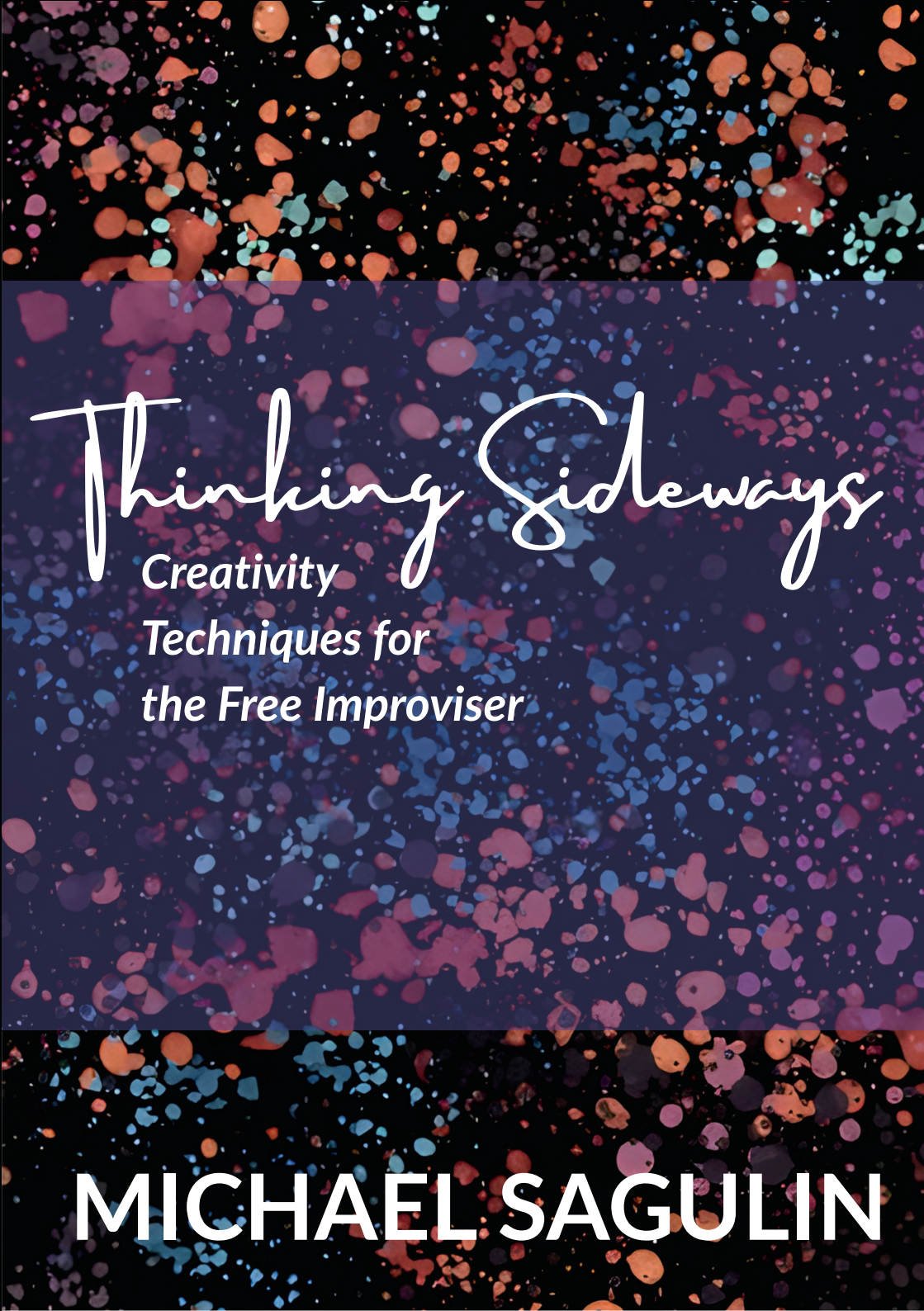




Thinking Sideways

Creativity

*Techniques for
the Free Improviser*

MICHAEL SAGULIN

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*For the Finnish gang in Tallinn, with whom I studied:
Tua, Saara, Satu, Johanna, Erno, Sanna, Ville and Lassi.*

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Introduction

There is a moment every improviser knows. You are mid-performance, your hands are moving, sound is happening — and yet something feels stuck. Not wrong, exactly, but circular. You keep returning to the same gestures, the same dynamics, the same unspoken habits you did not even know you had. The music is there, but the thinking behind it has gone quiet. This book grew out of that moment.

I came to creativity techniques through an unlikely door. During my studies in contemporary improvisation at the Estonian Academy of Music and Theatre in Tallinn, I found myself reading Edward de Bono — a Maltese physician and psychologist whose work on lateral thinking was developed not for musicians but for business executives, engineers, and schoolchildren. His ideas felt immediately familiar. The way he described lateral thinking — as a deliberate effort to disrupt established patterns and find new connections — sounded less like

corporate problem-solving and more like a description of what free improvisation, at its best, already does. Or tries to do. Or sometimes fails to do, in ways that are worth understanding.

What happens when you take tools designed to unlock creative thinking in the boardroom and bring them into the practice room, the rehearsal space, the stage? The short answer is: quite a lot. But the longer answer is more interesting, and it begins with a problem.

Free improvisation is, in many ways, the most demanding form of musical activity there is. It asks you to compose and perform simultaneously, without the safety net of notation, harmonic convention, or predetermined form. It asks you to listen and respond in real time, to make decisions in fractions of a second, to sustain creative momentum across the full arc of a performance. And it asks all of this without giving you, in most cases, any systematic way to think about what you are doing or why.

This is not an accident. There is a long tradition in improvised music – and in free improvisation especially – of treating the process as essentially mysterious. Something that happens rather than something that is done. Derek Bailey, one of the most important figures in the history of free improvisation, described it as enjoying "the curious distinction of being both the most widely practised of all musical activities and the least acknowledged and understood." That observation was made in 1993, and while things have changed considerably since – improvisation has found its way into conservatoires and music academies around the world, and a substantial body of research now exists – the underlying problem Bailey identified has not entirely gone away. We still

Thinking Sideways starts from a simple observation: free improvisation is one of the most cognitively demanding forms of musical practice, and one of the least systematically taught.

Most improvisers learn by doing — accumulating experience, absorbing influences, developing instincts over years of playing. This book does not argue against that process. But it does argue that there is something missing from it; a vocabulary for the thinking that improvisation requires, and tools for developing that thinking deliberately.

The tools Michael Sagulin proposes come from an unlikely source. Brainstorming, Six Thinking Hats, and Random Stimulation were developed not for musicians but for business executives, engineers, and schoolchildren. They are practical methods for doing what Edward de Bono called lateral thinking — the kind of thinking that moves sideways rather than straight ahead, that disrupts established patterns rather than deepening them, that looks for new connections rather than better versions of existing ones.

Sagulin shows how these techniques can be adapted for free improvisation at every stage; as preparation before a session, as exercises within it, and as tools for honest reflection after the fact. The book ends with a practical framework — the Improviser's Self-Reflection Diary Template — that brings all three techniques together into a repeatable process any improviser can use.

Thinking Sideways is for improvisers who want to understand their own thinking better, for teachers looking for new approaches to improvisation pedagogy, and for anyone who has ever found themselves stuck in the same musical loop and wondered how to get out.

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