

# Empty Chair Speaking

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## Abstract

This article is about how the Empty Chair originated as an improvisational theater technique. Its starting point is a political speech by Clint Eastwood from 2012 where he spoke to an empty chair. The text follows, through literary sources, tracing back how the Empty Chair originated as a theatrical technique, and what the original thoughts behind it were. The article emphasizes the theater mediums opportunity and potential for change and transformation by discussing the positions we take to others. The question to be explored in the text is the following: How was Empty chair conceived as a theatre improvisation technique and how is the technique linked to the concept of encounter and J.L. Moreno's role theory?

**Keywords:** Chair • Empty • Theatre

## Introduction

When the iconic American actor and film director Clint Eastwood, at the Republican National Convention in August 2012, talked to an empty chair, in front of a full audience and to more than 30 million American TV watchers, the theatre improvisation technique called Empty chair was brought to the centre of political debate for the first time. Empty chair became a celebrity. Not only in the US. Across large parts of the western hemisphere, the phenomenon was commented in the media the following day. NRK, Norway's public broadcasting company, said: "Clint Eastwood scolded invisible Obama – created web phenomenon." The occasion was the choice of governor Mitt Romney as the Republican presidential candidate for the presidential elections the same year. The convention had announced a surprise at the end of the three day-long meeting, and to the tunes of the film *The Good, The Bad and the Ugly*, Clint Eastwood entered stage as one of the last speakers. Shortly after entering stage, Eastwood started talking to an empty chair that stood beside him. In the chair sat the now imaginary President Barack Obama. Shortly after the happening, a Twitter account with the name "Invisible Obama" gathered 35 000 followers. "Eastwooding" became an expression after the happening, showing pictures of persons talking to empty chairs in the same Twitter account [1].

## Methodology

In his films, Eastwood is known for his aggressive and confrontational style. At the lectern, he also attacked, this time an imaginary President Obama. In *Estado da Arte*, Brazilian culture journalist Rafael Baliardo imparts the following from the incident:

What do you want me to say to [Mitt] Romney? /.../ Asked the actor as he started at the empty chair with conviction. /.../ Mordid, the actor went on talking to the empty chair. "It is a national disgrace! Perhaps it is time to call someone different to solve the problem". /.../ "I think if you just walked away, Mr. Romney could take over.

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In *Aftenposten*, Norway's largest newspaper, commentator Andreas Slettholm transmitted the following from Eastwood's talk:

"I know you were against the Iraq war, that's OK with me, but you find warfare in Afghanistan acceptable. We didn't check with the Russians how their decade-long war there turned out," Eastwood said to the chair. With regular intervals, he was "cut off" by "Obama" in the chair. "I'm not going to shut up, it is my turn now," Eastwood responded strictly to the chair.

Sometimes it feels good to express one's frustration at someone who has disappointed. One may even use an empty chair to help in doing so. In expressive therapy, expressing one's feelings to an empty chair is a well-known technique. Eastwood possibly also felt better after having expressed his sarcasm to an empty chair [2].

There is, however, thinking behind Empty chair as technique which did not appear in Eastwood's speech. A thinking which originally comes from the theatre and which later has spread to various cultural arenas: the classroom, counselling, the workplace and to expressive therapy. Aims and purpose behind the various practices differ, but not seldom their aim is to strengthen the participant's understanding and capability to perceive the character/ counterpart he or she is addressing.

This article is based on the theatre improvisation technique Empty chair. The ambition is not to write out various areas of application where Empty chair is being or may be used, but rather with more help from literary sources to find an early thought behind the use of Empty chair as technique, first in the theatre. I shall follow some traces back to how Empty chair arose as theatre technique and what were the ideas behind. Originally, the technique arose from a thinking about changing theatre and from a philosophy of encounter. This arose from an understanding which deals with the possibility of improving ability of perception through theatre improvisation, but also that relations and responsibility towards other humans and things may be developed and communicated with the help of the theatre medium.

The article is a narratively oriented essay written out as a running text where sources of cultural history and literature, stories, theory, discussion and analysis form parts of collected wickerwork. The text may be associated with a theatre production where story, theory and performance form parts of a unity. In this sense, it is inspired by an art-based understanding of research which is recognised by actively taking into use varying styles and modalities in the meaning-seeking research process. In the continuation, I shall place the investigative into a researching and contrasting dialogue with the opening example's way of applying theatre conventions. The purpose is to extract interesting qualities and aspects of Empty chair (originally characterized by role-reversal with one's counterpart) as theatre improvisation technique, but also the technique's bifurcations to the concept of encounter and a role theory.

The question to be explored in the text is the following: How was Empty chair conceived as a theatre improvisation technique and how is the technique linked to the concept of encounter and J. L. Moreno's role theory?

## Results and Discussion

### Exercising imagination

We know from the Russian theatre director and acting teacher Konstantin Stanislavskij how he worked with the actors' imagination through different techniques, including Empty chair, to improve the actors' ability to identify with the mindset and emotional register of their characters. Stanislavskij's techniques, or the system, are termed method acting in the US translation (p 144). The purpose of the techniques is to develop the actor's imagination through acquiring a role and imagine, and thus achieve better "contact" with the character played. The thought behind the process of exercising one's own empathy of feelings is for the actor to believe in it, to believe in the character he/she is playing and at the same time develop, deepen and change the relation with the character. Stanislavskij described his work as experience art, or the art of experiencing authenticity on stage. His work developed a school for the art of acting with great influence in Europe as well in the American theatre. In the US this included The Group Theatre, a theatre improvisation group that arose in the 1930s.

One who was in contact with and influenced the work of this theatre group in the early 1930s, was Jacob Levy Moreno. Like Stanislavskij, Moreno was interested in how human imagination could be developed through theatre work and theatre techniques. In his contact with The Theatre Group, Moreno contributed substantially, among other by introducing the theatre technique Empty chair. In meeting with the group, he carried out several demonstrations based on his own experience from a spontaneous theatre dating back to Vienna around 1910 and which was developed through the 1920s into a theatre later called Das Stegreiftheater. The theatre developed its own goals, and there, Empty chair was shaped as theatre improvisation technique, a technique where empathy, imagination by physically putting oneself in the other's position and by taking one's counterparts role, whether it was a character, a structure or a thing, constituted the hub in the dramatic production of the theatre. Impromptu Theatre (improvisational theatre) was also used as term for this theatre. The theatre experience from Vienna in turn led to the formation of a school. A school with a detailed syllabus and a program of one year. The school was called Impromptu School.

One occasion when Empty chair was used as technique in a theatre performance, on that occasion also linked to a political situation, was in a performance at Komödienhaus in Vienna more than a hundred years ago. The political questions put at the time were of a different character than Eastwood's. And even if the incident was discussed in the media the following day, it never ended up at the centre of political debate like Eastwood's speech did [3].

### Empty chair in the theatre house Komödienhaus

"I invite each of us to speak the truth". The line is the first spoken in the evening performance in the theatre house Komödienhaus in Vienna on 1 April 1921. Alone on stage is an actor dressed in the costume of the court jester. He is in the role as jester. The curtain is pulled aside. On stage is an empty chair, upholstered in red velvet as a royal chair. Beside the empty chair is a hat-and-coat stand with a royal gown and crown. The actor on stage is J. L. Moreno.

The background for the stage image was the political situation in Austria at the time. The country was in political chaos, lacking governance and leadership. The royal chair and crown on stage are strong symbols for just this: leadership and power. The jester on stage is the one who can speak freely, the one who can ask and say what no one else can. The jester often represents the silliness, madness and childlike naivety of human nature. At the same time there is doubleness in the role as the character may also be wise and clever. The doubleness is also shown in the jester's costume, which often has a dichotomous colour pattern. On 1 April 1921, the jester on stage asks the audience about their ideas and perceptions of the ruling and leadership of the country, Austria, a country that was dissolving at the time. The audience was invited on stage; they were invited to touch the crown and the cape and even to sit down in the empty chair. They were invited to communicate their perceptions of the governance of the country, to take the role as the new leader, to be him or her, and thereby contribute to the community with new ideas on leadership and ruling of Austria, to contribute with new actions for a possible better future.

The theatre was full of curious spectators. They were officials, politicians, ordinary theatre-goers, friends of Moreno and friends of friends. The performance had been advertised in the press days ahead and lasted for two hours. The following day the performance received poor reviews. One reviewer concluded that the performance most likely was a case of April fool's day.

The performance in the evening of 1 April 1921 is also identified as the start of what has later been labelled sociodrama. Sociodrama is defined as "a deep action method dealing with intergroup relations and collective ideologies". The purpose of the performance that night was to use the theatre medium to find new alternatives to political organizing and to give a voice to various political and social ideas on leadership. The critical point in the performance was the audience's will or ability to take the role as the new leadership, to give the new leadership a voice and an expression, which is the opposite of speaking about, or to, as Eastwood did, but rather to be one's counterpart by taking the role as the new leader/leadership.

The audience was possibly too little "warmed up" to play out their ideas about new leadership? May be was the breach with well-known theatre conventions too big? May be the audience was too large and not sufficiently homogenous? Did they think the jester on stage was just an April fool? Some did actually enter the stage, taking the role and acting their ideas about a new leadership for the country, but the performance was not a success with the theatre choosy Vienna audience of 1921 [4].

### Impromptu express

Despite the poor review in 1921, Das Stegreiftheater continued to develop their improvisation methods after the performance in Vienna. Hans Kafka wrote in an article called Impromptu Express after a performance in 1923 that what the audience experienced during an impro performance was "real" theatre, "they realized that it was theatre which they had experienced, a superb form of theatre, theatre on the order line of real life. They had never seen stronger action in a legitimate theatre". The relevance of the theatre was also compared with the ordinary theatre: "However, in contrast to the problem theatre of today, the emotional Impromptu Theatre brings great relief and is full of new stimuli". The value of a here-and-now theatre, an improvisational theatre based on the audience's perceptions, stories and experience was also launched as model for the dramatic school of the future: "Impromptu training is the main subject of the dramatic school of the future".

Empty chair was only one of many techniques the theatre developed. As theatre improvisation technique, Empty chair formed part of a series of production elements in a performance. Role-reversal was another that is to take the role of one's counterpart, to take the other's perspective and on basis of that act out one's perceptions of the other, the others. A third element was "auxiliary ego", meaning that someone else, sometimes several others, can be the character that the person needs for one's interpretation and narrative on stage. Later on came a technique called "the double", someone who plays the subtext of the performance or the protagonist. The protagonist, a term from antique Greek drama, is he or she who plays the lead role of the drama. A mixture of techniques were developed, all with the purpose of creating a theatre that developed "true" meetings in a here and now, also labelled "the impromptu state". The performances were led by a director, by trained actors who belonged to the theatre team, and by people in the audience. As theatre improvisation, it didn't contain demands for perfection; it rather gave the impression of an imperfect theatre, a theatre where something fundamentally human, popular and ordinary also could take place.

The theatre was based on the daily experience of the audience, not a written and rehearsed manuscript. In 1924 Robert Müller, one of the actors at the theatre, writes this about the everyday character of the theatre in the article "The Impromptu theatre in Vienna":

"The theatre is filled with onlookers placed in chairs that are arranged without any seeming order. The stage is separated from the audience by a curtain, and is a room containing only the most essential properties, chairs, tables and closets to offer suggestion of locale to the men and women who step up from the midst of the audience in order to act, using suggestions arising from the audience or from one of the directors of the theatre."

The theatre room and activity described above was eventually developed for application also in learning forms in working life and in the classroom, and in the therapy room. Role play was also used as term for the theatre form, and today we find again many of the expression forms as a fan under the umbrella term Applied Theatre. Investigations show that much of the role play methodology we know today has its roots in the theatre modernistic art movement outlined here, and which may be traced to Vienna at the beginning of last century.

Behind the development of The Impromptu Theatre in Vienna lay political, cultural and existential thoughts linked to the understanding of art, but also to the term encounter.

## Theatre as rebellion

The bourgeois theatre had a central position in Vienna at the beginning of last century, but the idea that the theatre should be a place for true meetings between people was still alien among the convention oriented Vienna audience. The writer Stefan Zweig, born and raised in Vienna, described the task of the theatre like this:

“From the actors at The Imperial Theatre, the audience learned how to dress, to converse, which words a well-behaved man may use and which he must avoid. The Theatre was a place not only for killing a few hours (...) it presented norms for correct pronunciation and good behaviour.”

The Viennese bourgeoisie cherished the arts, especially the theatre. Zweig characterized the adoration of the theatre as “Theatre mania” among the Viennese. Impromptu theatre was a reaction and a rebellion against this. They themselves put it like this: “The little theatre movement is sick to death. Its logical successor: Impromptu”. The Impromptu Theatre was a rebellion against the times, the culture and the society it was part of: Viennese culture. And it was part of an avantgarde art movement which has later been labelled expressionism.

The avantgarde art movement expressed rebellion, culture critique, and it stressed theatre’s potential through emphasizing spontaneity and play. “Free yourselves from the old conventions and manifest your own creative talent by creating a new world”, was one of the slogans of the movement. It looked for expressions behind the social façade, behind the masks., and Empty chair was one of the many techniques used to advance this. From the outset, the technique may be traced back to an invitation to encounter.

## Encounter and Empty chair

“Invitation to an Encounter” is the title of an expressionist poem first published in Vienna in 1914. The poem was published in German with the title “Einladung zu einer Begegnung” and was originally part of a larger publication sold in streets and cafes. The poem is existentially oriented and the essence is that before a true encounter can take place between people, there must be equality between the parts, a subject-subject relationship. An encounter presupposes willingness to take the other’s perspective, to take the other’s role. Or, as the poem goes: “and I will look at you with your eyes/ and you will look at me with mine”. The poem makes it clear that it is that I who takes the first initiative. The responsibility for meeting lies primarily with the I, the acting subject. Thereafter, things may develop to the point where the other can “look at me with mine (eyes)”. In order to develop a two-way equal contact, an encounter, lies on the subject, initially, a particular responsibility as I interpret the poem.

Based on such an interpretation, one may read the poem as a role instruction, an instruction which later paves the way for what became the theatre technique Empty chair. As role instruction, “look at you with your eyes” becomes the act of taking one’s counterpart’s role and looking at matters from there, whether the matter concerns absence or loss in life, culture or society. To meet one’s counterpart’s position implicates the constitution of new meaning where lack of meaning prevailed, creating contact where there was no contact, and creating encounter. In this sense, Empty chair becomes a medium where one can act out and meet the one, it or the others as character. Encounter thus deals with the subject’s participation in the world, about meeting the other as subject. As theatre technique, it is based on the presumption that

meaning comes through contact. In Empty chair one gives the other or the thing a voice by lending one’s language to the thing and thereby giving life to it. Humans can give voice to things through language and thereby allow things to speak with one’s help. From an existential perspective this is about the subject’s participation and responsibility in the world, it is about the fact that when humans see that we can change something, we are not passive, but acting and creative subjects who take part in changing the world.

Lending one’s voice to things and thereby giving them life is a phenomenon both in children’s life and play as well as in art. In children’s life it is a basic form of socializing and development of a self, a form of development of learning and knowledge. The phenomenon also appears in art. In meeting art one may, for instance in meeting a work of art, experience that the work speaks directly to oneself. In descriptions of experiences of art we run into this frequently. The writer Karl Ove Knausgård (2017) describes his first meeting with Edvard Munch’s paintings. He describes how they became subjects to him, his view was the object. He writes that it seemed like Munch’s pictures approached him, they spoke directly: “that it was the pictures that were active and the view passive. Such intensity, that a picture could take possession of a room and make its mark on it, I had never experienced before. They were shivering!”

Later on Knausgård describes how this also has influenced is art of writing. That writing is letting the text become the subject that comes to the reader and that it doesn’t belong to the writer, that the text can express itself independently in the moment, and that “This moment could not be reconstructed, it only belonged to the moment when it was born. The art of writing was to find a new such moment, and another, and another/.../ “Writing cannot only recreate a moment, it must be a moment in itself, only then is it in contact with the world, not as depiction, but as action.” What Knausgård describes here, brings associations with an understanding of encounter found with Moreno and which Martin Buber labels I-Thou relation.

Buber describes how one, being in an I-Thou relationship, is captured by the relationship, be it with a human, a thing or a tree. This capture is characterized by reciprocity an equality, it is characterized by being in unity with the thing. The thing then becomes something else than a thing, it becomes a subject, it speaks directly, just as it is possible to imagine Knausgård’s description of his meeting with Munch’s paintings: “they were active / ... / They were shivering”. Buber describes meeting a tree. That one may regard the tree as an object, an it, but one may also have a direct relationship with the tree:

“But it may also happen, by will and mercy at the same time, that while I look at the tree I am captured in a relationship with it, and now it is no longer an It. The power that excludes everything except the one, has grabbed me / ... / Everything that belongs to the tree is included, its form and its mechanics, its colours and its chemistry, its conversation with the elements and its conversation with the stars, and everything in an entirety / ... / it stands alive facing me and has something to do with me just as I have with it. One shouldn’t try to invalidate the meaning of the relationship: The relationship is reciprocity.

By will and mercy, writes Buber. Knausgård describes the painting coming towards him, speaking directly. And Moreno writes about the responsibility of the subject for allowing a unity between an I and thou to occur. It appears with the three authors that the subject has a responsibility for letting an encounter happen, for allowing something to pass both ways between two or more. With the three, this responsibility is possibly characterized by an openness to what comes towards us, an openness built on both will and mercy. These perspectives may also be found in Moreno’s role theory, and especially in his term tele.

## A theory that things may speak

Based on experience, among other from theatre improvisations in Vienna where Empty chair was an ingredient, and from an understanding of encounter, a role theory arose. A central thought in it is that anything that can be shaped to a role can also be expressed as character and directed through acting. Roles may be brought alive and mediated by help of the theatre medium. Role theory opens up for things, all phenomena in existence, everything from the first cell to Cosmos, by the help of role to express its “I”. By lending one’s human voice to the things, they may speak directly, as subjects. Contact and new meaning may

arise by changing role with the things, one may give them life through one's own body and voice. Instead of regarding the things around us as dead things, they may be given language and life. The point of departure of the theory is that everything that is around me also is me. It is like this from the beginning. The theory opens up to the possibility that the I is both in the centre and in the circumference and that the things may express their nature, their being, if we lend them our human voice. Moreno developed a role theory with the purpose of developing the human imagination, a sensibility and responsibility for the surroundings, all on the basis of an understanding based on encounter.

Humans have at all times tried to understand things and creatures that lacked language, not only by observing them, but also by getting caught in a mutual relationship with them. New qualitative meaning, as an added dimension, may arise from reciprocity with the things one senses. Meaning is not given to us, meaning has to be created through the participation of the subject, through sensing, engagement, through listening and interpretation of what one meets. This is true not only for meetings with people and situations but also with things that lack verbal language. One may give what meets meaning through a sensed, participating, listening and interpreting approach. Two significant questions one may put are therefore: what does it take to read and understand a language which isn't formed with human words? And this: how surmount the prejudice that "meaning" and "expression" is a privilege exclusively for us humans?

Role theory builds on an understanding that things may speak directly to us if we lend them our voice. It is based on early theatre experience and affects circumstances like practice and behaviour but also views on knowledge. As practice and behaviour, it suggests more emphasis on the subject's participation and responsibility in the world. As source of knowledge, it touches on the relationship between subject and subject, between subject and object, perception and the category of the moment, presence and distance, participation and observation. As responsibility in the world, it also touches on an ethical claim that deals with the subject's obligation and guilt in the world and especially related to the more commenting and observing positions we easily take. Not the least, role theory is about questions linked to genesis in the world.

In the poem "Invitation to an Encounter", encounter is described as a unity, it is bidirectional, it goes both ways: "And I look at you with your eyes / and you look at me with mine". Moreno describes this bidirectional contact as tele. Tele is mutual contact, it gives "equal opportunity for encounter". "Tele produces two-way relationships based upon mutually perceiving and accepting the other's truth as reality..." And this mutual sensation, described here as tele, is not something inside each individual, it is between humans and things: "... there is in the field outside of the organism, a special area, the area between organisms". The quote may be understood as if there exists some sort of interpersonal chemistry, something that occurs in the space between: "Tele has no social existence by itself. It is an abstraction". Tele and the concept of encounter as such, is rooted in existential philosophy. The concept may also be linked to Buber's encounter when he writes: "I cannot be I except in relation to a Thou". Tele thus means to be on a par. It is about unison between people, a sort of basic "putty" that includes the ability to keep humans and things together. Tele is to be able to act with others' eyes and in this way master the multiplicity in interaction with others.

Much of this may then be traced back to a poem written in 1914 and to theatre improvisations in Vienna more than a hundred years ago, theatre improvisations built on experience like Empty chair and the understanding of encounter. It is therefore possible to ask what we missed when Empty chair ended up in the spotlight of the media and became a part of the political debate in USA in 2012, through Eastwood's speech.

## Conclusion

What could we have learnt if actor and film director Eastwood had sat himself down in the chair he talked to, taken the role as Obama and played his counterpart? May be we missed an encounter? A dialogue that went both ways and with equality as ideal? May be we then would have heard what the president answered to Eastwood's accusations? May be something about the difference between the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan? That the war in Afghanistan was inherited from another republican, the former president George W. Bush? Perhaps Eastwood's views would have been more generous if he had taken the president's role? May be we missed something our deadlocked political system could have benefitted from: To see the view of the counterpart with the other's eyes?

May be we would have learnt something about the difference between the positions we take, about the difference between talking about and commenting others instead of seeking understanding through taking the other's position, taking the other's role? Because basically, the positions we take are about our responsibility and our participation in the world.

Unfortunately, the political edge might have disappeared if Eastwood had taken his counterpart's role. The media might also have lost their interest in the incident if this had happened. A selling and "good" story in the media is often a polarized story. The existential horizon Empty chair and encounter come from has another function. It refers to the participation and responsibility of the subject in the world, to what brings people together. Not the least does the incident with Eastwood show that we missed something that deals with the theatre medium's possibility and potential for change and transformation, that with the help of the theatre medium one may occasionally experience that an empty chair can speak.

## Acknowledgments

None.

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