

BOOK REVIEWS

Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art by Stephen Nachmanovitch

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Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art by Stephen Nachmanovitch

Canongate Canons, 2024, 256 pages, ISBN 978-1805301929, £12.99 paperback (Kindle edition available)

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The book repays either a thorough read, or a dip for nuggets. It may well serve Stephen Nachmanovitch's intention of sparking your creativity, especially if you warm to his rather poetic style, which I confess is a tad too fanciful for my pragmatic solutions-focused taste.

You'll find lots of lovely concepts, such as his distinctions between education and training; between disciplined practice and the titular free play; between newness and originality. He writes wonderful phrases: I love 'Structure ignites spontaneity', in the chapter on limitations. In my writing I've defined improvisation as 'freedom within structure', and bow to Stephen getting to the heart of it in his pithier three words.

It's a pity he has not updated at least the part — an entire chapter, no less — where he makes a long-discredited argument in favour of mistakes. Here's how it goes: as so often in the 'improvisation literature', there's an anecdote in which a 'mistake' leads to a better artistic outcome than if the mistake had not occurred.

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In one of Nachmanovitch's examples, a detuned violin string prompts him to play around, generating a satisfying new composition. No doubt, and jolly good: it's the kind of event that can happen, especially if our mistakes are in a space of artistry, rather than say when walking across a busy road, performing surgery or landing an aircraft.

What the argument misses is the rarity of such wonderful outcomes when compared with the usual mistake results, which range from mild annoyance (forgotten computer password), through unpleasant inconveniences (missed the meeting), to utter disasters. Nor are mistakes such a great source of learning, once you've absorbed the most common teaching of a mistake — which is 'don't do that again.'

And from a solution-focused perspective, the most pernicious aspect of the make-mistakes message and 'failure fetish' is how it blinds us to the richest sources of learnings — discovering and noticing what works, so we can do more of it, re-applying our recipes for success. 'Take appropriate risks' is a principle that fits an SF and contemporary improvisational stance with more accuracy and utility.

Fortunately, most of the book skirts the problem path and reveals the many entrances to the mysterious-yet-everyday territory of artistic, improvisational, playful flow.

Find out more about the book at the Canongate website <https://canongate.co.uk/books/5068-free-play-improvisation-in-life-and-art/>.

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