

Book Notes for

Johnstone, K. (1981). Status (pp. 33-74) *Impro: Improvisation and the theatre*.
New York: Routledge.

The purpose of these notes is to provide an in-depth overview of the content of this chapter from this important book. *Impro* can be purchased online from Chapters@ <http://www.chapters.indigo.ca/> or Amazon @ <http://www.amazon.ca>

1 The See-saw

"Suddenly we understood that every inflection and movement implies a status, and that no action is due to chance, or really 'motiveless'" (p. 33).

"Normally we are 'forbidden' to see status transactions except when there's a conflict. In reality status transactions continue all the time" (p. 33).

"The third [type of teacher] was a status expert, raising and lowering his status with great skill" (pp. 35-36).

"Status is a confusing term unless it's understood as something one *does*. You may be low in social status, but play high, and vice versa" (p. 36).

"Status seems to me to be a useful term, providing the difference between the status you are and the status you play is understood" (p. 36).

"My answer [to the question what happens to friends in regard to status] is that acquaintances become friends when they *agree* to play status games together" (p. 37).

"Once students understand that they already play status games with their friends, then they realise that they already know most of the status games I'm trying to teach them" (p. 37).

"See-saw" Principle: "I go up and you go down" (p. 37).

"The exception to this see-saw principle comes when you identify with the person being raised or lowered, when you sit on his side of the see-saw, so to speak" (p. 38).

"I therefore teach actors to switch between raising themselves and lowering their partners in alternate sentences; and vice versa" (p. 38).

"Most comedy works on the see-saw principle" (p. 39).

ACTIVITY: "One way to understand status transactions is to examine the comic strips, the 'funnies'. Most are based on very simple status transactions, and it's interesting to

observe the postures of the characters, and the changes in status between the first and last frames" (p. 39).

2 Comedy and Tragedy

"[T]he man who falls on the banana skin is funny only if he loses status, and if we don't have sympathy with him" (p. 40).

Tragedy also works on the see-saw principle: its subject is the ousting of a high-status animal from the pack" (p. 40).

"When a very high-status person is wiped out, everyone feels pleasure as they experience the feeling of moving up a step" (p. 40).

"Terrible things can happen to the high-status animal, . . . but he must never look as if he could accept a position lower in the pecking order. He has to be *ejected* from it" (p. 40).

"Two things strike me about reports of sacrifices: . . . the other is that the victim is raised in status before being sacrificed" (p. 40).

"A sacrifice has to be endowed with high status or the magic doesn't work" (p. 41).

3 Teaching Status

"[B]reaking eye contact can be high status so long as you don't immediately glance back for a fraction of a second. If you ignore someone your status rises, if you feel impelled to look back then it falls" (p. 42).

"[S]tatus is established not by staring, but by the reaction to staring" (p. 42).

ACTIVITY: Prior to introducing the term "status"

1. ask students to say something nice to the person beside them
2. then say something nasty to them

Result is often laughter and achieves the wrong effect. (p. 42)

ACTIVITY:

1. mill about and say "hallo"
awkward doesn't feel real
2. some hold all eye-contact for a couple of seconds
- 3 others try to make eye-contacts and then break them and immediately glance back for a moment
4. responses: 2s feel and look powerful; 3s feel and look feeble. (p. 42)

ACTIVITY:

1. I insert an "er" at the beginning of each of my sentences and ask group if they detect any changes in me - helpless, weak but can't say why
2. move "er" to middle of sentences - perceive me to be a bit stronger
3. next add longer "er" to beginning of sentences - look more important and confident
- 4 have students try it out (pp. 42-43).

"I explain that keeping my head still whenever I speak, and that this produces great changes in the way I perceive myself and am perceived by others" (p. 43).

"Officers are trained not to move the head while issuing commands" (p. 43).

"My belief (at this moment) is that people have a preferred status; that they like to be low, or high, and that they try to manoeuvre themselves into the preferred positions. . . . In either case the status played is a defence, and it'll usually work. It's very likely that you will increasingly be conditioned into playing the status that you've found an effective defence. You become a status *specialist*, very good at playing one status, but not very happy or competent at playing the other. Asked to play the 'wrong' status, you'll feel 'undefended'." (p. 43)

"If I speak with a still head, then I'll do many other high-status things quite automatically. I'll speak in complete sentences, I'll hold eye contact. I'll move more smoothly, and occupy more 'space'. If I talk with my toes pointing inwards I'm more likely to give a hesitant little 'er' before each sentence, and I'll smile with my teeth covering my bottom lip, and I'll sound a little breathless, and so on" (p. 44).

In real life, "moment by moment each person adjusts his status up or down a fraction" (p. 44).

"The audience will always be held when a status is being modified" (p. 44).

Student comments: "The most interesting revelation to me was that every time I spoke to someone I could tell if I felt submissive or the opposite" (p. 45).

Student comments: "I find that when I slow my movements down I go up in status" (p. 45).

"If you know what status you're playing the answers [responses] come automatically" (p. 46).

"In order to enter a room all you need to know is what status you are playing. The actor who understands this is free to improvise in front of an audience with no given circumstances at all!" (p. 47).

Wrong Room Exercise: "You prepare a status for one situation, and have to alter it when suddenly confronted by the unexpected one" (p. 47).

"I repeat all status exercises in gibberish, just to make it quite clear that the things *said* are not as important as the status *played*" (p. 49).

Activity: (p. 49)

A. Hallo.

B. Hallo.

A. Been waiting long?

B. Ages.

"Status is played to anything, objects as well as people. If you enter an empty waiting-room you can play high or low status to the furniture" (p. 50).

4 Insults

"The actor or improviser must accept his disabilities, and allow himself to be insulted, or he'll never really feel safe" (p. 53).

5 Status Specialists

"If you wish to teach status interactions, it's necessary to understand that however willing the student is consciously, there may be very strong subconscious resistances. Making the student safe, and getting him to have confidence in you, is essential" (p. 55).

"[Y]ou can play high or low [status] in any situation" (p. 56).

6 Space

"[S]tatus is basically territorial" (p. 57).

"closed-eye" space: "you feel it when you shut your eyes and let your body feel outward into the surrounding darkness" (p. 58).

"Here's [acting teacher] Jean-Louis Barrault:

'Just as the earth is surrounded by an atmosphere, the living human being is surrounded by a magnetic aura which makes contact with the external objects without any concrete contact with the human body. This aura, or atmosphere, varies in depth according to the vitality of human being. . . .'" (p. 58).

"High-status players (like high-status seagulls) will allow their space to flow into other people. Low-status players will avoid letting their space flow into other people. Kneeling, bowing and prostrating oneself are all ritualised low-status ways of shutting off your space. If we wish to humiliate and degrade a low-status person we attack him while refusing to let him switch his space off" (p. 59).

"The body has reflexes that protect it from attack. We have a 'fear crouch' position in which the shoulders lift to protect the jugular and the body curls forward to protect the

underbelly. . . . The opposite to this fear crouch is the 'cherub posture', which opens all the planes of the body: the head turns and tilts to offer the neck, the shoulders turn the other way to expose the chest, the spine arches slightly backwards and twists so that the pelvis is in opposition to the shoulders exposing the underbelly - and so on. . . . [T]he opening of the body planes is a sign of vulnerability and tenderness, and has a powerful effect on the onlooker. High-status people often adopt versions of the cherub posture. If they feel under attack they'll abandon it and straighten, but they won't adopt the fear crouch. Challenge a low-status player and he'll show some tendency to slide into postures related to the fear crouch" (p. 59).

"Status can also be affected by the shape of the space you are in. The corners of couches are usually high-status, and high-status 'winners' are allowed to take them" (p. 60).

"'Close' is a concept related to the amount of space available" (p. 60).

"When you watch a bustling crowd from above it's amazing that they don't all bump into each other. I think it's because we're all giving status signals, and exchanging subliminal status challenges all the time. The more submissive person steps aside" (p. 61).

"One way to teach a student an appreciation of social distance is to get him to hand out leaflets in the street" (p. 62).

ACTIVITY:

I ask students (for homework!) to watch groups of people in coffee bars, and to notice how everyone's attitude changes when someone leaves or joins a group. If you watch two people talking, and then wait for one to leave, you can see how the person remaining has to alter his posture. He had arranged his movements to relate to his partner's, and now that he's alone he *has* to change his position in order to express a relationship to the people around him" (p. 62).

7 Master-Servant

Johnstone's Law: "I teach that a master-servant scene is one in which both parties act as if all the space belonged to the master" (p. 63).

"When the master is present, the servant must take care at all times not to dominate the space" (p. 63).

"A servant's primary function is to elevate the status of the master" (p. 63).

10 Golden Rules for Number Ones (from Desmond Morris, *The Human Zoo*)

1. You must clearly display the trappings, postures and gestures of dominance.
2. In moments of active rivalry you must threaten your subordinates aggressively.
3. In moments of physical challenge you (or your delegates) must be able forcibly to overpower your subordinates.

4. If a challenge involves brain rather than brawn you must be able to outwit your subordinates.
5. You must suppress squabbles that break out between your subordinates.
6. You must reward your immediate subordinates by permitting them to enjoy the benefits of their high ranks.
7. You must protect the weaker members of the group from undue persecution.
8. You must make decisions concerning the social activities of your group.
9. You must reassure your extreme subordinates from time to time.
10. You must take the initiative in repelling threats or attacks arising from outside your group. (p. 69)

"It is the lack of pecking-order that makes most crowd scenes look unconvincing" (p. 70).

8 Maximum Status Gaps

"I train actors to use minimum status gaps, because then they have to assess the status of their partners accurately, but I also teach them to play maximum status-gap scenes" (p. 70).

"'Absurd' plays are based on maximum-status-gap transactions" (p. 72).

9 Text

"Once you understand that every sound and posture implies a status, then you perceive the world quite differently, and the change is probably permanent" (p. 72).

"I'd suggest that a good play is one which ingeniously displays and reverses the status between the characters" (p. 72).

"I don't myself see that an educated man in this culture necessarily has to understand the second law of thermodynamics, but he certainly should understand that we are pecking-order animals and that this affects the tiniest details of our behavior" (pp. 73-74).

Notes from a July 11th 2007 Interview with The Comedy Couch

KJ: "The secret [to enjoying teaching] is not to quite know what to do, then it's exciting. If you've got some system that you apply, it gets so boring. So if you never quite know how to do it, it's always an adventure. You never know how well you're going to do."