too much staging. These are then stopped after a while by a moderator with a gong strike abruptly. A first feedback is started: good approaches and positive comments are rewarded. Now the audience itself is asked to continue or replay the piece that was started with a win-win solution, in a solution-oriented way. This can also be the same actors. With a final feedback, the experiences and feelings, are discussed and appreciated together. Other goals are:

- Presentation of goals and core messages effectively and visualize them emotionally
- so far only theoretical messages can be packed into exciting stories
- Triggering impulses for change and boosting motivation
- Promotion of sustainability through visual absorption of the messages and through the identification of the audience with the role figures on stage
- Reflection on one's own thinking and behavioral structures, self-knowledge
- Activation of hidden resources and potentials of the participants and the audience
- Sensitization of difficult topics, shame, fear, anger, hidden anger.

Not explicitly expressed topics, visions and missions, which are very topical and which should necessarily come to light, are unabashedly shown through improvised theater play (psycho-drama) and consciously processed collectively.

The challenges of hidden and not consciously lived feelings are emotionally processed in a (theater) protected environment. Team spirit is fostered, personal leadership is tested and mirrored.

### The preparation.

The expert / trainer Jean-Marie A. Bottequin (Munich) comes for a certain short time as a "companion" and discusses and works out a kind of provisional script together with the participants in a trustful first phase.

Many topics can be addressed, from e.g. feelings of "violence", pressure, injustice, possibly

ethnic problems, religious differences, competition, disadvantages, to positive, valuable, future, re-orientation, new goals, plans, changes, etc., etc.



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The trainer motivates the tasks, lets the participants rehearse and he encourages them. At each meeting (e.g. about 3-4 hours) the piece continues to grow, is rehearsed together in a protected environment, until the public "premiere".

#### *The Script.*

The collaborators work together on a dialogue text that is "merged" or rewritten together, according to the needs and requirements of the group. A specific target theme should be in the foreground. Nevertheless, improvisation is also in the foreground.



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#### *The game.*

At best, the audience could be seated in a semicircle. The moderator (a participant) introduces the whole thing and the actors start their - somewhat pre-practiced - improvisation.

The moderator stops the action on stage at a certain unknown moment (climax). This would be his "highest critical" point. The moderator asks the audience for feelings, sensations, solutions, etc.

It is discussed (microphone is passed around by helpers) and also in the audience a "discussion" is to be fomented. This is then stopped by the neutral but engaged moderator again for the second time. The good answers and suggestions from the audience are rewarded in each case. "Go-Go-Girls" e.g. appear surprisingly, e.g. with PopMusik and throw e.g. fresh oranges into the public.

#### *The actors.*

In the theme-oriented "Stop & Act-Impro" (© Jean-Marie A. Bottequin), the employees take over the direction, reflect on challenges in their daily work and develop valuable action alternatives.

Employees are selected democratically, or as volunteers, during the preparation phase. Everyone has his or her "job." The play is designed together and the direction is again taken over by the group or a "director" chosen by them.

After the "stop" (gong), the actors immediately stop playing and remain motionless until they are replaced by new "volunteer actors" from the audience who have a new or complementary solution to offer.

The new players could also have been determined in advance and "expressed" themselves accordingly in the lively discussion.

#### *The "go-go girl(s)".*

Two volunteer pretty ladies (or boys) take over the show part. Dressed up accordingly, they separately rehearse the humorous part of the appreciative "rewards".

#### *The stage.*

The stage can be anywhere (indoor). It is important that possibly the spectators sit all around in a semicircle or the stage is e.g. somewhat higher or the audience sits higher.

#### *The moderator.*

The important part of the moderator is taken over by one or two participants who feel suitable for it. They also get encouragement from the trainer and the group. They should be able to speak well, motivate and have a certain "pull" effect and charisma..

#### *Feedback afterwards.*

A debriefing is important to get the fruits out of the "Stop & Act". This feedback is preferably done with the trainer, at least the first part of the debriefing. The trainer is available for a personal feedback with his evaluation.

#### *Different ways of acting.*

This is usually a focused delivery of content out of context in the form of theater or PSYCHO-DRAMA. In essence, it serves much more than just

information transfer or entertainment, but is intended to be an impetus for new perspectives and food for thought. The experience is healing and balm for the soul.

Every participant asks himself the legitimate question: "What do I do now with this knowledge? How can I implement it in everyday life? How can I use it for myself and my environment, friends, team, family?"

The special feature of Impro-Theater (similar to Psycho-Drama) is to describe the topics with its special possibilities for application in the area of "corporate communication", which otherwise would never be practically possible in smaller or larger sessions.

*Possible areas of application:*

- Mediation of corporate guidelines
- Conveying information in the context of internal change processes
- Conveying core messages in the context of a motivational event
- Product and trade fair presentations, road shows, kick-off events
- School and company anniversaries, incentives, etc.
- Competence training (leadership, sales, call center, creativity, etc.)
- Communication and conflict training, behavioral training
- Team development
- Self-reflection and development of new behaviors and actions
- Support in change processes on the emotional level, conception and implementation, etc.



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*For schools, institutes and companies.*

In normal elaborative team meetings, questions at this point often come up empty, such as: "What do my newly gained insights now mean 'concretely'

for me in practice? How do I actually deal with the different behavioral styles in everyday life? How does our team now deal with this information?"

What exactly should be developed or changed and how?

How can we draw a benefit for our everyday life and our daily challenges from this information?"

It is precisely in this area of tension between theory and practice that corporate theater or improv theater as psychodrama can provide valuable assistance.



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*The 7-W question technique.*

With the help of this question technique, one obtains an optimal overall view of all existing information and aspects that are connected to the central topic. With this instrument, information gaps can be closed and transparency can be achieved.

*Where?*

- Stocktaking / analysis of the current situation / as-is situation
- Narrowing down the fields of action
- Targeting individual aspects (location, space)
- Where do we currently have the biggest problems?
- What are the trends of the future?
- Where are our strengths / weaknesses?
- Where can we expand what and when?

*Why?*

- Why / WHY are we doing the project / program?
- Benefit for the company / the employee / the product

*What?*

- Leads to the later result definition of a topic
- Narrowing down central aspects and defining the field of action

- What specifically is to be achieved with the project / program?
- Objectives (overall goal for the company / employee / product)?
- Result (direct benefit for the company / employee / product)?
- Measurability (in numbers / in emotional values)? Who?
- Resource planning for input from customers / end customers / departments
- Who is involved in the project / program ?
- Customer (internal, external), client, project manager, employees, external consultants, etc. ?

#### When?

- Consciously plan buffer for detours.
- When do we want to have achieved our goals, healing, improvement? Time planning?
- Individual steps, intermediate result, overall result?

#### How?

- How can we achieve our goals? How do we plan in advance?
- What do the individual work steps look like?
- How do we communicate our plans to the company?
- How do we deal with setbacks?

#### How much?

- Provision of an appropriate budget and necessary resources
- How much does the project / program cost?
- Personnel costs internally and for externals?
- Costs for new resources, additional qualifications.
- Planning of time resources of all participants.

## Discussion

The use of improvisational theater, in this case psychodrama, (also corporate theater), in the area of (corporate) communication often has an event character and takes place in a public or semi-public space. In this environment, there are usually rules of their own, which are revealed to the audience.

However, rules in the workshop or seminar context of improvisation (corporate) theater are necessary to shape the togetherness. They give the

participants the necessary security and the framework they need to feel comfortable and to enable change.

Depending on the workshop orientation, some of the following rules can be suggested and then adopted together with the participants at the beginning of the workshop:

- Stopping rule (everyone has the option to pause or stop if the process overwhelms him or her).
- Punctuality.
- Confidentiality (everything stays in the room!).
- Disruption takes precedence, cell phones off!
- I am open to offers of support.
- I try to support everyone in the group.
- Keep contributions short and to the essentials.
- Allow excuses.

Further benefit of using "Stop & Act" technique lies in the following:

- Humorous feedback.
- Gets people moving emotionally.
- Delicate topics can be visualized in a playful way.
- Stimulation to deal with one's own potentials.
- Strengthening of the corporate culture
- New perspectives are gained.
- Addresses both on the conscious and even more on the unconscious level.

## Conclusions

Stop & Act is a very suitable form for a special group dynamic. The therapeutic character is especially worth mentioning here. Superficially, one might think it's about improvisation theater. It is much more. The individual approach and the harmonious integration in the group is a healing method for past or present frustrations, suffering, traumas, etc.

The individual does not feel focused by the audience and can therefore improvise more easily and react spontaneously to his/her fellow actors. In the process, the newly born "actor" experiences a feeling of happiness that makes him/her forget his worries for a long time.

The discussion with the audience, i.e. the subsequent actors, strengthens the individual and the group at the same time.

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