

Everybody Must Get 'Stoned'

Improv guru Keith Johnstone brings his Maestro to the Long Center

BY WAYNE ALAN BRENNER

Keith Johnstone is coming to Austin to direct a night of Maestro improvisation.

Now, the above statement means either 1) nothing to you at all, or 2) you've likely let out a substantial squeal of excitement. Perhaps, depending on the level of your affection for or your obsession with comedy improv, you've even wet yourself; yes, *and* we wouldn't blame you.

Keith Johnstone is pretty much the Supreme All-Father of Improvisation these days, the beacon of creativity to so many people around the world when it comes to methods of extemporaneous storytelling. The author of *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* and *Impro for Storytellers*, the creator of the popular Maestro format and Gorilla Theatre and others, Johnstone, pushing 80, is one side of the ever-twinkling coin of modern improvisation. (The other side of that coin, Del Close, deceased these last 10 years, was a proponent of what's called the Chicago style.) So it's no small change that he'll be here this week, teaching a few already-sold-out workshops and riding herd over some of the best improvisers in town in a massive, one-night-only Maestro showcase at the Long Center.

Why is he coming to Austin in the first place? We put this question to Kareem Badr of the newly revitalized Hideout Theatre, under the auspices of which this series of educational and entertaining events will unfold.

"I wish I could say that it was some sort of magical arm-twisting," says Badr, between gulps of a double cappuccino outside Quack's 43rd Street Bakery in Hyde Park, "but the fact of the matter is, this is kind of what he does. He goes around to cities and teaches workshops. He's done it for a long time. Andy Crouch, the longtime teacher and education director at the Hideout, always wanted to get him down here, but I guess it wasn't until Roy [Janik] and Jessica [Arjet] and I took over that we had the money and the resources to do it."

So Johnstone himself is, understandably, a big deal, but the idea of him coming to a city isn't such a ...?

"When I was on tour with Pgraph [Parallelogramophonograph, the Hideout's house troupe] last year," says Badr, "we saw that places all over the country were having workshops with him. Places like Chattanooga, Tennessee. Literally: Chattanooga had a Keith Johnstone workshop! And I've talked to a lot of improvisers around the country, and they all say that Austin has an amazing improv scene, so, not to disparage Chattanooga, but surely if they can get Keith Johnstone, Austin can get Keith Johnstone. So, yeah, we were definitely willing to shell out the cash to get him down here."

And Johnstone's teachings have a big influence at the Hideout, don't they? He's not the one being brought here just because Del Close is, ah, unavailable?

Badr shakes his head, black curls shifting in the bright afternoon light. "The Hideout – definitely when it started, and still, at its core – is very Johnstone School. I mean, improv is improv, it's all pretty much the same basic skills, but Johnstone comes at it from a different side. He stresses storytelling and narrative, whereas Del Close and the so-called Chicago style are more about, ah, really strong characters and more realistic situations. Johnstone is more about unlocking the inner child in your head and letting the really fantastical happen."

That description brings Austin's duo Get Up – Shannon McCormick and Shana Merlin – immediately to mind.

"Oh, definitely," says Badr, "those two are really rooted in that style. And Shana has studied with Johnstone quite a bit, and she was one of the first people to register for the four-day workshop. Just the list of people taking this workshop is incredible. And almost everyone in the workshop is going to be in Saturday night's Maestro at the Long Center."

Note: The Maestro format is an elimination-style competition in which a stageful of improvisers vie for supremacy, combining and recombining in different groups – duos, trios, and beyond – to play a variety of short games chosen and tweaked by a director. But

'What Does Keith Johnstone Mean to You?'

Andy Crouch, Dean of Education, Hideout Theatre:

"Keith's the guy who got me into improv. Or, more specifically, he's the guy that kept me in improv after the first blush of funny shows and funny classes wore off. I read *Impro: Improvisation and the Theatre* in the summer of 2001 and realized that it was all about way more than just the funny, the witty, and the wacky. It's about investigating what keeps people from being as completely in-the-moment as they'd like. It's about giving ourselves the tools to let go of the need for control and safety – to just play with each other and make stuff happen. And that anybody can do it. Put a human being onstage who is willing to be genuine and vulnerable, and audiences will lean in – and inevitably laugh."

Kaci Beeler, Director of Design, Hideout Theatre: "To be honest, I'm a little afraid of him. He's not an improviser, but an improv director, strictly. So my position is much different than his. But Keith Johnstone, to me, represents the idea of constant thought in an art form. I didn't realize it until I took a workshop with him in San Francisco in 2006, but he doesn't stick firmly to one strict variation of improvised theatre. His ideas are always shifting. He sees the art form as the open place that it really is,

and he manipulates it to make the kind of theatre he wants to see. That's a powerful thing to learn: To create what you want, instead of trying to copy what others think is the 'right way.'"

Shana Merlin, Principal, Merlin Works Institute for

Improvisation: "When I saw Keith Johnstone teach and direct for the first time, what impressed me most is that he saw the improv coming from a mile away. A scene would start, and I would have no idea where it was going, and he would pause the scene and knew exactly where it was going. Or, better yet, had four or five excellent ideas about where it could go. This made it so he could direct improvisers so effortlessly that it seemed like he wasn't doing anything at all – which made the students in the class look brilliant, as if they'd done it all on their own. I came away from that summer in Canada with the goal of seeing improv the way Keith did, seeing the whole game play out in the moment and in the future at the same time. It makes me think of an article I read about how Roger Federer plays tennis, how for him the tennis ball is huge and slowly makes its way across the net, because he just sees things so far in advance and can react so quickly. It's actually a different game for him than it is for you and me."

Shannon McCormick, Artistic Director, Gnap! Theater

Projects: "Having Johnstone here in Austin is like having Jack Kirby or Harvey Kurtzman or Will Eisner with us to talk about comics, or, hell, having Duke Ellington or Louis Armstrong to talk about jazz. He was responsible for helping give birth to an entire mode of cultural expression, an art form previously unknown. And his importance is still sort of undervalued in the United States improv community. This isn't my analogy, it's Jeremy Lamb's, but Chicago-style improv is U.S. football, while Johnstone is soccer: predominant in the rest of the world. Or else Johnstone is Alfred Wallace to Del Close's Darwin, Leibniz to Viola Spolin's Newton. OK, I'm getting into the weeds here, but I'm tossing those genius names out there for a reason."

Jeremy Lamb, Founder and Director, Out of Bounds

Comedy Festival: "He's my guru. Without him, I would still be doing *Whose Line* rip-offs in bars. Johnstone started giving actors the tools and guidelines to tell solid stories without a script 40 years ago! Watching him direct or teach is like watching a gazelle leap; you rarely get to see it in person, but when you do, you can't believe how effortless it seems and how amazing it is." – W.A.B.

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do all Johnstone workshops end with a performance of Maestro?

“I don’t think it happens *all* the time,” says Badr, “but it happens often enough so that, when we mentioned it as an idea, his people were like, ‘Oh yeah, he can do that.’ I don’t think all of his workshops end with a Maestro, because not everyone *plays* Maestro. And one of the reasons we figured we could do it is that so many of the people taking the four-day workshop are sort of ... well, not legends, exactly, but, ah, fixtures here. At least half that class are fixtures in the Austin improv scene. Shana’s in it, and Bill Stern, Jill Bernard, Kaci Beeler, Jeremy Lamb – people who left Austin *are flying back to take this workshop*. There’ll be between 20 and 25 people onstage, and they’re all intimately familiar with the Maestro format: It’s been a mainstay at the Hideout for years. I’ve never seen Johnstone direct a Maestro, and I’m

Keith Johnstone conducts a very special Maestro with Austin improvisers Saturday, Jan. 16, 10pm, in the Rollins Studio Theatre at the Long Center, 701 W. Riverside. For more information, call 443-3688 or visit www.hideouttheatre.com or www.thelongcenter.org.

really curious – because it’s *his* show, and he has very strong ideas about it.”

And so, though it was such short notice, why, the Long Center simply rearranged its finely wrought schedules and flung wide its well-made doors for this event?

Badr laughs, setting his coffee cup aside. “No, actually, the Hideout’s community liaison

Mike McGill hooked this up through a group in town called Catalyst 8. I think it’s gonna be the first improv show at the Long Center, which is pretty fantastic. And

we’re kind of piggybacking off the Pollyanna Theatre Company, because they have the Long Center’s Rollins Theatre for a run that week, but they don’t have a show scheduled for that particular night, so they’re letting us use it. We haven’t looked at the theatre yet, but apparently they’re doing some sort of Greek mythology-themed show, and,” he grins, “that could be a really cool set to do a Maestro in.” ■

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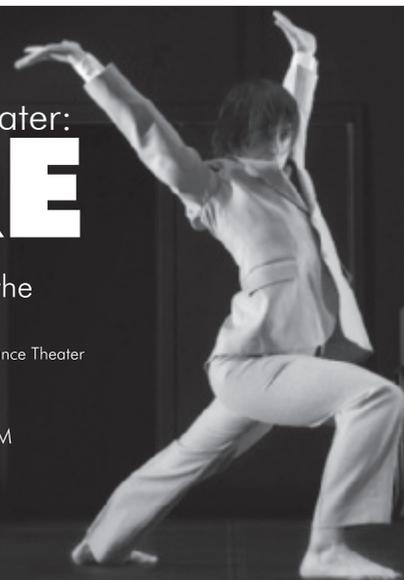
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