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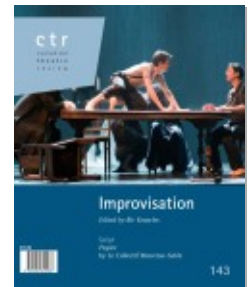
“Why Can’t We Go Somewhere There?”: Sun Ra,  
Improvisation, and the Imagination of Future Possibilities

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Canadian Theatre Review, Volume 143, Summer 2010, pp. 98-100 (Article)

Published by University of Toronto Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/ctr.0.0053>



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will highlight some trends and specificities that, in undisguised academic cheerleading, will encourage the reading of one, some, or all of the essays.

A significant portion of the papers provides a developmental analysis and can be grouped into three categories: first, those papers, written by Alan Filewod, Robert Nunn, Renate Usmani, and Diane Besai, that critically address the fundamental role of Theatre Passe Muraille's *The Farm Show* and Twenty-Fifth Street House's *PaperWheat*; second, the texts on devising theatre based on Grotowski and Barba, and focused on the human body in performance, as found in Per Brask's paper on *Primus*, Barton's on *Number Eleven*, and McLean and Plowman on *Zuppa Circus*; and third, those that trace regional trends in the Maritimes (Ric Knowles's account of Nova Scotia's *Mulgrave Road Co-op*, and Chris Brookes's journal of collective creation in Buchan, Newfoundland), Quebec (Robert Wallace on Québécois theatre's rejection of the authority of literature in favour of performance as the governing impulse, and Erin Hurley on Carbon 14's *écriture scénique* dramaturgy) and Vancouver (Jerry Wasserman's overview of site-specific theatre).

Then there are the candid first-person journals of collective creation or devising processes that pinpoint passionately and humourously the many leaps forward and snags (sometimes occurring within a day's rehearsal) of creating theatre with a group. Brookes's story of the Mumpers Troupe labour-funded mining play, *Company Town*, includes a week-by-week journal of documentary play-making from scratch, the phases of creation entitled, "First Impressions," "Up to the Elbows in Research," "Up to the Armpits in Research," "Lost in the Woods," and "The Home Stretch"; final script excerpts accompany the reflections. Monique Mojica's contribution has precious rehearsal notes, writing exercises, poetry, and script of different stages of *Princess Pocahontas and the Blue Spots*, *The Scrubbing Project*, and *Chocolate Woman Dreams the Milky Way*. The intimate musings about theatre creation Ker Wells made while he built a fence—without mechanical assistance—on his family's PEI farm connects physical labour to the work of the artist: "I start digging and my thoughts turn to presence and action. I use these terms a great deal when I am teaching and directing . . ." (212). Wells's text also beautifully complements the papers by Brask and Barton by detailing Wells's journey from *Primus* to *Number Eleven* to solo devising.

Two other papers that emphasize process by charting the development of individual scenes are the co-authored testimonial about *Zuppa Circus's Radium City* by director Alex McLean and playwright Robert Plowman, and producer Modupe Olaugun's paper about AfriCan Theatre Ensemble's intercultural *Market of Tales*. Plus, there is the little gem by the late Paul Bettis on *Rule Plays* and the creation of *Svengali*, which details the many paths that can be followed to create a particular scene and, like Olaugun's discussion of orality, stresses the unfinished nature of non-text based theatrical

work.

Papers that probe thornier issues, like Julie Salverson's analysis of the "moment of danger" (91) in *Are the Birds in Canada the Same?*, or Barry Freeman's radical suggestion of the extra-theatrical as the site of "cultural meeting" (223) in the Prague-Toronto-Manitoulin Theatre Project, question the ethical and cultural assumptions behind collective creation and devising from a risky insider's point of view. Other writers who engage in pointed criticism within a theoretical discussion are Filewod on the unproductive agitprop devices of *Paper Wheat* (6) and Edward Little on the debate surrounding "artistic form and social utility" in popular theatre projects (154).

If there is a criticism of the collection, it is related to my expectations of what is also groundbreaking in collective creation and devising in Canadian theatre and has been omitted from these pages: the feminist collectives Nightwood Theatre and the Company of Sirens, and Robert Lepage's collaborative creations (only a brief mention of *La Trilogie des Dragons* appears in Wallace's paper). The first may be explained by the existence in the series of Volume Four, *Feminist Theatre and Performance*, where these two companies are featured, and perhaps Robert Lepage's astounding body of work with Théâtre Repère and Ex Machina will be the subject of a separate volume.

Nonetheless, *Collective Creation, Collaboration and Devising* unquestionably achieves what general editor Ric Knowles stresses as an objective of the series: to make "the best critical and scholarly work in the field readily available" (iii). Since this goal is naturally limited by the length of each book, the suggested further reading list is much appreciated. The addition of an index would also facilitate accessibility to specific artists and shows that are the subject of these twenty-three essays.

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## **"Why Can't We Go Somewhere There?" Sun Ra, Improvisation, and the Imagination of Future Possibilities**

by Ajay Heble

In this short think piece, I'd like to riff on the question of why improvisation matters, and for whom. What is at stake in improvised performances? If creativity and innovation are vital tools for building sustainable communities, promoting social cooperation, and adapting to unprecedented change, then what role might improvisation play in this context? What kinds of critical questions might the theory and practice of improvised performances open up about artistic expression

and responsibility; about the role of performing artists and their audiences; about intent and interpretation; about histories and futures; about activism and forms of critical practice; about the ethics and aesthetics of surprise; about a politics of hope? At its best, improvisation can encourage us to take new risks in our relationships with others, to work together across various divides, traditions, styles, and sites, and to hear and see the world anew. As a fundamental site for the choices made and the challenges emerging out of social contexts, improvisation can provide a trenchant model for new forms of social mobilization that accent agency, collaboration, and difference. Indeed, we have much to learn from performance practices that accent dialogue, collaboration, inventive flexibility, and creative risk-taking, and much to gain from noisy and boundary-shattering art forms that disrupt orthodox standards of coherence, judgment, and value with a spirit of experimentation and innovation.

Taking as a point of departure such performance practices that cannot readily be scripted, predicted, or compelled into orthodoxy, I'd like to argue that the innovative working models of improvisation developed by creative practitioners have helped to promote a dynamic exchange of cultural forms, and to encourage new, socially responsive forms of community building across national, cultural, and artistic boundaries. These models find particularly relevant expression in the lifework of the Astro-Black philosopher, composer, and improvising artist Sun Ra. "If you find earth boring, just the same old same thing," Ra liked to declare before he left the planet, "then come on and sign up for Outer Spaceways Incorporated." Or, in a piece entitled "Imagination," Ra asked us, "If we came from nowhere here, why can't we go somewhere there?" The full lyric, reprinted in Ra's book of poetry and prose, *The Immeasurable Equation*, reads, "Imagination is a magic carpet / Upon which we may soar / To distant lands and climes / And even go beyond the moon / To any planet in the sky / If we came from nowhere here / Why can't we go somewhere there?" (206).

Now, all this might seem like flippant rhetoric and offhand space-age futurism from an eccentric and marginalized figure in jazz history. I'd like to suggest, however, that it is anything but that. Despite being marginalized and summarily dismissed in dominant narratives of the music and all but forgotten in most institutionalized accounts of jazz history, Ra, in my mind, remains a hugely influential and pioneering improvising artist whose reinvention of musical and conceptual categories, and whose profound and salutary commitment to enabling aggrieved peoples to become subjects of their own histories and futures, continue to command our respectful attention. Indeed, "nowhere here," for Ra, was an apt and serious descriptor for the earth-bound dead-end life situations in which African-Americans repeatedly found themselves, a world of systematized and institutionalized forms of violence, oppression, and racist constraint. As Ra wrote, "We need to

get off this planet as fast as possible. We'd better be out there when here blows up" (461). "Somewhere There," and "Outer Spaceways Incorporated," by contrast, offer a place of hope and possibility, a place of black social mobility. I've argued elsewhere that outer space (remember: Ra flatly declared that he was from Saturn and would, as reports would have it, show up in supermarkets and other public places dressed in his space outfit!) functions as a metaphor for possibility (or perhaps for performing the impossible), for alternatives to dominant systems of knowledge production, or, in the words of his biographer, John Szwed, as "a metaphor of exclusion and reterritorialization, of claiming the 'outside' as one's own, of tying a revised and corrected past to a claimed future" (140).

Herein, I'd like to suggest, lies a tale about the resilience, force, and impact of improvisatory performance practices. If, as bell hooks has argued, "African American performance has been a site for the imagination of future possibilities" (220), and if, as another theorist suggests, "the emergence of a radical future ... is almost always necessarily defined by its very otherness from the world as is" (Shukaitis 112), then Ra's out-ness, his fondness for blasting off into what other African-American improvising artists might have called "destination out," needs to be seen and heard as a kind of (social and sonic) expression of black mobility. Ra's performances, often featuring a quasi-theatrical improvised romp through the history of African-American music from the early forms of swing (remember that Ra played with Fletcher Henderson) to bebop, free jazz, and—well, yes—far, far beyond into the outer space noisiness of who-knows-where, were themselves statements about a mobility of practice, expressions both of unspoken, erased, or whitewashed black histories and of unwritten, unscripted futures. The "somewhere there" of improvisation was, for Ra, part of black music's resistance to capture and fixity, its noisiness and clamorousness part of a refusal to give in to the kind of culture of acquiescence or non-participation which resigns itself to the way things are because (or so we are too often told) no other future is possible.

Ra, of course, knew otherwise. By gifting us with "a jubilant choreography of mobility and social momentum" (Heble 138), Ra taught us that improvisation matters. It matters because it offers a manifestation of the possible. And here, I would suggest, there might even be significant (if unsuspected) resonances for Canadian cultural and performance practices. I'm not about to make the claim that Ra was Canadian (even though he did, in the early sixties, touch down in Montreal, where he lived for a brief period of time before blasting off to other destinations), but I do want to consider how Canadian cultural practices might be enlivened by histories—such as Ra's—from elsewhere. In particular, I want to reflect on how the mobility of practice exemplified by his lifework has served as a launching pad for the work I do in my capacity as a Canadian music curator. As artistic director of the Guelph Jazz Festival, a festival dedicated to presenting some of the most "out" jazz



Sun Ra Arkestra, under Marshall Allen, parading toward the Carden Street Jazz Tent at the Annual Guelph Jazz Festival, 8 September 2001. Musicians (l-r): Art Jenkins, Marshall Allen, Fred Adams, Cecil Brooks, and Elson Nascimento  
*Photo by Herb Greenslade*

on the planet, I have learned from Ra's example: possibility in improvisation lies not just in the sounds, not just in the ability of the music to stage the unforeseen or the unexpected. It is also, and perhaps more profoundly, registered in the way in which improvised musical performances compel us to dispense with customary frameworks of assumption, how they determinedly elude any inclusive analysis or interpretation of the effects they produce, how they continually keep us on edge, and subject our assessments to an ongoing process of critical inquiry. I've learned from Ra's example that other futures, futures not confined to scripted or predefined ways of knowing or doing, *are* possible: who, after all, would have thought seventeen years ago that a small and unassuming university town in southern Ontario would become known as a must-go "out" jazz destination for musicians and audiences from around the world? What future possibilities might we envision, then, for cultural practices in Canada? Were we to mobilize the resources and the sense of hope, the spirit of inquiry, and experimentation associated with improvised musical performances in the service of sounding other possible futures, imagine the ideals that might be nourished, the relationships that might get fostered, the spaceways we might travel. Why, indeed, can't we go somewhere there?

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