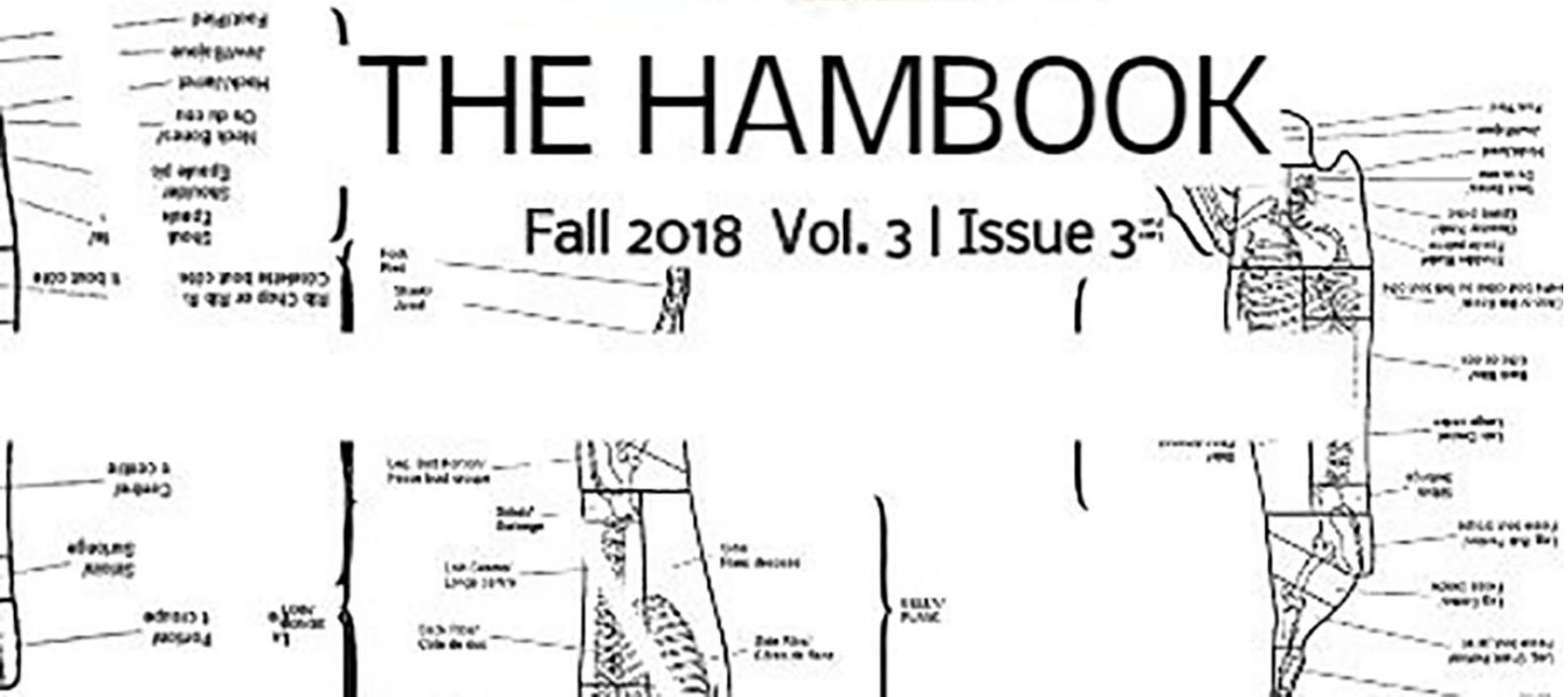


# THE HAMBOOK

Fall 2018 Vol. 3 | Issue 3



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# FOREWORD

## LEE BENZAQUIN

Welcome to the penultimate issue of the *Hambook*! It's a huge one. Thomas insists on going bigger every issue, but I'm starting to get worried about our servers. Can Squarespace hold this much data?? Fortunately for us and our servers, we have only one more issue after this, and then the crew and I will focus on getting the book published. Speaking of...

### On the book

We'll be self-publishing one, big, hardcover book with every essay ever published. You'll buy your copy, then there won't be anymore. We'll probably delete the website after that, because it gets expensive to host a website with no income or ad revenue. Did I mention we're losing money on this?

I'm hoping we break even on this book project. It won't be a book you'll see in stores or online, we'll just order as many copies as we think we'll sell. If we make a profit, the extra money will be spent on a big party for all the authors who have contributed over the years, because they deserve a proper thank-you for all their free work. We'll figure it out, but it'll probably be a crowdfunding thing, where you'll have to pay for your book way in advance. The more people order it, the more the cost will drop, so if you want a book but you don't want to pay two hundred dollars for it, start telling everybody you know about the *Hambook*. You got social media? You read every *Hambook* issue that comes out? Why

haven't you tweeted about us yet? You better do it soon, before we start commenting on all your posts and embarrassing you in front of your coworkers.

The whole process will probably take about six months, so you can expect the book by around Fall of 2019. It is a total pain to format a hard copy book, which is why we stopped releasing the hard copies of the individual issues (we were giving those ones away for free, too, and our wallets couldn't keep handling that kind of reckless spending). Ideally, we'll have a hard copy that has one of those color-print sections in the dead center of the book where we'll feature all the *Hambook* cover designs ever made. But that'll be a whole other "thing" to figure out.

And after the whole book is done... I don't know, movie?

## On other things

I haven't improvised in several months. Like Rayna Caskey's Diane advised in her essay from our Summer issue, I took a long break to re-acquaint myself with the art form. I've only seen a few improv shows in these months away, and a lot of them have left me pretty confused, bored, or a combination of the two.

It seems like most improv teams don't go into shows with a real goal. I don't even see many teams warm up, let alone make a plan. I'm not here arguing that all teams should start a show by agreeing backstage to explore heartbreak, or any un-fun garbage like that. What I mean is that, I don't think most teams are even deciding to be funny together before they enter the theater. Do teams even talk before the shows? Back when I'd perform a few

nights a week, I'd watch teams mingle backstage, avoid talking to the piano player, and then sigh and go improvise together like it's some annoying chore.

Look, people just can't go entertain an audience without making some sort of game plan together first. And picking a form doesn't count—I mean a real decision, about what the whole team wants to do that day. Could you imagine if a band was built that way? Eight to ten strangers were put together, then none of them discussed what genre they were going to try to do, then they walked out and performed for a paying audience? It would be disjointed, uncontrollable chaos. And yet, that's exactly what most house teams do every week at your “Best of Chicago” shows.

Here's a suggestion; spend an entire rehearsal getting to know one another's goals with improv. Do most of you do it to have a good time? Great, then focus your shows towards getting every teammate's rocks off, and don't end a show until everyone is satisfied and exhausted. Do most of you do it to make the audience laugh as much as possible? Start rehearsing short form and game structures, and play with game more often in your scenes. Do you want artsy transitions? Then flap bird wings and stomp feet, whatever you want. But you gotta talk beforehand, or some of your team will be flapping bird wings while someone else is trying to make them laugh, and none of it will seem sincere.

There's a reason why the independent improv teams that rise to the top are the ones that people will travel to Logan Square on a Monday night for; they're not just strangers who got to know each other. They're friends first, who built something unique by

finding a common want. But it's really not hard for a group of strangers to find a common want; the issue is that most coaches don't spend any time searching for that. I'd go so far as to say that the only thing a coach has to do for an improv team is help facilitate constant discussions about what the team's unified desire is. And even that isn't necessary, if a mature team can just hold that conversation on their own.

But enough with that...

This issue is packed, Thanksgiving style, with great essays that explore the hyper-personal aspects of improvisation. **Ian Ornstein** talks himself out of being angry for not getting cast on house teams. **Jena Wallander** asks herself whether she's hit expert status after 10,000 hours spent improvising. **Alan Giles** asks God why he's embarrassed to admit he likes improv. **Mary Tilden** tells us how she made the jump from improvising to professional acting. **Derry MacDermott** directly addresses cisgendered gay male improvisers. **Erin McEvoy Mason** explains to her children why practicing is important. And her fellow teammates from **Sirens** (**Joanna Buese**, **Lindsey Harrington** and **Lori McClain**) share a discussion with one another about their nearly two decades of improvising together. **Steve Han** tells personal stories about the importance of minority representation in improvisation. **Jonald Reyes** shares advice for solo shows that he's gained after directing several years' worth. **Jeremy Sender** explains the differences between improv comedy and improv theater, and the downfalls of misusing the tools of either one.

And that's all in just the first essay!

No, I'm kidding. That's the whole issue. Go read it, and share it if you like it, and donate if you really like it!

As always, read slowly, and talk about it.

# DEAR CIS COMEDY MALE GAYS

**DERRY MACDERMOTT**

Hi. I am your inner gay soul speaking to you. Close your Grindr account, take off your “Not Today Satan” T-Shirt and put on your Warby Parker glasses... You need to read this. I have sat through one too many terrible improv sets to just sit back and not say anything at this point.

I know what you’re thinking! I’m scared! This article is directly aimed towards me! Well, maybe. Are you one of the gays that still think it’s funny to play a “dumb blonde” and only talk about shopping, shoes, and hilarious manicures? Do you not call out other performers for being sexist because everyone knows you “love women” even though when someone says the word “vagina” you squirm and run out of the room? Let’s talk, buddy!

Being gay is simply the best, I get it! You get it! We all get it. You get to be around dicks, you can quote *Rupaul’s Drag Race* and some other gays in the room will understand, and you can use an umbrella when it’s raining and not be afraid to lose your masculinity. Three cheers for you being gay! Okay, did we get celebrating you out of the way? Can we put that behind us? We get it, you’re better than the average straight male... Because you are. That’s not even a question. But don’t forget a key point that still is

apparent in that sentence. You are still a **male**. Shocking, I know. Male privilege still applies to you and you are not excused from it. So let's go over some key elements that sometimes you and your gay counterparts seem to forget from time to time. Get out your coaster, we're about to serve some tea. (If this is a little hard for you to read, make it a drinking game! Take a swig every time you say... "Shit, I do that." Take a big gulp every time you like/agree with what you're reading, but think you can write better than me. You're probably right, but just... just.... Let me have this, okay? Finish the drink when you stop reading this entirely and open up Instagram to like a picture of Kameron Michaels out of drag.)

1. Let's talk about language used on stage. Buckle up, this is a big one! Are you cozy in your seat? Are comfy? Well get uncomfy, queen, because you using offensive words makes other people uncomfortable. You don't get a free pass just because you're gay. You liking penis doesn't give you a pass to call women on stage a "b\*tch" or "c\*nt". There is a difference between using the word "bitch" with your fellow gay friends dancing at Berlin where everyone is screaming, "You better work, bitch!!! Slay!!! Work!" But using such words in an improv set to insult someone is not okay, especially if they are a woman... Let's make another choice there, pal. By the way, this also is still offensive to women if "all of your friends are girls." You don't get a Fastpass to the front of the "I'm A Feminist, I Can Say What I Want" rollercoaster.
2. This brings me to another point. In the world of improv, you get to be anything you want. You can be a grilled cheese sandwich, a Starbucks employee talking about how overpriced their products

are (except for their bagels... weirdly cheap), or even a tree. If you want to be a tree, dammit, it is your show, you can be a tree! But here is when your tree becomes a tree that makes me, your inner gay soul, want to chop you down with an axe and throw you into a wood chipper. When you play a female tree and you make choices where the tree has huge boobs, can't stop talking about your new designer purse, and your voice is comedically squeaky with the word "like" and "totally" in every sentence... You can do better. Not only does it make it look like you don't understand women, it makes you look like an asshole. Don't be an asshole.

3. Don't fall in love with a straight dude in a flannel you see in the comedy world. It'll ruin your life. It has happened to every gay boy. I get it. Just buy a PBR, give it to him and he'll explain his love and deep understanding of craft beers and you'll fall out of love. Works every time!
4. Queer representation is important and vital within our comedy community. If you are a queer show runner/producer/host, it's your job to book LGBTQA+ acts. Not only that, but to provide a safe space and supportive environment for them when performing. And this doesn't mean just hiring fellow white gay stand ups. This includes but is not limited to: transgender, genderqueer, people of color, bisexual (no matter who they are dating at the time, they are still bisexual) performers. Not only does it give them a space to perform on stage, but it gives the everyday audience member visiting from Schaumburg the opportunity to understand that these people are out there, valid, and talented. Be-

cause they are! Oh, and don't just hire queer performers during pride month. Make it a year-round gig, my dear.

5. I'm going to keep this one simple. White gays: even though Lizzo runs your world and you idolize Selena (RIP, btw)... That's not a pass to play people of color on stage. Just shut the fuck up and play your race.
6. Not only are you gay, you're hilarious! For real, this is not your inner gay voice saying this in a sarcastic way... you're hilarious. The audience eats up the content you put out on stage and are begging for more. The more I am saying this, the more sarcastic it is sounding. It's NOT. But you know what's not funny? Being the teammate/comedian in the room that just shouts over everyone. You're funny! Trust me, you are! So let the other people you are performing with also talk. And though the audience wants to see your cute lil face out on stage a lot... You don't have to be in every scene. This one inner thought isn't gay specific really, just men specific. Try your stupid hardest not to interpret talk over your scene (\*cough cough— not male— cough cough\*) partners. Makes you look like a team player! We love a good team!

Listen, no one is perfect. But just because you suck on a dick every once in a while doesn't give you an excuse to be a shitty performer. Well, you might be a shitty performer, but don't drag others down with you. Though we have had our struggles, you and I, I'm saying this with love. Because I care about you. Us gay boys help make the comedy community strong, fun, and vibrant. But that doesn't mean we are the only ones who matter. The women, people of color, gender non-conforming individuals are

just as important as us. So maybe shut the fuck up and just listen every once in a while. You'll quickly learn that we are all changing comedy for the better. And I cannot emphasize this enough... Don't fall in love with a straight boy.

# I AM NOT AMY POEHLER

*How I Followed My Dreams, Instead of Someone Else's*

## MARY TILDEN

I moved to Chicago six years ago to be Amy Poehler. Obviously I didn't think I was going to somehow genetically modify myself or Freaky Friday myself into her skin, but she was my artistic muse, my hero, my guiding light. I went to undergrad in my hometown (solely because it would leave me debt-free), where I got my B.A. in theater. It was during undergrad that I rigidly sucked every resource dry of grant money, research funds, acting opportunities, and improv gigs. But I knew I had to move away from Columbia, South Carolina, after that, and the only question was where?

My college roommates were planning moves, too. One to New York and the other two to Chicago. Having just read *Bossypants* where Tina Fey touted the magic of Chicago Improv and knowing my uncle lived in the suburbs, I found myself telling my college advisor that I planned to move to Chicago even before the plans had fully materialized in my own brain. I wanted, ultimately, to act. My best friend Annabel is the one who reminded me that I admitted to her I wanted to be an actor when we were 11; the same year, coincidentally, that Amy Poehler joined SNL. However, there's not a clear route advertised that one can follow to become an actor. Especially if you're a woman. Tina Fey's book was the closest I had come. It outlined her way into acting and performing in a narrative, which made me hopeful. So moving to Chicago, the first "step" in Tina Fey's narrative towards perform-

ing (and, from internet research I knew it was Amy Poehler's first step too), would be the first step in mine. Chicago as a city seemed "unique", less needy to me than being a naive narcissist road-tripping to the valley of vanity that LA promised (#noshade LA, I totally am here for you now), and less idealistic and stupid than shuttling myself up to New York without any sort of plan. Of course, I didn't have any sort of plan for Chicago, either, but I thought improv would lead to acting, which would lead to being able to do both forever and ever, amen.

I spent three months after college working in a restaurant to save money while I lived with my parents and watched episodes of *Parks & Rec* and *Girls*, dreaming of the day when I'd single-handedly give Chicago a place on the comedy film & television map. My shows would showcase the improv I would learn there and also my dramatic acting abilities in scenes where I cried in a diner after a breakup (*Girls* reference) and then ate waffles covered in whipped cream (*Parks & Rec*).

I signed up for iO classes a month before moving and by my second day in Chicago, I was in level 1. I was doing it! My journey had begun! I'd be an actor and improviser in no time. I'd be on a show with Amy Poehler in only a matter of... a few years!

Breaking into the theater scene in Chicago was a little more tricky. Unlike comedy, the theater community, for better or worse, isn't so concentrated around a few sacred buildings. It's more sprawling, the quality and longevity of a store front's life more hit or miss. The theatre building itself could look like a dump and contain within it some of the best performances you've

seen. Or it could be the shiny well-funded downtown like the Goodman Theatre and contain within it some of the most solidly formed trash you've ever seen. (#noshade Goodman, I.L.U. thank you for employing me) Of course, improv is the same way. Who knows if an improv show is going to be any good?! But the commitment is a lot lower. You practice an hour or two each week and then try it out in front of an audience. With theater, it's hours spent. Days. Months. And to make something bad? That's pretty damn heartbreaking.

I remember, when I first moved to the city, noticing a surprising divide between the comedy community and the acting community. Weren't we all trying to be like Amy Poehler? Why wouldn't everyone try to do everything? I wanted to do it all, and I wanted to prioritize improv as equally as acting. Of course, after a few improv classes I realized I was pretty bad at improv, despite how much everyone loved coming to see my college improv team (#noshade Toast Improv, you're great). I didn't know what I was doing. I needed to practice! And practice took time! It meant trekking to the quiet, empty small Playground Theatre on a Tuesday night in the snow and then doing a show at the dive bar Town Hall Pub directly after, having performed for a total of 10 people the whole evening, 8 of whom were other performers (and that's on a good night). It meant doing something similar on a Wednesday and Thursday, too. I desperately wanted to make a Harold team (the house team ensembles at iO Chicago), because I needed to be like Amy Poehler, so this lifestyle, in my mind, was NOT an option.

Meanwhile, my focus on acting in theater slowly slipped. When was there time? I couldn't get cast in anything, anyway. Casting directors and theatre people didn't know who I was. In improv, my anonymity was a gift. I could surprise people if I was good in a show, and if I wasn't good, people would forget about it within a few hours and I'd forget about it in at least 1-2 years. Low stakes for everyone!

It became my quest to master improv and become Amy Poehler, though at this point, I'd settle for either her or the female version of the next TJ & Dave. Plus, while I still scoured acting sites for auditions, there wasn't a whole ton of stuff advertised that I was interested in. I didn't want to do burlesque and I wasn't buxom enough to audition for the seductress in *Amadeus*... the auditions that I did get called in for felt random and often sketchy. I didn't know these people and they didn't know me. Why was I wasting any of our time? We all knew they were probably going to cast someone who went to Depaul or Northwestern anyway! (#noshade Depaul & Northwestern people. Your education was valuable and so are you!)

Two years into living in Chicago, I finally, after persistently auditioning for plays here and there between improv shows, auditioned for a production of *Much Ado About Nothing* to be performed in a park in Evanston and was cast as Verges, Dogberry's vigilante sidekick. It was a random audition I found online, but thankfully it wasn't sketchy. The people were nice and generous and just honestly interested in doing good Shakespeare. I found in this audition that, for the first time, I was using my own voice.

I wasn't using some far-away, feathery Shakespeare damsel voice when doing my monologue, and I have to say, I think it was because I had been performing improv so much. Improv made me face myself. It forced me to recognize that when I played characters onstage I thought people WANTED me to play versus characters that I WANTED to play, the scenes weren't funny. It made me examine what kinds of characters I wanted to play and then presented me a blank stage that beckoned me to play them. Through improv I was able to play disgruntled fathers, horny moms, overeager postal workers, vengeful teenagers. And only the latter of those characters are ones I would ever be cast in in a play! Through improv, I was given the chance to develop a point of view and commit to it, to try things and fail. I think this changed me as an actor. It made me flexible in my choices and it made me unafraid of my own voice. I think I got cast in *Much Ado About Nothing* because I was able to tap into what I liked about the audition and committed, so they cast me as a character typically played by a man. At this point in time, I was not yet on a Harold team at iO, but I was close to the point where I'd be auditioning through class shows.

While this version of *Much Ado About Nothing* felt outside of the city and somewhat random at the time, I made some awesome non-comedy (but very funny) friends in the process and little did I know that a year later, when I auditioned for *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, it would matter that I had Shakespeare on my resume already. And this was in Chicago city limits! A step forward. Granted, it was in Portage Park—an hour and a half drive from

my house— but on those car rides to the theatre each night, I became friends with my now dear friend who drove me. That friend became a casting associate at Steep Theatre—a very revered small storefront theater a mere seven minute walk from my house! Yes! —and she called me in to audition for a play. I was cast and then got to work with the director of that play who called me in for a show at the Goodman Theater, my first ever fully-paid (non-stipend) professional production—right smack dab downtown!— which I was cast in.

It was that show at the Goodman that finally gave me the confidence to say, “Yes, I love improv, but I want to be an actor.” I want to get PAID as an actor, and I need to doggedly pursue what I want.

I realized this year that I don’t want to be Amy Poehler anymore. I value the mentorship I gained from watching her career, but I’ve been in Chicago long enough to value the fact that I’ve been on my own path all along. Amy Poehler had other opportunities and left Chicago when she was 26 and I’m 28 and I’m still here. And I’m truly just discovering the acting world in Chicago.

I believe that many other improvisors in our community and possibly many young women who dream of one day being comedic actors (or even actors in general that have a strong sense of self) could use a narrative to follow once they move to Chicago to do both improv and acting. Here’s what I have to say about my narrative thus far. I want it to be helpful for people. Everyone’s journey is different, but it’s really nice to be able to start with at least an image of what is possible.

If you want to break into the acting world in Chicago, take an acting class. I know they're expensive and you already feel ripped off or bummed out by the amount you spent on improv classes, but let me just tell you this much: I waited too long to do this. I wish I had done it earlier. One class in the acting world can get you really far. It introduces you to other actors and whoever your teacher is will hopefully be a good resource for understanding the Chicago acting scene as well. Use your classmates as resources. Remember there are people in the city of Chicago who have connections in the industry because they went to school here, but they have \$120,000 in student loans for studying acting, so that might make you feel better about \$350 on an acting class. Plus, a five week class is like \$700 in LA (this is a made up number...but probably not far off), so take advantage of the prices here while you can before you get sick of the cold weather.

Go to staged readings and talk to the playwrights after. New playwrights run the Chicago theater world and if they know you and trust you with their child (child=play... I'm not suggesting you babysit for them, unless you want to), you're golden.

Theater and live performance are your best bet to getting an agent or getting seen by casting directors. Write a show, produce it at iO or The Annoyance and invite theater people. Directors, playwrights, agents, casting directors, they appreciate invites. Don't be shy about inviting them. Keep inviting them. Be persistent. This is a reminder I need constantly. People notice and respect persistence. Don't be annoying, but send updates to casting directors every six months. It's not annoying. At least, so I hear. :)

Everything takes time and time feels way longer to you than it does to anyone not inside your career.

Having an agent is not the end to your struggles/unemployment/artistic stagnation. They can help you get TV/Film auditions but you still have to take care of fulfilling yourself through improv, theater gigs, sketch shows, writing, etc.

Chicago is a town of hustlers. Hard work is the name of the game. Work as hard to take care of yourself as you do to prove yourself. You'll appreciate it and the people who cast you will appreciate it when you're not drunk, hungry, or sluggish in rehearsal.

Go see plays. Stay and tell people you liked them in the plays. In improv, people see each other's improv shows to watch improv in order to learn how to get better. Acting is the same way! You have to watch theater in order to understand how plays work, how actors bring their different styles to characters. Chicago has so much good theater; given money to do so, you could attend a master class in play making every night.

Learn your lines. Don't think because you're an improviser you don't have to honor the playwright. Do your script homework. Use your improv as a skill for listening fully once you know your lines. Use your sense of humor in your characters. Even in a sad play, the characters are interesting and human if they have a sense of humor. Let that be a part of who you are and how you make choices.

Stay improvising in down times. My favorite thing about improv is I get to be who I want to be and say what I want to say. It keeps

me buzzing artistically and connected to an artistic family (my improv team). Don't dump your improv team just because you booked a play. The play will end, all your theater friends will go on to do other projects and you can go home to your improv team, and create something new and wonderful with them on a snowy Tuesday night in Chicago.

# IMPROV THEATER, IMPROV COMEDY & THE IMPORTANCE OF KNOWING THE DIFFERENCE

## JEREMY SENDER

Let me start with a disclaimer: improv is fun adult playtime and as long as you're making stuff up and not being an asshole, you're doing it right.

I've improvised on house teams at the UCB Theater in LA and the iO Theater in Chicago, and a lot of people have asked me what the biggest differences between the cities' improv styles are. Here's a short list:

1. Chicago improvisers go to the sides, and LA improvisers make a back line. I accidentally "initiated" dozens of scenes when I first moved to Chicago because I didn't realize I was on stage.
2. LA improvisers rarely, if ever, do organic edits. They almost always sweep, and there's usually an applause break between scenes.
3. Chicagoans tend to have more strict dress codes – no shorts, no graphic t-shirts, no hats. Angelinos are more lax, probably because it's always summer and everyone's unemployed.
4. Ending a show by holding hands and bowing is just a Chicago thing, because Midwesterners are polite and traditional. Californians just wave and leave the stage because they're... *\*puts out a legal joint by tossing it into an expensive cocktail named after a Sequoia tree\** chill AF, my dudes.
5. Tables, servers, and musical accompanists don't exist in LA improv theaters. Well they kind of did at iO West, but, well, yeah.

And most distinctly...

1. Chicago focuses on improv theater. LA focuses on improv comedy.

To the person off the street looking to catch a show, the difference is subtle – maybe imperceptible. To improvisers, the difference can be chasmic.

Improv theater comes from an abstract, right-brain perspective. The performers use character, theme, relationship, and genre to discover and build scenes that can cover a wide range of topics and ideas. They start with drama, then layer on comedy.

Improv comedy comes from an analytical, left-brain perspective. The performers use unusual things, patterns, and justifications to build scenes that milk as much material as possible out of a single comedic premise. They start with comedy, then layer on drama.

As you may have gathered from the symmetry of the previous two paragraphs, I personally gravitate toward the left-brain method. At the end of the day though, good improv scenes from both camps look similar. Both feature deep relationships, committed performances, truthful insights, and funny patterns. Whether that scene is approached from a place of drama or a place of comedy is completely incidental. When you go to the Grand Canyon, the views from the northern rim are just as breathtaking as the views from the southern rim.

But what about a shittier national landmark, like Mount Rushmore? Looking from the left side will give you a barely perceptible profile of George Washington's ugly flat face. Try looking from the right side, and there's the back of Lincoln's gross mis-

shapen skull. What I'm getting at here is that bad improv theater looks a lot different than bad improv comedy. So before explaining why it's important to know the difference, let's use bad scenes to exemplify exactly what those differences are.

In bad improv theater, performers tend to react inauthentically and ignore subtext, so scenes end up boring and stunted. A tell-tale sign of improv theater gone wrong is too much focus on plot. Here's a fictional example:

*SEAN brandishes a sword heroically.*

SEAN

We are the bravest knights in all of Camelot, and we must slay the dreaded dragon!

*BECCA brandishes her sword and gallivants across the stage.*

BECCA

Let us sharpen our blades to ready ourselves for the slaying.

SEAN

Good idea. I can't wait to stab that dragon right in the eye.

BECCA

Wait, I thought I would be the knight to make the deadly blow.

SEAN

I'm the strongest, so I should be the one to strike!

...And so on. Rather than diving into their characters and relationship, Sean and Becca grab for their most surface-level invention: slaying the dragon. With no subtext behind it, the scene blandly moves through the planning stages of plot before awkwardly transitioning to surface-level conflict. Despite a high-concept genre premise, this scene doesn't go anywhere.

Bad improv comedy, on the other hand, focuses too much on game moves and not enough on the scenic base reality. Approaching a scene comedy-first requires the performers to find a funny idea and make a pattern out of it, but that technique alone can make for scenes that feel more like a pitch session than a performance. Here's another fictional example:

*MARK approaches ELLA.*

MARK

I can't believe we got laid off.

ELLA

I know, it's the worst. What if we ignore it and go to work anyway?

MARK

Yeah, mind over matter! While I'm at it, I'm deciding to not get sick ever again.

ELLA

Good call. How about this... I'm deciding that my car didn't get stolen last night.

MARK

Great! And I just decided that I don't have to go to a funeral today!

...Etc. Mark and Ella recognize that refusing to acknowledge getting fired is unusual behavior, so they make a pattern out of it. But because they don't sufficiently build their location, activity, or relationship, the scene is effectively just a list of other bad things that would be strange for people to ignore. Even if some of the jokes land, it's boring to watch.

Though this bad improv comedy scene looks very different than the bad improv theater scene, they're missing the same thing: depth. Audiences don't care what comes next in the pattern or plot, they care about why things are happening, why choices are made, why characters behave the way they do. If these fake performers were more explicit in exploring those questions, they could move beyond their starting points and build well-rounded scenes.

So if bad improv theater and bad improv comedy both suffer from a lack of depth, why is it important to know the difference? What's the deal with the title of this essay? Do you even know what you're doing?

I super don't, so please accept the following hot take with a grain of salt.

Many improvisers in Chicago try to perform improv comedy using the tools of improv theater. It doesn't work. The result is iron-

ic detachment, and it's improv poison. Here's one more fictional example:

*JANET approaches ARTHUR with a plastic baggy.*

JANET

Arthur, I found this bag of pills in your room.

ARTHUR

(old-timey showbiz voice)

You're a pill, mom! A real pill!

*ARTHUR does jazz hands, then grabs the baggy. JANET swoons.*

JANET

Be careful of my brittle bones!

ARTHUR

I'd rather have brittle bird bones than my rough snake skin. That's why I take these pills!

JANET

Don't be ashamed of your snake skin! You are fierce like a cobra!

*ARTHUR hisses like a snake. JANET swoons.*

JANET

My bird bones!

...Okay, you get it. Janet and Arthur are certainly listening and yes-and-ing, but they're bypassing emotional depth in favor of making jokes. And pursuing jokes without the tools of improv comedy – framing and creating patterns out of unusual things – looks much more like a confusing word association game than a true exploration of a comedic premise.

Ironically detached improv can get laughs. It often does. That is its dangerous allure – it has moments of genuine success. Saying something clever or taking a big physical swing has comedic value. Beyond that singular moment, however, it leaves the scene high and dry. There’s no depth to fall back on. If we don’t know anything about *why* things are happening, *why* choices are made, or *why* characters behave the way they do, performers are forced to spontaneously invent the silliest or wittiest thing off the top of their head over and over for three minutes. If you’re capable of that, congratulations on being a mad genius. But keep in mind that 99% of your scene partners, genuinely talented improvisers, can’t do it. They need you to play with them, not against them.

Don’t get me wrong, I relate to the impulse to ironically detach. We all expect improv to be funny, and spending valuable stage-time earnestly developing authentic characters and relationships can feel like a horrible, silent eternity. As improvisers, we feel pressure to get a laugh as quickly as possible. But resorting to jokey, wacky, or downright random choices shatters the fourth wall and ruins any semblance of depth. Ironically detached improv feels more like a defense mechanism than a technique. If you judge the scene from the inside, you are immune to criticism from the outside. It’ll be funny sometimes, but it’s a low ceiling.

The Benign Violation Theory states that something is funny when it is simultaneously perceived as benign, the way things ought to be, and violating, the way things ought not to be. We notice the contrast, then we laugh at the realization that they coexist. In improv, the benign is the theater—relationship, spacework, setting,

genre, etc. The violations are weird and unusual behavior. Improv comedy prioritizes defining the violation, then balancing it out with the benign. Improv theater does the inverse, prioritizing a three-dimensional benign over defining the violation. Because of this approach, improv theater isn't necessarily funny. A scene that invests heavily in the benign may end up being more dramatic than anything else. That said, good improv theater often becomes funny because of the sheer nature of it being improvised. When you're in a scene and need to say something specific *right now*, you're probably going to say something dumb. If you resist the urge to ironically detach, and instead commit to that dumb thing in a deep theatrical world, you'll create hugely fulfilling, memorable comedy. That's the best kind of Chicago improv.

Get another grain of salt ready... I think the Chicago improv scene has a branding problem. The city's training doesn't prepare you to be a comedian. It prepares you to be an actor, a playwright, or a beret-wearing "theater artist." It prepares you to engage your physicality, stretch your voice, design stage pictures, connect to your sense memory, and explore profound themes. My time in Chicago taught me how to get out of my analytical left brain and tap into abstract creativity. It taught me how to truly commit, even when it was embarrassing. That's why I'm 1800 words into this ridiculous essay—because I love good improv theater.

Ironic detachment is completely antithetical to Chicago's style. We should trust that good theater will lead to good comedy. We don't need to force laughs out of the audience. We can build

three-dimensional characters and worlds, listen for where laughs naturally occur, and then dive in. If the laughs don't naturally occur, we can use our theatrical training to pursue what we find most interesting. Even if the audience is dead silent, they'll be captivated by the commitment, by the artistry, and by the theater of it all.

# LETTERS FROM GOD

## ALAN GILES

*I found a letter in bottle washed ashore while strolling down Montrose Beach. I opened it and this is what it said:*

Dear Alan,

Hello, my name is God.

Actually, my name isn't "God." My real name is "Fifty Dollars." That is the name I was given in The Beginning. But for whatever reason, you have decided to call me "God," and make my real name, which is "Fifty Dollars," mean something else. But I have come to terms with this.

I'm writing to you to tell you something that I think is important for you to know. This is it:

**It is okay to like improv.**

Allow me to explain.

You moved to Chicago five long years ago. Back then, everything was new and shiny to you. You were bombarded with new people, places, and things. And that's when you found it: improv. You watched that one Harold show and you were amazed. You signed up for classes and you felt enlightened. You joined your first indie team and you became filled with passion and drive.

Do you remember such a time? A time when you would watch a late-night improv show with a classmate and talk about it on the walk to the train? A time when you would recognize your favorite improvisers in public and geek out, almost as if they were celebrities? A time when you would read books and listen to podcasts and attend workshops ABOUT improv? Can you even remember that?

I can, because I am God and I have perfect memory.

Alas, the classes ended. The indie teams formed and fizzled out. The auditions came and went. And hundreds of shows later, here you are. Despite your overall positive experiences, you consider yourself “jaded.” You sit at the bar with a fellow improviser who is also “jaded.” A gaggle of improv students trot past the bar on their way to class.

“Fools,” smirks the fellow improviser. “These programs cost so much money, and for what? You don’t get anything useful at the end of it.”

“Haha, yeah,” you agree. “I wish I had spent all of that time and money on something more productive than improv.” You and your compatriot clink glasses, down your drinks, and waddle over to the stage to perform an improv show.

This, THIS is the reason I am writing this letter.

Firstly, beware the “jaded” improviser, for their attitude can be contagious. Remember that improv, at its core, is a celebration of

pure creative freedom. Therefore, ego and entitlement have no place on the improv stage.

Secondly, I feel it might be helpful to remind you that improv is completely voluntary. Unlike breathing and eating, improv is not necessary for a human to live (I know this because I designed you this way). This means you could stop doing improv at any time. You could take a break for awhile or you could just stop altogether. People do that all of the time.

But you have not stopped. In fact, you've never even seriously considered stopping. Despite all of your grumbles and gripes, you continue to seek out improv opportunities. You think about improv, you talk about improv, and you still very much do improv. Do you know why?

**Because you like improv.**

And that's not something to be ashamed of. Some people like baking, some people like football, and you happen to like improv. And that is awesome because caring about something is one of the bravest things a human can do. I so wish that you could still see the beauty and wonder of improv as clearly as you could five years ago. I promise you that it's still there, you just have to rub away the fog of politics and careers and "being cool." Once you do, once you can accept the fact that you like something and allow yourself to like it, I guarantee that you will have more fun. And improv is all about having fun. I would know; I took Levels A-E at Second City.

Also, you should be glad you didn't "spend all of that money and time on something more productive than improv." Those classes, shows, and experiences are an important part of who you are now. Whether you stop doing improv next year or you keep doing it for the rest of your life (I know which one will happen!), the time you have spent with improv will always be a part of what makes you such an incredible person.

Please feel free to write me back if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Fifty Dollars

*I then wrote a response, which I stuffed inside a bottle and hurled into Lake Michigan. This is what I wrote:*

Dear Fifty,

I would thank you for taking the time to write this letter, but I assume that you don't experience time linearly, therefore writing this letter took no time at all for you. Still, thank you.

I believe at its core your diagnosis is correct; **I do like improv.** However, recently I can't help but wonder about the longevity of improv happiness and fulfillment after the "honeymoon phase" of improv classes ends.

While it is true that I still gain joy from improv, it is undeniable that I was most enchanted with the improv world during classes. Back then, improv seemed untapped, unexplored, and infinite.

The classes gave me a structure in which I could learn via tangible, practical lessons that all led to the eventual goal of graduation. I felt like I was expanding and improving myself while striving for the thing I really craved: **validation**. I didn't just like improv; I wanted to be good at improv and I wanted other people to think that I was good at improv. In a lot of ways, I still do.

Once the classes ended, that structure disappeared. Suddenly I couldn't rely on my teachers and classmates for validation. I had to provide it for myself. And that can be really hard when you have that one rough set or that gut-wrenching audition and you start to ask questions like:

“Am I even good at this thing?”

“Do other people think I'm good at this thing?”

“How much more money and time will I have to spend to get good at this thing?”

“Am I still having fun?”

When those ugly questions start to pop around my head, sometimes it is easier to simply minimize improv altogether. Rather than facing these questions head on, I tell myself that improv is just one part of my life and it is not important to me. I tell myself that I should be more well-rounded and find new hobbies and passions. **I tell myself I don't like improv.**

Furthermore, I feel that, after being around improv for a few years, you start to raise your standards for improv in general. I expect higher quality out of the shows I perform in and the shows

I watch, which leads to more opportunities for disappointment. Then trivial things like drama and politics of “the scene” start to cloud my view and suddenly improv doesn’t seem like the positive aspect of my life it once was.

So what’s the cure, Doc? Do I take more classes? Do I try to join more teams? Do I try to coach or teach or move or something else? What do I do?

Sincerely,

Alan

*The next day I found a letter in a bottle floating along the Chicago River. This is what it said:*

Dear Alan,

First off, I have to address that “Dollars” is not a last name. My name is “Fifty Dollars,” not “Fifty,” but I appreciate the attempt!

Second, wow. There’s a lot to unpack here. I am omnipotent so obviously I knew all of that already, but I’m glad you took the time to write it out.

If you want to call improv classes the “honeymoon phase” of your improv relationship, then think about this: most healthy relationships continue to find fulfillment after the honeymoon. The love doesn’t fade, but rather transforms in new and exciting ways. There are things in improv that excite you and inspire you now

that didn't when you first started, and vice versa. This is normal and expected in a lot of passions, and improv is no exception.

Also, as with most long-term relationships, **there will be highs and lows**. As hard as they can be, the bad shows help you appreciate the good shows. And the rough auditions make that one stellar audition feel even more amazing. The lows can be hard, but they are totally necessary. Besides, isn't that part of the magic of improv? The risk of walking onstage and having no clue what is about to happen?

Now let's talk about the meat of the issue: validation. This problem does not only exist in improv, but I've definitely watched plenty of improvisers struggle with this. At its core, validation can stem from the problem of "permission." Within the construct of institutions, it's easy to see how improvisers can fall for the trap of waiting for other people to give them permission to do something they like. Read this:

**You are the only person who can give yourself permission to pursue a passion.**

So in a larger sense, stop waiting around for other people to tell you it's okay to do and like improv. Tell *yourself* that it's okay to do and like improv. Remind yourself that bad shows are normal and you will never outgrow them. And if you ever start to notice that "jaded" feeling creeping back up, try something new. Take a new class. Make new friends. Travel for a bit. Try out a new hobby. Do whatever you need to do to rediscover that passion. Improv will be waiting for you when you're ready.

I hope these letters have helped you. I know you're probably thinking that I, being The Creator, have better things to focus on than your relationship with improv. But improv is clearly important to you, as it is important to so many people you know, so it's important to me, too. I promise I'll make it to a show eventually. Weeknights are hard. Do you have any weekend shows coming up? Let me know.

Sincerely,

Fifty Dollars

*On the back of this letter was a \$50 bill. I am going to spend it on something that will make me happy.*

# PRACTICE AND PARENTING AND PRACTICALLY EVERYTHING

**ERIN MCEVOY MASON**

I was more than a little surprised at how much practice we are expected to do as improvisors. From the outside, it seems silly; practice for making things up? And it is one of the FAVORITE topics of friends and family who wonder, “Why do you practice, what do you practice, why would you need a coach, aren’t you making everything up, are you really planning it all out, there’s no way you came up with all of that stuff on your own, you must have planned it out in that practice, do you just sit in a room and make things up, does everyone practice, what about that really funny girl with the short hair, she probably doesn’t practice, do the funny people practice or just the not funny people, did you practice that funny scene with the funny girl in the gas station, did you write it at the practice?”

Like everyone before and after me, I have learned the value of practice in improv and now as a parent I have an even clearer perspective. You definitely have to make up nearly everything on the fly as a parent and just like an improv show, it does not always go well. Parenting and improv both don’t happen by yourself; this shit ain’t stand-up. You need another person to parent and you need another person to improvise. As a parent, you and your “scene partner”(aka child) will go through a million different exchanges in your lives. Like shows, some will go better than others, and some will be magical

where you both are in complete understanding with symbiotic mental clarity. To get there, you have to practice. Because as it turns out, **EVERYTHING TAKES PRACTICE!** Practice takes practice. And it came to me on the simplest of evenings while trying to explain the power of practice to my kid. It only took me 20 years of improvising and 4 kids... so, not too long.

As a mom, probably my main role is to explain shit. I'm expected to explain a lot of shit. Regular shit, like, "Do cats really hate dogs?" Gross shit, like, "Why are boogers salty?" And sometimes some big important, confusing shit, like reproduction, why recycling is important, and, of course, death. And these answers usually take some thought. Call it what you want: parental advice, wisdom, a teachable moment. I call it a parent speech. It's the important answer to an important question that a child has posed to you, usually at an inopportune moment. And probably because I have 4 of these creatures, I've had quite a bit of practice trying to come up with good ones.

And you do want to get this right. Because IF you get this shit right, life will be changed from this moment on. The code will be cracked. Your child will **UNDERSTAND** you and the world and everyone's role in it. You will have figured out how to communicate what has seemed impossible before in a calm, caring, simple, but not simplistic way that all children everywhere should hear, and they will because your children will carry on this knowledge, gifting it to their friends and eventually to their children. They will be the future that can parent-splain an even more perfect parent speech. Because of you, they will walk the earth with a mark of wisdom and eternal gratitude. Silence will wash over your house like the gentlest of floods, bathing everyone in peace and serenity.

For me, it wasn't answering "Why do we die?" or "Where does that baby come out?" I fucked both of those answers up and I'm still back pedalling. My perfect parent speech came to me without planning or googling. The facts just flowed and the room switched to a rosey sunset and I was pure parenting.

My daughter Dorothy asked, "Why do I have to practice my viola?"

I barely looked up and started with some usual answer. "It's to give your brain help and teach your muscles 'muscle memory.' So that each time you do it, you'll get better because you're not starting from scratch."

"But why? It's so boring!"

"Well, honey, I don't think you realize it, but you practice lots of things every day all day long, because practice is one of the most important things in life. Growing up and practicing things and doing things over and over are one of the most human things we do."

"You don't have to practice."

"What? I have to practice lots of things! Mom wasn't born knowing how to drive or type or change a diaper or not be afraid of clowns, it was practice! I had to do it over and over and eventually it became easy and I didn't think about it."

"But you don't have to..."

"Listen, I'm practicing everyday, reacting and readjusting. Like right now, I'm practicing using the Instant pot; remember the sticky green rice I made? Not good. And this slouchy winter hat—I'm practicing wearing it around the house to see if I'm cool enough to wear it out. Right now, I'm not sure. And this glass of wine—I'm practicing identi-

fying dominant smells and tastes so I can impress your Dad’s friends at Easter. And this dish rag—do you know how much I’ve practiced using both sides of the micro fiber? One’s bumpy, one’s smooth; there are advantages and disadvantages of both.”

Her face softened... a small nod of affirmation. “Ok I’ll practice, set the timer.”

Rosey sunset.

Whether it was the rhythmic glide of microfiber on the table or the wine, it all became so clear: everything is practice. Practice takes practice! Improv takes practice! Parenting takes practice. Marriage takes practice, which seems cliché but it does! How else would you put up with another human’s opinions, odors, socks in the Living Room (every fucking night) if you didn’t have to keep doing it and trying to get better? Knitting, duh. Lying to your kids. And lying in general, I guess. Telling the truth when you want to lie. Not freaking out in elevators. Eavesdropping at restaurants while still able to hold a regular conversation with your actual dinner companion. Googling the spelling and definitions of words you thought you knew like eavesdropping (I thought it was “easedropping”). Not killing a barista who loudly sings along to the music they choose to play to at a coffee shop. Remembering the names of other school parents who all seem to know your name. Going to the bathroom in Spanx. Trying to figure out if you like Rachel Maddow. Listening to your parents talk about their medications. And getting up on stage with nothing planned in front of a room full of people and trusting that you’ll say something and your scene partner will say something and it will build and everything will turn magical.

So, if everything is practice, then I figure I'm pretty set on having a go-to explanation for almost any question my kids can throw at me for the next 18 years. I'm not always good at this shit, but I put in the work each day, which makes me hopeful that practice makes good parenting. And that when I die, my kids will look up to the sky and think, "She was pretty great."

Rosey sunset.

# A REMINDER OF THE VALUE OF OTHERS

**IAN ORNSTEIN**

I can recall in vivid detail the first “professional” longform workshops I ever took. I remember those classes with the same fidelity you would for a first-kiss or a moment of extreme-embarrassment (in my case, one and the same). Each class was a revelation because I was open to learning. I was inspired by the experience of my teachers and overjoyed by the abilities of my classmates. I can picture standing in improv circles while the teacher side-coached the exercises. Whenever I had a successful scene, I would high-five my scene partner. Together, we managed the impossible—good improvisation. As we high-fived, I would mouth “thank you” I was thanking them for being on stage with me and helping to build a scene together.

By the time I moved to Chicago, I no longer saw these as “professional” classes. As I became better at improv, I started to become judgmental of other improvisers. I was no longer open to learning from my classmates. I attributed successful scenes solely to my own contributions.

Towards the beginning of this year, 2018, I overheard my friend Caleb Hearon praising his classes at iO. Even though he was already a skilled improviser, he said he would “learn so much every day” from his classes. I felt a pang of remorse. His eagerness served as a reminder that I had lost this learning mindset. How did I forget the value of my teachers and classmates? How was he able to be a great

improviser and still learn from those around him? Could I again tap into this position of humble openness and appreciation?

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On a summer evening in 2016, Matt Higbee gave my class notes for our show. Then, he sent us some parting advice for our 5B shows, which served as auditions for Harold teams. He said to “find the person no one wants to play with and learn to play with them.”

In my 5B class, that person was Andy (name changed). Andy couldn't act: his face froze in the same stoic expression no matter the situation. His dialogue sounded like descriptions of situations rather than lines of people simply behaving in the scene, and he didn't listen or build off of his partner's lines. He was wildly unpredictable in scenes and would suddenly shift the scene's focus. No one in my class wanted to play with him.

I followed Higbee's advice, and I attached myself to Andy. Whenever he initiated, I joined the scene. As I grew comfortable playing with him, instead of seeing all the things he didn't do, I started to see what he brought to scenes. He followed his instincts and made moves no one else would think to make. His choices brought a powerful spontaneity and play to his scenes. In one show, he kept bringing up the Hamburgler in every scene. Finally, his scene partner exasperatedly exclaimed, “Why are you so obsessed with the Hamburgler?!” Andy immediately answered from his gut: “Because he killed my whole family.” It surprised everyone, and it was utterly hilarious. Another time, he set a scene by placing two chairs together and motioned for his scene partner to sit down. To start the scene, he turned to his partner and said, “So anyway, we're in space.” The audience lost it. I think a lot of people would call that bad improv, because it was a line

no human would ever say—but that line was incredibly successful in that it made everyone laugh uproariously and it established context.

I was able to stick with him line-by-line and ground all his spontaneous specifics into a cohesive scene. In other words, I brought realism to his chaos. This mix of play and anchoring resulted in dynamic and exciting scenes. At a certain point, it was so easy for me to have a good scene that I considered backing off to give other people the opportunity to play with him. Yes, the opportunity to play with him.

At the time, I thought that we had great scenes because I was good enough to handle his unhinged-spontaneity. This is a trap we often fall into. We watch student-teacher jams and applaud the teachers for making the students look good, rather than acknowledging the ways in which the students are already good. Even when they get laughs, we don't credit the students.

Often those students are missing a certain set of skills, the same skills Andy was missing that made me write him off: listening, responding line-by-line, displaying confidence, not-breaking, reacting honestly, and other similar skills. These skills make the audience believe in the scene. I call these “aesthetic skills,” because without them, someone looks like a bad improviser even if the audience enjoys the material they generate. Often aesthetic skills are used to ground the scene or play the voice of reason.<sup>1</sup> When I studied Clown, I started to see how people could actually be good improvisers even if they didn't have aesthetic skills. In Clowning, the comedy comes from people bringing their authentic inner-selves and personal spontaneity to stage.

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<sup>1</sup> I'm borrowing Kevin Mullaney's term here as a less problematic replacement for the term “straight man” [You can read more here.](#)

For example: my friend Justin would blankly stare at the audience and cup his left breast, digging his thumb into his side ribs. It was incredibly hilarious—for no reason other than it was somehow very deeply him. I know that this description doesn't sound funny. That's because you're not watching him perform it. If anyone else tried the gesture, it failed. That's the thing about Clown; if it's unauthentic, it fails. If it's true to you, it works. Clowning is unpretentious in its evaluation of a performance: if the audience is laughing, that is considered good clowning. There's no such thing as someone “looking” bad or good. They either made the audience laugh or they didn't. This contrasted with my judgements of Andy who I saw as a bad improviser, even though he made the audience laugh.

According to the perspective of Clown, Andy was a good performer; he consistently followed his intuition to deliver surprising lines that no one else could have said (e.g. the Homicidal Hamburger). In long-form improv, I call the skill of listening to and acting on your impulses “gut skills,” and I think it results in some of the best work an improviser can do.

Often times, beginning improvisers who haven't learned “the rules” of improv have great gut skills. As we learn what works and what doesn't work in improv, we tend to censor ourselves and become less unique improvisers, in exchange for gaining aesthetic skills.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> *Some improvisers manage to have the best of both worlds. In particular, Zoe Agapinan and Mike Brunlieb, both of whom perform in Chicago and have strong aesthetic skills and gut skills. They often make moves that surprise you (and themselves) because they are so in touch with their inner-spontaneity. Zoe often does this verbally. You can actually see surprise on her face as she lets her spontaneous intuition take the wheel to finish her sentences. On the other hand, Mike dives deep with rich emotional reactions that twist in unexpected ways.*

I think back to Higbee's advice to find the person “no one wants to play with.” He didn't say find the person who is bad. He said to find the person to whom no one has given a chance. All Andy needed was someone to balance out his skills. I was able to supply aesthetic skills and have great scenes with him.

Because I was able to do great scenes with Andy while many of my teammates couldn't, I thought I was a superior improviser. I was crushed when I didn't make a team. Again, I didn't make a team after The Pool, which was my fourth failed audition for a Harold team (I had auditioned twice at the now defunct iO West prior to moving to Chicago). I thought all of my experience had entitled me to make a Harold team. I grew bitter. I would critically watch house teams, judging the other improvisers and picking apart everything they were doing wrong. I would think, I'm better than this person. I should be on this team. How did that person get on the team? Why not me? Watching shows was miserable and stressful.

Six months ago, In Spring 2018, I had another opportunity to audition for an iO Harold team. I thought my audition went well. People kept tagging the other player out to play with my character, and I credited that to my character-work.

I didn't even get a callback, and I was heartbroken.

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When coping with my failed audition, I remembered a conversation I had with Mike Johnson after finishing The Pool and not making a team. He told me that “You have a lot to learn, in a good way.” At the time, I had ignored that advice, thinking that I was already good. Now, I was humbled from this failure. I admitted that there was “a lot

to learn,” and I realized how that is a “good” thing. It meant I could grow! Getting rejected in March 2018 ended up being the best thing for my improv.

I dedicated the next six months to getting better at improv in order to prepare for the next audition. I knew I had to get better so I could improvise with anyone. In order to do that, I had to be prepared to learn from everyone around me.

The 10,000 Hours Program at iO helped me see how I could learn from everyone and also served as my training grounds for “learning how to play” with strangers. The 10,000 Hours Program, created by Julia Morales, is a series of drop-in workshops designed for improvisers to get their reps in. Often, the coaches have little experience coaching, and the people in the workshops have little experience improvising. I thought I wouldn’t learn much from those workshops, so my initial plan was to make a Harold team and then coach those practices. After not making a team, I humbled myself and signed up for as many practice sessions as I could.

Every week, I would attempt to find value in everyone (the players and the coaches) and learn from them. I started to recognize the subtle things my scene partners did that helped the scenes. I discovered that everyone brought something to the table to make the scene work.

It was natural to apply the same perspective when I wasn’t performing. I used to bitterly watch shows, trying to prove that I was better than the people on stage. Now, I joyfully looked for what I could learn from every scene. This helped me find strengths in improvisers I had written-of before as undeserving of house teams.

Stephanie (name changed) was one of those improvisers that had aesthetic skills but seemed to blend into the background of shows. She was on a house team at CIC, but she rarely got huge laugh breaks. Watching shows for what worked, I started to see that she had incredible architecting skills. Stephanie could balance any situation and make her partner look amazing. A friend on that team who is a more “loud,” entertaining player confessed that she was his favorite person to improvise with because she gave weight to the jokes in the scenes. No matter what crazy choice he made, she would turn it into a working scene with specifics and context.

Stephanie helped me realize the importance of those architectural skills, which subtly improve every show. I refer to those skills as “ninja skills,” because they are hard to notice. Editing, for example, is a ninja skill. You don't notice when someone makes the perfect edit, but I've been in plenty of shows that falter because of missed or bad edits. The perfect edits make a show build in rhythm and momentum, and yet the editor doesn't get a single laugh doing this important work. When we applaud at the end of the scene, we think we're praising the people in the scene. In reality, the applause belongs to the editor for calling it at the right moment.

I started to appreciate that everyone had different skills that combined to make shows successful. All of those skills are equally important, and just because someone is lacking in some skills doesn't mean they are bad. I'm referring to gut skills, aesthetic skills, ninja skills, and others; however, not all skills are useful in all contexts. For example, if you're improvising a 5-minute character monologue, ninja skills are useless. Or, if you're in a set full with power-house, absurd

character-actors, your own character-skills aren't going to help the show that much.

Therefore, the value of a given skill completely depends on the presence or lack of that skill in your teammates. The answer to “is this person a good improviser?” is contextual to a particular team and a particular show. When we make the statement “I am a better improviser than X,” we are doing it outside of context. In order to definitively say you are a better improviser than someone else, you'd have to know that was true for all possible contexts.

Since it's impossible to consider all possible contexts in improv, when we compare ourselves to other improvisers, we only consider a subset of the skills involved in improvising. We are often biased towards improvisers who have aesthetic skills, who get the laughs and emotional responses, and who are like us. This last tendency prevented me from seeing tons of really important skills I didn't have. As I began to appreciate the skills I didn't have, I was able to start learning them myself.

When I shifted to figuring out what I could learn from shows, I started enjoying watching improv again. Instead of only enjoying performers who played like me, I was enjoying players for being themselves.

Andy brought himself to stage, and he also brought concrete skills that I did not have. Our scenes worked well because Andy's skills complemented mine. He initiated strongly with context—I am not good at doing that. I play at my best when I'm surprised and simply emotionally reacting. His gut skills made it easy for me to shine. Looking back, I now attribute our successful scenes mostly to him.

This approach has really opened my eyes in terms of team composition. Sometimes people that you don't immediately perceive as good are actually providing the exact skills the team needs. I no longer look at teams and think what is that person doing there? It might not seem immediately obvious in a given show, but somehow, their skills are balancing the skills of the rest of the team. CIC House teams in particular do a great job of this. They often strike a balance between large character-actors and improvisers with ninja-skills.

Now, when I improvise with someone, I try to suss out what skills they are bringing, what skills they are lacking, and how I can find gold in their lines. I love playing with improvisers like Andy because it's very easy to supply missing aesthetic skills; I just react line by line and use confidence, acting, and truthful responses to ground their ideas. When they make an emotionless line dripping with heavy context, I add emotions. If they say, "Anyway, we're in space," I jump in, play with the environment, and make their truth feel real to the audience.

It's tempting to act as a wall, deflecting their specifics back at them and tipping your hat to the audience isn't this person weird? Lines like, "I know, Jerry, you don't have to keep saying that we are in space" will get laughs from the audience. I've grown to really dislike these moves. When we deflect too hard, our scene partner may start retreating and not exposing their wonderful intuition—and now the scene will be worse!

Some improvisers lack confidence and are scared to contribute anything to the scene. To help them, I try to give them a clear who/what/where to alleviate that burden, and then "yes and" hard to build their confidence up. TJ Jagadowksi, when playing with students, would lit-

erally nod his head and bounce his whole body up and down as his scene partner talked. Each bounce served as a non-verbal affirmation that his scene partner rocked, and then, with that confidence, they did rock.

When we treat our scene partners like they are amazing, we end up doing better work. When I was on a team with my friend, Shawn Gndt, he would often brilliantly set me up to connect disparate parts of the show together. Later, I would learn that he wasn't trying to set me up for those callbacks. I found those connections because I valued him as an improviser, and I looked for meaning in all his lines. When we search for brilliance in our scene partners, we end up finding it in ourselves.

I want to go back to Andy's initiation one more time: "So anyway, we're in space." I imagine if you played with someone with poor aesthetic skills you might think, ugh, what a fake line and you may respond with some way of explaining their weird vernacular. "Yes, we are captain. You don't need to keep reminding me."

Imagine instead Laurel Krabacher delivered that line. You'd be thinking, wow... she's initiating a surreal world where everyone talks narrating their environment and relationship. How Cool! You'd be glad and excited to play in that world. The difference isn't between Andy and Laurel... the difference is in you. You treated someone like they were great, and that attitude actually made you a stronger, more joyful, improviser.

If you're interested in this, try watching the next show you see with generosity. Pick someone at random before the show starts. Focus specifically on them. Watch everything they do. What subtle moves are they making in group scenes? When do they edit? What are they

doing right? How do they support the scenes they are in? Celebrate their moves and convince yourself that they are a great improviser. Give them a specific compliment after the show. I've been doing this the last few months, and it's been one of the more rewarding perspective shifts I've taken on. This approach has helped me see there isn't one objective scale of quality, but a multitude of skills for us to balance.

I had attempted to take those six months to improve myself as an improviser, so I could prove to everyone that I deserved to be on house teams. Instead, I learned that everyone was great at some aspect of improv and could do amazing given the right balance of skills from other people on their team. I came to the understanding that we all deserved to be on house teams.

With this new perspective, I was incredibly grateful for the opportunity to audition for a Harold team again in September 2018. I no longer felt entitled to be on a Harold team — after all, almost all of my audition-mates deserved to be on a team, too. When my scene-partners tagged my characters into different situations, I attributed the success of those moves to their ninja skills, rather than me and my character-acting skills. I succeeded not because I was individually skillful, but because my skills balanced with my scene-partners.

After that audition, in the midst of writing this essay, I did get placed on a Harold team. I understand that might seem very hokey to you (wow, what a perfect way to wrap it up); it is hokey to me, also! However, this isn't the end of my journey toward unlearning my superiority. It's another step—a big step. Now that I have been validated by a theater I respect, it's easy to start thinking that I am better than oth-

ers. Sometimes I still forget that my success on stage comes directly from my scene partners' contributions.

Everyone in this community brings something to the table. Whether they provide aesthetic skills, gut skills, ninja skills, or something else—in the right team, they will thrive. Anyone can succeed on any team if their skills are balanced with their scene partners' skills.

The truth is, I've known every single thing in this essay for a long time. You also knew all of this. Some time ago you walked into your first improv class. You were incredibly open to learning from improvisers who were different from you. Every slightly successful thing your peers did amazed you. Full of appreciation, you understood that if you managed to produce a good improv scene, it was because you and your scene partner worked together to do it. You already knew everyone around you had value.

I wrote this essay to serve as a reminder. You have skills that I don't. We depend on each other to make this all work. How did I forget the value of my teachers and classmates? Could I again tap into this position of humble openness and appreciation? I think I can, and I think it begins with a reminder: You are immensely skillful and talented. You have tremendous value.

Thank you for being on stage with me. Let's high-five.

# REVISIONIST HISTORY

## JENA WALLANDER

Hello!

A few months ago on a trip to Iceland, my fiancé and I listened to *Outliers* by Malcolm Gladwell. Somehow we both had not been assigned it in high school, and as we bypassed fjords and craters and waterfalls, we listened to Malcolm talk about hockey players and what it means to be successful until we got to a chapter discussing what he called the “10,000 hour rule.” Malcolm essentially proposes that you can only really be \*good\* at something after working at it for 10,000 hours, or roughly (by his calculation) 10 years. It just so happens, my friends, that this fall marks my 10 year anniversary of performing/learning/explaining improv to my relatives. So obviously, this chapter got to me. I can’t get it out of my brain!

When I was a little improv baby, just beginning to learn how to zip, zap, and zop, I couldn’t have imagined how much of an impact improv would have on my life. If you had told 16-year-old Jena that not only would she still be performing, but that she would be writing a dang essay about improv, I’m fairly certain she would have have laughed you right out of her high school’s lime green and bright blue drama room. 10 years! That’s a lot of time to be doing anything. Is time the key of being good at improv, though? After all the classes, all the rehearsals, all the fun shows, all the not-so-fun shows: am I good at improv?

10 years ago, I started performing improv in high school. ComedySportz Indianapolis has a cute little high school league, and I joined my junior year because all my theatre-kid friends were already on the team. At the time, I mainly thought of improv as another way of having fun with my friends. When I got to college (2 *years/200 hours in*), I found out Marquette had an improv team on campus, so I auditioned because they reminded me of my theatre-kid friends. I spent the next four years learning about long-form improv and growing deeper in my improv knowledge base. Even so, I didn't view improv as anything more than an extracurricular where all my friends were until my college days started to come to an end (6 *years/600 hours in*).

I've never been the funniest one in my family. One of my sisters once said to me, not unkindly, "Jena, you're improv-funny." And I wasn't the funniest one in any room in high school. But none of that ever really mattered. Not at the genesis of my improv journey. I was having fun with my friends. Who cared if I didn't consider myself to be naturally funny? This was only going to be a hobby, something I did in high school and college.

Except.

Doing improv, I felt different and uninhibited in ways I did not feel anywhere else. I couldn't explain it and I didn't discuss this with anyone. And once I knew what it felt like to know exactly what to say, and when to say it, and hear laughter as a *direct result* of what I had said and when I had said it, I knew in the deepest part of my soul I didn't want to let it go. That's cheesy, right? Whatever, I'm keeping it in.

Chicago is a pretty hard place to just go out and make friends. As I started working, and feeling lonelier than I really ever had, I began to ache for my theatre-kid improv friendships. And so, four months after moving here, I signed up for classes at iO. My choice to do improv felt more intentional, and at iO seemed to solidify for me how much I wanted to keep doing improv. Making a team felt more and more crucial as I moved through the levels, and not initially making a team at iO was more devastating than I wanted to admit, especially because through classes I was starting to own, at least to myself, my talent. Some of the friendships that I had craved and begun to establish felt unmoored; I began for the first time to doubt the time and money I had spent.

Except.

Now (*8 years/950 hours in*), my social anxiety had gotten worse. It started to show itself in panic attacks, and the only place where I felt (and still feel) truly free from that garbage was in rehearsal and onstage. I could be all sorts of people who didn't have my emotional baggage. Now, it wasn't just about getting a laugh; it was about releasing myself from whatever was worrying me at the time. Improv is not therapy! Improv is not therapy! Improv is not therapy! But it was making me feel better to do it than to not do it.

What I didn't know until I pitched this to the dear Hambook folks and started digging into Malcolm's 10,000 hour rule further is that the rule itself has been debunked HARD. It comes from a 1993 study published by Ericsson et al., which looked at the impact of what they called "deliberate practice" on ability to per-

form. That study looked at violinists, and subsequent studies by Ericsson and his pals in 2007 and 2012 also focused on deliberate practice. This guy loves deliberate practice! Bummer for him, though, because it's wrong as hell. A meta-analysis of several studies looking at practice and skill published by Macnamara et al. in 2014 painstakingly proved this, stating in its conclusion, "Ericsson and his colleagues' (1993) deliberate-practice rule view has generated a great deal of interest in expert performance, but their claim that individual differences in performance are largely accounted for by individual differences in deliberate practices is not supported by the available empirical evidence." YA BURNT, Ericsson! Macnamara et al. found that the 10,000 rule didn't apply to all domains (i.e. music, games, education), was difficult to accurately study because people have different ideas of what deliberate practice means, and that it was especially less applicable to activities that had less predictable outcomes. And if improv is anything, it's not predictable.

But also, the results of the meta-analysis seem to disprove what a lot of improv teachers have told me over the years: "Gotta get those reps!" "Even if you're performing to nobody, reps are key!" "I friggin LOVE reps!" Deliberate practice in an improv context, of course, is more than just reps; it's rehearsals and classes and shows and the time we spend talking about improv and I'd argue even the time you spend reading my (and others') illustrious prose in the Hambook. Does all that time help us get better? I know I feel rusty if I haven't rehearsed with my team in a while, but is that more chemistry than anything else?

My first draft of this essay talked about why I wasn't sure I should write something like this because improv is not introspective: we rely on teammates, coaches, friends we've dragged to shows, and the audience to tell us that we're *good* at this. And I do believe that. Comedy is subjective, and society's definition of what is funny shifts depending on who has the privilege and power to define it. But what I really meant by writing that originally is that I don't *want* to say I'm good at improv, and the Hambook folks saw right through it. Why is that? Why don't I want to own my abilities and skill set that let me excel at an artform I love pursuing? Why is it hard for me to say I am good at improv?

My improv journey has been like traversing through some sort of short form/long form improv Venn Diagram, with my college team in the middle. Learning the intricacies of long-form when I got here, especially grounded scene work, I felt that I was getting stronger, that I was able to support better; but, my short form experience drives my ability to edit and make me a stronger piece-player. It helped, too, when my perceptions of improv transitioned from a throwaway after-school activity to accepting it as a lifestyle that I was not only actively choosing, but in turn was informing my choices and my relationships. I began to understand my strengths as a piece player, and I love being able to use my voice and talent for my team.

My favorite musical, *A Chorus Line*, conveys most clearly my experiences as a performer. It considers the drive and ambition you need to succeed in performance art, the highs of doing well and the incredible lows of doing poorly, and also lets the characters

discuss their own journeys of getting to where they are (in this case, an audition for the ensemble cast of a musical). You gotta listen to it! But if you don't want to, at least listen to the song about improv. In the song, a character is talking about an improv class she took at her performing arts high school. She is pretty bad at improv, according to the teacher of the class, and she is miserable! When she decides to move on from the class and the teacher, she feels better about her own ability as a performer. This song roasts improv, but really, it explains the impact the people we play with have on our performance. It helped to have coaches and teammates who wanted my success as much as they wanted it for themselves; my favorite thing about improv is the communality, 10ish (okay, probably less than 10) people working together for a common goal.

As I grow and keep doing this thing, of course it's easier now (*10 years/1,200 hours*) for me to feel good at improv; I'm on teams with people who challenge me and make me a better performer, and more importantly, make me laugh. I have forged meaningful improv friendships that feel as validating as they had before, and I get to play regularly at the theaters where I learned and aspired to perform. I also know that there are plenty of great performers here who don't have the same opportunities that I do currently. The people at the end of *A Chorus Line* who don't make the ensemble (sorry, spoiler alert!) aren't bad at dancing, just as the people who aren't on teams right now are not bad at improv. Improv and art are tricky that way, and it's easy to tell ourselves that

performing opportunities shouldn't be validating when we end up getting those opportunities after all.

When people who don't do improv tell me, "I don't know how you get up on stage and do that! It looks so hard!" I usually respond that it's easier than it looks. And that's true, kind of; it's easier than it looks if you're just seeing the performers on stage, but all those performers want to be there, and they wanted (most of the time) to be at the rehearsals and classes getting them to that point. Sometimes I feel great after a show, and sometimes I feel terrible after show. Sometimes I watch the people I think are good have bad shows.

I don't think there's any one reason why any one person is good at improv, or any one journey to the stage that makes someone better than another. There are millions of improv ideas to explore, and I don't think there's some magical plateau out there waiting for us to reach it. But, I am good at improv. And I think that to be good at improv, you probably need to want to be good at it; it's not necessarily the deliberate practice, but the will to engage in deliberate practice that makes a person good. The desire to come to rehearsals, and shows, and team hangs, and to download the Hambook (honestly, I'm doing a lot of plugging for this thing. Can I get comped for my work here?).

I have improv to thank for a lot about where I am now in my life. So I'm going to keep doing it, and keep laughing with my friends. Is this still cheesy? Whatever, I'm leaving it in, too.

# THE IMPORTANCE OF REPRESENTATION

## STEVE HAN

Whenever I think about my journey in comedy at Chicago, I cite Second City's "A Red Line Runs Through It" as what inspired me to want to pursue comedy.

I've lived in Chicago for more than five years now. I've been attending comedy shows for years. And for the first four years of my time in Chicago, never did it occur to me that what the performers I was seeing were doing, whether it be sketch, improv, or stand up, was something I could do. When I saw Peter Kim perform in Second City's "A Red Line Runs Through It," that changed. Seeing Peter, a member of the revue's ensemble, on stage was the first time I saw someone on stage who looked and sounded like me. The power of seeing yourself on a stage, screen, or even a half-empty dive bar with a broken stand-up mic is... that's powerful. And that's what inspired me to pursue a career in comedy and sign up for my first improv class.

There are some familiar reasons that other improvisers in Chicago cite as the catalyst for their improv journeys:

"I've wanted to do comedy for the longest time, since I saw Will Ferrell on SNL."

"Chris Farley is the reason I'm here."

“I remember my parents taking me to the Second City when I was young, and I’ve wanted to do this ever since.”

I think the last one was the one that resonated with an inner part of me the most—not that I had been brought to Second City or Chicago at all as a kid, but a part of me has always wanted to be that kid.

Even now, when I perform on a regular basis at Second City and iO and constantly see families (mostly white) walking around to watch shows together, I think there’s something magical about seeing children inspired by the arts and finally understanding that something they want to do might be something as creatively fulfilling as *comedy*.

For me, growing up Asian was something I was so ashamed of. It’s a tried and true story—one of deep shame when our parents with accents come to our classrooms to help out, only to be ridiculed by our cruel classmates. Bringing a lunch box full of “smelly” food and then going home to beg your Mom to pack a Lunchables the next day instead (mind you, I think anyone who prefers a bland-ass Uncrustables to bulgogi is out of their damn mind). One that I think I don’t particularly open up about, but is very true to me: cramming decades worth of pop culture to fit in with my white friends, saying it was for Quiz Bowl, when in reality, I was only doing it to be in with the lingo around my high school peers. It was a charade that has now become a facet of my personality, but to get from point A to point B was a journey. It’s not easy to get to a place where you can admit that your flaws and the things you hate most about you are with you for the long haul.

But eventually, most of us get to a place where we can finally find inner peace—acceptance of ourselves.

It isn't until you get to that place of acceptance that you can create true, meaningful art. I was able to find my own place to create meaningful art through Stir Friday Night. I found inspiration through Asian comedians in Chicago who came before me.

I remember my first time experiencing the magic of SFN. It was my audition—I had never seen an audition room of ONLY Asians. There was no cattiness; there was, however, an overwhelming amount of support and complaining about different institutions in Chicago that made us feel tokenized, used, and, above all, under appreciated. And to audition with no care at all; I can say to this day that that's the best audition I've ever had.

One specific show I did with SFN stands out in my memory: it was a show for Asian Heritage Month organized by the Korean Student Organization at Northwestern University. They booked SFN, and I, along with four other SFN members, went over to Northwestern to perform. I was excited for the show, not only because I am Korean, but also because I'm an alum of the University of Chicago. UChicago and Northwestern have a fake rivalry, fake because neither student body cares, though our admissions officers do. We did a 20-minute sketch sampler; we weren't mic-ed in an auditorium that sat about 1,000, and we weren't very rehearsed (I was definitely not off-book for one of my sketches). With all that, never have I had a more supportive and engaged audience. They shrieked when I would've shrieked. They all went out to 24-hour jewelers and bought pearls because they needed

something to clutch at times. And, they all roared when we were loud and proud about being Asian. After the show, a few of them came up to me to 1) show me respect because I was their elder and a badass Korean, and 2) to ask about how to get involved. They wanted to know - they also were on the premed track like I was in college, but they saw this and thought it was so cool that they wanted to try it out themselves.

There's such a power in representation, not just in sketch, improv, or stand-up, but in entertainment in general. As a Korean-American, I had not been taught how to dream as a child. Many of my Asian friends had not been taught how to dream as children. We weren't told to "dream big, kid;" rather, we were told to "dream of Harvard Law, or Yale Medicine." It took an external trigger to help unearth a dream I never knew I had. It was seeing Asian people on stage that helped me achieve that.

When there are so few individuals in the entertainment industry, a negative feedback loop exists: because there are so few people young children can look up to, there aren't many adults who were those kids a long time ago. And while I may be biased in this opinion, it takes institutions to take a risk and believe in these marginalized communities to deliver. It takes people in positions of power to take a risk on an artist that may not look like anyone they've ever worked with before but are willing to try out so that they can pave the way and inspire in a widespread fashion. It's things like seeing *Crazy Rich Asians* and *To All the Boys I've Loved Before* for young Asians out there to become inspired.

Finding your tribe makes engaging with your creative dreams that much easier. Stir Friday Night is the best thing that has happened to me since joining the improv community, for so many reasons. When I perform with SFN, I feel so free, empowered, and most importantly, safe. Being able to create unapologetically Asian art has been the most creatively, liberating, and enriching experience I've ever had.

And how powerful is that? To know that what you do on a stage can not only be soothing for your soul, but can also enrich and enlighten the lives of others? It gives so much power to what you do, and for me is the gasoline I constantly need to reignite the fire under my ass. I was on that stage, totally not off-book, but having the best time of my life because I was performing to an audience of almost all Asians and some allies with my Asian brothers and sisters. I still think about the Northwestern performance on a regular basis. Nothing will compare to doing a show during Asian Heritage Month to an audience of mostly Asians; it was almost as magical as me seeing the opening weekend of *Crazy Rich Asians* in Koreatown, Los Angeles. Almost.

From personal experience, it wasn't until I joined Stir Friday Night that I knew how to improvise without fear. As someone who has intense and at times crippling OCD and anxiety, improvising in front of an audience was one of the most terrifying things I could have forced myself to do. But once I surrounded myself with family, both around me in the audience and with me on stage, I found myself truly enjoying what improv was meant for all along.

This is all a rambly way of saying: find what makes you happy. Find your inspiration. Go find people who look like you and watch them. It sure as hell helped me get to where I am now. My only hope is that I'm doing the same for someone out there as well.

# SIRENS

## JOANNA BUESE, LINDSEY HARRINGTON & LORI MCCLAIN

*Sirens is the longest-running, all-female-identifying improv group in the United States. Performing together for nearly 20 years, Sirens' productions include: Chicken Scratch, Paso Doble, Paper Trail, Social Atom, and performances for the Chicago Improv Festival, Funny Women's Festival, Gilda's Club Chicago, and The Del Close Marathon, among others. The following is a collaborative self-interview exploring improv and creativity between Sirens members, Joanna Buese, Lindsey Harrington and Lori McClain. [www.sirensimprov.com](http://www.sirensimprov.com)*

### What drew you to improv in the beginning?

Lindsey:

I saw a few short-form shows in college. I thought they were amazingly funny, but I also thought, "That's how my mind works!" Learning that it was an actual art form was eye opening, and then, performing with the college group, with very little knowledge or direction, was pure play. I knew I wanted to move to Chicago, and after learning about improv, I knew why. It was a way of making the big city seem smaller. I was excited to see what could be built with a few friends or acquaintances and our imaginations.

Joanna:

In college I saw a touring UCB show and what struck me was the sheer joy, excitement, and childlike delight on Matt Besser's face just watching from the sidelines, waiting to get into a scene. I remember very little about the actual show, but his perma-grin is crystal-clear in my memory. I'd done theater in high school and

watched SNL since I was a youngin’—I wrote a story in 3rd grade called “The Kid and Velvet Jones,” but I didn’t know improv was a thing I could learn to do until a friend told me about *i(mprov)O(lympic)*. I was afraid of it, so I moved to Chicago and signed up for classes. Because why not?

Lori:

I was absolutely terrified of improv. I had a little exposure to improv games in high school theatre class, and that was kind of fun because I got to try to be “clever,” but I didn’t know it was something people would be pay to see. In college, there was an improv group in our theatre department, but it wasn’t on my radar (although a few of those guys have gone on to have long improv/writing/performance careers: Joe Janes, Ric Walker, and Brad Sherwood). When I moved to Chicago, I got hired to go on the road with a children’s theatre company and one of the women there kept encouraging me to take classes at Second City. Every time she talked about it, I’d get a stomach ache. I finally decided to audition for the program, and I think what pushed me past my fear of auditioning was that I had no other plans after my contract with the children’s theatre ended. I didn’t have a direction, so going back to school seemed like a good option, even if it scared me. And I knew I’d need my “ready-made family” fix, which used to be a really big part of my draw to performing and being in ensembles. I was beyond thrilled that I got accepted into Level One (or Level A? It was different back then), but then had to get comfortable with having a stomach ache every Saturday morning.

My old therapist explained to me that self-esteem can come from doing things you don't think you can do. So, I guess I'm ok with being afraid but doing it anyway. What's that old quote? "I don't love writing, but I love having written." It feels good to conquer your fears. So I think that feeling is what keeps me coming back.

And a half a glass of wine before a show really helps.

## Where are you in your improv life now?

Lindsey:

I don't want to be in my post-improv life, but I also fall asleep before 9:30 pretty regularly. A 10:30 show requires a significant amount of mental and physical preparation, not to mention childcare. Improv provides me a lot of energy, but I also think it requires a lot of energy to do well. I don't think that improv is a young person's game, but I haven't done a show in a year and a half. My work as a middle school teacher and being a parent keeps me improvising, in a way. I feel like there is a ragtag element to improv that is so delightful, but now, there's so much work and planning that goes into preparing for that set of spontaneity that the balance can be tipped toward staying home for many people. I really miss the feeling of playing with people I trust, and I trust the Sirens and the guys from college that I used to do shows with, too. Starting a new group at this stage of my life would require more energy than I think I could muster and still meet my responsibilities at the level I would like, although I would love to rehearse with my friends. Basically, I'm bummed

that I don't get to do a show a month with my friends. I would love that. It would be great if twenty people came to the show, and I would rehearse for it. Could this set-up exist? Please?

Joanna:

I am in... the twilight years, relying on pets for comfort. I would love to play more, but at some point several years ago I started making choices that didn't support going out and doing shows at night as often anymore. And honestly, those choices came out of a very personal need to not be around a heavy drinking environment. I know some people can be really centered and grounded and able to thrive creatively while maintaining good personal boundaries and a healthy sense of self while around lots of people, lots of banter, but not me. I needed to quiet down, wake up early to run or work out, and hit the sack early. I think I stopped fighting my introverted tendencies, put simply. I also decided to pursue a Masters degree and to put all my energy toward that.

A friend asked me recently if I'd want to possibly sit in with him and some folks for an improv set next month. I said yes—of course—even though my skills may have atrophied a bit and I haven't improvised with anyone other than Sirens in many years. He reminded me, "it'll be fun." And I was like, "Oh yeah, FUN!" For me, it's easy to worry about the future and let my anxiety take over. But when I remember the simple shit—listen, respond, play—it makes saying yes and having fun a whole heckuva lot easier.

Lori:

I usually get to improvise a couple of times a month or more—with *Second City Works*, *Improvised Sondheim*, *Sirens*, or sitting

in somewhere. I hate to admit how much I like the structure of short form and musical improv. One of our other Sirens, Katie Watson, puts it best: “Having structure is like playing on the top of a mountain and wildly running around, but all while, there’s a fence keeping you from falling off.” I like doing a show immediately after we’ve taught a workshop because I really have to focus on embodying the skills we’ve just shared with them.

Some of the most blissful moments I’ve ever had have come from being in a musical improv show. The characters interacting in a stylistically heightened scene, with music, lyrics, rhymes, the camaraderie—that really thrills me.

Like Joanna, I too, am in my improv twilight years, and feel pretty ambivalent about getting out there to do a 10:00 pm improv show—hell, I’m even ambivalent about going out to *watch* a 10:00 pm improv show. But once in a while, I feel the loss of being fully immersed in the improv culture (the hustle, the gossip, the relationships), but like my Sirens-sisters, I have different priorities now, and hopefully a little more maturity.

## How does improv affect your daily life?

Lindsey:

I think I have a spirit of playfulness with my students, family, and friends. With people that I find particularly challenging, I try to neutralize them by thinking of them as people making creative character choices that I need to support in our “scene” or interaction. That can be tough sometimes, but I do think improv has

helped me to be less judgmental of others and myself, although I have always been pretty hard on myself. There is something about being in the moment of an improv show that is so healthy for me. I get to create a draft with someone else, and we cannot judge it, we simply must create it and let it flow. After fun shows, I may not remember specifics of a scene, but I'll remember the feeling, and I love that excitement of connection with a scene partner and maybe even the audience, too.

Joanna:

By not being so locked in to the way I think life should go. I mean, that's being rather generous and optimistic about the power of anxiety (or lack of), but things tend to feel a lot better when I'm saying yes, and I'm not trying to force a solution or impose my storyline onto someone.

Lori:

Because of improv, I really notice when people are shut off from information—or the truth of what's happening in any given situation. I notice people not accepting what "is." Of course, I'm guilty of not listening and saying 'no' to protect myself, too, but when I first started improvising, I noticed how many congruent philosophies I was being exposed to. I had joined a Zen Buddhist Temple and started therapy at that same time, and I noticed they all kind of said the same thing: "It's not about you, it's not about you, it's not about you."

How did you improvise before you were “trained?”  
How did training in improv affect your work on stage  
and in your life?

Lindsey:

I used to imagine things and make myself laugh all the time. During tests, I would think, “What if this wrong answer was actually right?” and I would get the giggles to relieve some nervousness. I remember walking on the Quad in college trying to figure out why, “Two guys walked into a bar, and the other one ducked,” was a joke. I imagined the scene, and I started laughing to myself (but still aloud) while walking to class because I finally got the joke after many years. I had to picture the scene first to actually get it. Improv is creating the picture for me. I’ve always been a “what if” thinker, and although it can lead me down an anxious spiral, it can also be pretty creative. I actually named my feeling of anxiety “Gary” so that I could personalize it, recognize it, and figure out how to work with it. A therapist and meditation teacher taught me that. Anyway, improv is a tool for dealing with difficult feelings and people. Saying “yes, and” to life, in general, reinforces the confidence I had in my imagination as a child. It reinforces that I’ll be able to handle anything that comes my way, or at the very least, find the humor in a situation because I’ve been paying attention in the moment. It also acknowledges those outside of ourselves and let’s them have their creativity, too, in the same shared world we inhabit.

Joanna:

I made up soap operas on cassette tapes with background classi-

cal music and medical trauma-related storylines. I think every kid improvises while playing, right? Although I remember when I was in 5th grade playing with kids on the playground who wanted to basically recreate the plotline of a sitcom they'd all seen (except me), and I was like, "What's fun about this?" Even if I had seen the stupid show (it was *Double Trouble*, btw), I thought it was boring to recreate something that'd been done already. Classes and training were great for me because I didn't know about games and status or tag-outs and heightening. But I'm a thinker, so more information, more "rules" tend to put me out of play and into worry. I had some rough years of knowing too much and having that stifle my fun. Actually, there were probably a few years when I rarely enjoyed myself because of that head-trip rules stuff.

Lori:

I didn't really improvise until I took classes, but when I was a kid, I made up stories and acted them out in my room all the time. In fact, if I was watching TV I'd think, "This sucks. I'm gonna go upstairs and make up my own story." I loved that. Getting into someone else's head, and basically doing character monologues in my room.

I remember when I was 16 or 17, I was in a community theatre production, and our director, who'd studied with Stella Adler at The Actor's Studio, would say to me, "Try to let your mind go blank before you walk out on stage. You know your lines, they'll come. Just react to what's going on." It was such amazing advice. I still think about it when I play a show—scripted or improvised—

and even when I'm singing with my jazz group. I try to let go just enough to completely trust that something great will happen if I'm in the moment. I think that's one of the shared principles of any type of art.

I know instinctively that we can't create and adjudicate at the same time, even though my ego will tell me otherwise. It's pointless—and detrimental—to judge ourselves while we're out there taking the leap.

Lindsey, you improvised in college with the esteemed Spicy Clamato at U of I. I know I was incredibly insecure in my late teens, early 20s. How did you overcome any insecurities you might have had? And did improvising with all men impact your performance, that you were aware of?

Lindsey:

I played a lot of sports in school so I was comfortable in a team environment, and I always felt that if you could play, then you should play, and it didn't matter with whom. I think that applies to improv too. I knew I'd better play to the top of my intelligence, but I also felt pretty safe on stage. I think that there is a sports mentality that I had, particularly when playing with guys. I had to earn the respect of the group I was playing with, but it was nice being the only woman sometimes because you got to be out there a lot. I think I was like the stereotypical little sister who really wanted to play and worked to prove that she could. I have always been pretty quiet in new groups, and since I got up at 6:00 AM to

get to school, and I didn't drink, I may have come off as a bit of an improv clock-puncher who was simply in it for the 25-45 minutes of creativity and laughs. I made sure that when I was in a game or scene that I was focused and supportive so the group would know that I wasn't there to mess around; I was there to improvise. I also tried to avoid playing either extreme of the whore-Madonna spectrum; I would play a person with a want and a perspective.

Joanna:

Early on, I found myself playing a lot of dudes or gender ambiguous characters. The reason was that I felt more powerful, more confident assuming more masculine qualities—in posture, gestures, and voice. When you play with a lot of other dudes, though, it's almost like, "Why is that girl playing another guy?" I didn't care, but there was always the possibility I'd get called out as a lady.

Luckily, I played with a lot of guys who were hip and could genderbend just fine without any fuss. Maybe it happened in rehearsal a few times, but my coaches or teachers were like, "Hey, she's clearly a guy. Get with it." I just remember what a relief it was to play with Sirens and it being so easy to play more masculine characters without worrying whether or not they'd get that I was playing a man. Eventually, I found power in playing female characters, too—maybe because I felt less threatened among other women? I need to call my therapist now.

Lori:

My first gig in improv was with ComedySportz in the 90's. I

stayed with them through the early 2000's and learned a lot about being fearless by playing with the guys. If I'm honest, there was always an undercurrent of me really hoping the guys would think I was a good player, even guys whose talent I might not have had a ton of respect for. And, like Lindsey and Joanna, I was happy when occasionally I'd be the only female out on stage. I worked really hard at getting good at ComedySportz, which is innately very fast and competitive—so very conducive to being a more aggressive player.

I think about my own role in supporting the “boys’ club” environment back in the 90's (that was not just at ComedySportz, obviously). I'm kind of embarrassed that I never really pushed to rock the boat or change it. I really just accepted that that's the way it was, and I worked hard to exist and flourish within that structure. And because I learned the game of being “one of the guys,” I got to direct and collaborate on some really fulfilling projects.

Back in the day, there were far fewer women, even fewer people of color, and only a handful of openly gay improvisers. I worked hard to ensure my place on the mostly-straight-white-male team. I was really hungry to be good at it. And I learned to play in a way that wasn't always comfortable for me, just so I could play.

How does improvisation affect your other artistic endeavors? Do you notice a different level of comfort doing improv vs. your other creative work?

Lindsey:

I think of lesson planning as creative, but I also feel that I need to respond to my students, and improv is so helpful with that. Improv is my favorite form of creative work because for me to do it well, I need to get out of my own head. I have so many first drafts of things that never go anywhere because I don't know how to get past the first draft. Once it's on the page, I start to wonder how things will be interpreted or if anyone will get it. Part of why I'm trying to write this is just to put something out there in the hope that I can see that it will be ok. Improv is so clarifying; it's that moment with those people, and it will never happen again. Scripted things have always made me terribly nervous, even if I know they're funny because they feel one step removed from the immediate bubbling up of an idea in the moment. I like playing the piano in my home, but when my son and I had a recital, I was shaking so badly that I skipped playing the second movement of my piece because I was so nervous. I would have rather done an improvised monologue right there and then. I really do love improv.

Joanna:

I picked up drawing 10 or more years ago. I knew I wasn't any good, I mean, by most objective measures, but I had a lot of fun doing it. I practiced putting down lines with confidence--attempting to draw things that were waaaaay more challenging than my level of skill suggested. The results could be surprising, but more often hilarious. I think the practice of improvisation taught me to take risks, to have fun, and not take making art so seriously. I was

also in 2 bands with other improviser/performers and we, probably annoyingly, relied pretty heavily on between-song stage banter and our sticky interpersonal dynamics, heightened for entertainment. I think improv absolutely affected my comfort within that context. Not to mention the fact that I barely knew how to play my instrument. That's rock 'n roll, though, I know, I know.

Lori:

Improv has made the rest of my artistic life and my relationships infinitely better. In fact, I think the guiding principles of improv are far more important to my daily life than actually getting up and improvising on stage.

Improv teaches you to be more comfortable with the uncomfortable—and that has, without question, helped me book other types of acting jobs. I'm usually really happy in a casting session, and I think it's because you are asked to prepare something, but then you have to let go and be present. It's very intimate. I can draw a direct line to my improv training when I really listen to someone-- another actor, another musician, or in a real-life conversation. When you're really walking the improv philosophies, only good comes from it.

What wisdom have you gained from improvising for 20+ years?

Lindsey:

I don't always remember this, but improv has taught me that there is a creative part to everyone. I've also learned the value of

affirmative choices, validation, listening, avoiding judgment of myself and others, and loving the people with whom you're creating art or life. I'm so thankful we work (and are working, each day) to get over that fear of not having an actual or metaphorical script.

Lori:

I think some of this comes naturally to me, but improv has really heightened the gift of perspective. What is going on in this moment, and what do I need? What do I want? What do "they" need and want? If I pull back to a wide-shot view of this "real-life" scene I'm in right now, what is the essence of what is happening, and do I need to do anything, or can I let this be and simply let life unfold?

I like being able to take the temperature of any given character in a conversation. And I always think of improv as walking the tightrope between taking a risk on the one side, and letting go of the outcome on the other. Step forward and risk, then let go; risk, let go. I think that's invaluable in life. I suffer the most when I refuse to accept what is actually happening in any given moment. So, this gift of perspective helps me—most of the time—to see what "really is." I am so grateful for that.

# YOUR ONE-PERSON SHOW

## *The Brainstorming Session*

**JONALD REYES**

"People have this idea that, when you're in comedy, they think you must be some free-wheeling fun person. But I always took myself seriously, got very down on myself. Comedy was my escape." -Conan O'Brien

As you continue on your journey through this wondrous comedy community cavern, you may be enchanted at the thought of the tumultuous one-person show. But what exactly does that look like to you? You probably have a lot of ideas but you have no clue what to do with them. You probably have a lot of characters, but you're not sure how they connect. And you probably have a really funny bit, but that might be all you have - a bit that you know you want in a show, doesn't fit any show you're in, so you just want to stick it into your one-person show. But honestly, the one pure advice that I can give you from all these swarming brain curdles is: "What are you trying to say?"

There are so many interpretations of what a one-person show can be, but ultimately it will be a performance culminating with a variety of one-person acts. It may be limiting to your creative process if you hold it hard toward a specific genre. It is not a stand-up comedy special. You can incorporate stand-up into your solo show, but then realize that your stand-up persona can become its own character within the show. It's also not just story-

telling; however, the theatrical presentation gives you more leniency to have your stories accepted by audiences as a solo show. A solo show is about saying SOMETHING, sharing your point of view with the audience. A solo show requires that the actor be willing to be vulnerable and share of themselves onstage.

Being a freelance Director for the past eight years, I've been very fortunate to have worked with many talented performers on their solo shows, and my main question when directing these performers is, "What are you trying to say?" Whether you're the new alt-comedy actor, a heartfelt storyteller, or an eccentric stand-up comedian, you have an idea that's worth sharing with the world. And that is the baby seed of what a solo show is.

This essay is meant to help get your creative juices flowing, to help you figure out what you are trying to say in your solo show, and to organize a structure of your one-person show. This is the brainstorming session.

## VULNERABILITY

Let me take you behind the scenes of how a lot of the shows I've Directed work best and on a different level than typical shows. It isn't about finding the best punchlines or the strongest characters (although can be just as important!); it's about how vulnerable you can be on stage. It's the acting and commitment to the performance in its entirety. This is even the secret to better comedy. When the dialogue coming out of your mouth is delivered with true sincerity and emotion, especially vulnerability, the audience believes it and will laugh at how true or relatable it is to them. Be-

ing vulnerable on stage shows the audience that you're a "real person," or your character has believable human emotions which the audience can connect to.

And with that, I'd like to break down the term 'vulnerability' to the actor on stage. Vulnerability on stage is letting up your guard and allowing hypersensitive emotions to fill your body in acting and reacting to the scene. Opening yourself up to your audience will also open themselves up to you. By having that trust, they'll stay more invested and allow themselves to feel what you're saying.

"And sometimes you have to address the things that you don't want to address, because it's bottled up inside you. And we don't figure it out until it's too late, but we use comedy as therapy." - Kevin Hart

## SELF ANALYSIS: WHAT ARE YOU TRYING TO SAY?

As the Writer of your solo show, you'll most likely sit and think and write and eat and think some more, maybe walk around the room, get another coffee, write again, take a nap, listen to music, jot down random words, look at Facebook, get sick of Facebook, then write again 'cause you're better than Facebook, and your solo show will show Facebook who's boss, and inevitably remember that you want this solo show to be important. So then you think. You think of what bothers you, what you love, what personal story you want to say, and what you think is funny and why. It becomes a very personal journey and opens up space for a lot of questioning.

When selecting a director for your solo show, consider not only someone's skills and talent, but also whether you trust them and feel comfortable with them. The rehearsal process may mean countless hours in the rehearsal space where it's only you and this other person. Directors also become an entrusted friend, or even a kind of therapist. Let me explain.

When I ask, "What are you trying to say?" in the rehearsal process, I continually dig deeper into your joke, story, or character to find your pure message. What I often find is that behind a comedic bit is a sugar-coated personal issue, a suppressed incident, or passionate emotion about a person, place, or event that's a part of this actor's history and/or identity. This history and these emotions represent the core of the actor's message: this is what the solo show is trying to say. I help the performer to make the connection to that material strong so that the ownership of their piece is preserved. By preserving this message, the performer now knows what to hold true for themselves and what to safeguard, no matter what the audience's reaction is.

When writing a solo show, we can overanalyze our lives and get depressed thinking of the past. We can feel exposed. We can feel deeply rejected if these vulnerable parts of ourselves that we've put in our solo show are not received well by the audience. When you explore yourself in preparing your solo show, make sure to practice self care along the way. And remember: **YOU. ARE. NOT. ALONE** in having these worries and feeling these things in the process of writing your show!

## FOCUS & STRUCTURE

I understand that bits can come out of the ether and jokes can appear in our minds out of nowhere because we just think they're funny, jokes that don't relate to what the show is inherently about. These are totally valid thoughts and I urge you to hold on to these smaller jigsaw puzzle pieces, because what we want to do is build into the bigger show. But The show as a whole is what we want the audience to remember when they walk away from your performance. "What are you trying to say?" can be your guide. When we have so many ideas and characters that have no relation to each other, we can tweak these items toward the mission statement to help add more value to the show as a whole.

Your mission statement can also help the narrative or timeline of your show. Much like an ensemble sketch show, a solo performance can have varying elements with different energies, tones, levels of funny, and presentation qualities. This is how we build variety. As the only person on stage, you want to ensure that you guide your audience into how to watch your show from the beginning. So most times, your opener is a character, song, or story that presents your mission statement so they can understand or make connections to that statement as the show progresses. Most typical solo show formats will also reinforce the mission statement at the end of the show. So, that becomes your closer. And in making sure your audience is still invested, the character or solo presentation with the most energy can be in the middle of the running order. Then fill the in-betweens with meat that makes the show flow naturally and you've got your solo show.

Here's a loose solo show Running Order that you can play with:

**OPENER:** Be yourself introducing your mission statement OR an opening song OR a mix of both. Something with mid- to high-energy, unless you want to create an intimate connection with your audience.

**VARIABLE SPOTS:** This can be your characters, storytelling, more music, etc. feeding into your mission statement. If you present an idea that's more abstract, careful to not lose your audience's trust too fast. Much like abstract art, the audience will interpret it the way they want to if you don't guide them on how to understand an idea and if you don't set them up correctly, they can begin to lose interest if they're not on board.

**MID-POINT:** Spike the energy of your show back up with a loud character OR fast paced scene OR music OR a special skill set. By doing this, your audience will re-invest and recharge their attention for the second half of your show.

**VARIABLE SPOTS:** By this point you have the audience's trust and they have an understanding of what the show is about, so this is where the meat in-between can be random. Just be careful to not do anything too over-the-top wild that will make the audience lose trust quickly. If you and your Director built a way for your audience to inherently watch your show, you don't want to do something that will confuse them. Audiences can be upset if they have the wool pulled over their eyes. And have a good set of mid-level energy scenes going into the Closer. By pacing and heightening the energy going to the end of your show, the audience will feel more upbeat when the show is done.

**CLOSER:** A clean, simple method to close is to bookend your show in similar fashion to the way you started it. This can be a closing song OR being yourself with a final message OR a mix of both.

Please keep in mind that this is only one example of a solo show structure. The running order can again depend on, "What are you

trying to say?" as well as what you want your audience to walk away with.

The structure of your running order creates this personal symphony of characters, stories, songs, and solo art forms. Remember, this is YOUR story. Make sure you're proud of what you're putting up and acknowledge that this is your platform to own. People came out to see what you have to say.

“One can use standard principles and textbooks in educating people for law, medicine, architecture, chemistry or almost any other profession—but not for the theater. For, in most professions, every practitioner uses the same tools and techniques, while the actor’s chief instrument is himself. And since no two persons are alike, no universal rule is applicable to any two actors in exactly the same way.” - Sanford Meisner, Sanford Meisner on Acting

## WRITE

The last and most important piece of advice that I'd like to give in putting together your solo show will be easier said than done: WRITE! Write, write, write! Don't overthink structure or how things connect or what's funny or not. Just write! It will give your process more clarity and help tighten solo pieces through multiple edits. Also, in having all your material written out, it will make the organizing less of a headache and you can visually see how the flow of your show is. The writing process can be just as intimate as figuring out “What are you trying to say?” since you're basically talking to the voice in your head. But realize that unless you're doing a completely improvised piece, you need to write!

## WHEN THE GOING GETS ROUGH

“Hey Jonald, I read all this, did all the things said, and still not really sure how I feel about everything.”

Writing a solo show can be a presentation of a lot of your innermost secrets, your silliest & dumbest ideas, and thoughts that you normally wouldn't share. If you understand the vulnerability aspect of what you want to say to your audience, you could be opening yourself up with a lot of anxiety. But honestly, don't forget that your voice matters!

If you've been doing comedy for awhile and have gotten to this decision to put together a solo show, you've already succeeded in the first step which is 'the want' to do it. Don't do it because you feel like you have to or that it's the only way for producers or agents to see you. Do it for you! A solo show is a great challenge in strengthening your voice as a performer, in working on your acting chops, and in cultivating your own material.

When I have my first sit down with an artist doing their first solo show, I always ask them, “Why a solo show and why now in your comedy career?” If you think about this in the beginning of your process, you can revisit it when you feel stuck or unsure of yourself. Hold yourself accountable to what you said in the beginning so that you finish what you start. And also know that you don't need to be held to only having one solo show. You can always have another solo show in the future. Don't put too much pressure on yourself on making this the be all end all of solo shows.

But still do your best in putting together the best version of yourself in the current state you're in.

If you put the work in and really focus on constructing a piece of performance art that you can be proud to call all your own, then you've achieved the ultimate goal of self-satisfaction. And don't forget how amazing you are! We forget to do self-care when we're overly inundated with all these improv & sketch shows that we do. Be sure to do a mental check because putting together a solo show can certainly be an emotional roller coaster.

## RECAP

Vulnerability. Self-Analysis. Focus & Structure. Write! And Self-Care. Now go and do!