

the complete  
Hambook



the complete  
Hambook

*(a magazine for improvisers)*

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*For every dog that has  
ever interrupted an  
improv set.*



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# Foreword

## AMY DO

Hello! Welcome to *The Hambook*.

My name is Amy. I've been an editor for the past two issues or so. It's been a buckwild journey. Here is a belated introduction to the three other editors of *The Hambook* mag:

- Head curator of Camp Ham, Lee makes really good bread. He has a strong backbone of values and morals, and takes his own passions and voice seriously. He uses words deliberately, pausing to make sure that language is doing what he needs it to do. I value how much weight he gives to his own opinions, and how much he loves BigAssMessage.com. He has an incredible collection of jazz records.
- The owner of the Hamtorium, Sarah exudes compassion, wisdom, kindness, and empathy like no other human I've ever met. Her aura is palpable, and the way she can go from razor-sharp intellectual analysis to geeking out over crushes is incredible. I remember watching her funnel oreos into her mouth fully horizontal while whispering to herself in a witchy voice about something, and thinking, "That is me. I do

that. But usually not in front of people.” She likes “Super Chunk” peanut butter and unsweetened vanilla almond milk.

- Benevolent Google Calendar ruler of *The Hambook*, Thomas was really intimidating when I first met him. The emails full of exclamation points were at odds with the thick sideburns, killer mustache, and love of donuts. As I type this, he’s tucked into a corner of Lee’s blood-red loveseat in a teal t-shirt probably typing “add quotation marks” on someone’s essay. I thought all copy editors were weird, nitpicky hobgoblins until I met Thomas. Some people just exude presence, I don’t know- like, the way they take up space is unique. Thomas is like that.

I’m honored to have been in the company of these folk once a week for many weeks. Together we have gathered, read, and re-read every single essay that is published in *The Hambook*.

I came into the editing team much later into the mag’s life and was welcomed with open arms. There was never a sense of othering or pulling rank- the team listened to my (sometimes brash, always half-formed) opinions and worked to get to the root of what I was actually trying to say. I know that every contributor has felt that same sense of respect and validation.

The essays published in *The Hambook* are little windows into the minds of talented people. I think there is something to be gained from every story, every weird diagram, and every clothing survey contained therein. I hope that people still read and learn from it even when new issues aren’t being published. Thank you.



## SARAH WAGENER

The experience of being an editor for *The Hambook* has been an incredible one. Very little in life brings me more joy than storytelling. It has been an absolute privilege to read the stories of those who chose to share them with our publication, to learn the stories of the other editors, and to come to understand more of my own story in improv and in life through editing essays for *The Hambook*.

Authors: thank you for sharing yourselves and your stories with us. It takes courage to commit to the process of writing, and patience and skill to put pen to paper/finger to laptop to get your ideas out of your head and onto the page. This publication would not exist without your efforts. Thank you for trusting us to be collaborators in the editing process and custodians of your work. You made me laugh, moved me, provoked me to think in new ways.

Lee: thank you for birthing *The Hambook* and being willing to enlist me as a co-parent for this publication when we met at Chicago Bagel Authority all those years ago. Your kindness, critical eye, willingness to own and speak your truth, and creative vision have been so impactful for me as a person and creative professional. Your warm support has meant so much to me.

Thomas: thank you for seeing abilities in me as an editor and person that I do not always see in myself. You champion others in ways that are sincere and encouraging. Your organizational skills have kept this ship from sinking, and your keen listening ear and positive attitude have made this a cozy, most pleasant journey.

Amy: thank you for being bold and being authentically you. You are wise beyond your years, and I am deeply in awe

*Sarah Wagener*

of all that you are and all that you are becoming as a person and artist. I have learned so much from you about editing and existing, and hope our creative paths cross again soon.

Readers: thank you for bearing witness. Thank you for your curiosity and open mind and enthusiasm. Thank you for celebrating the work.

On to the next adventure!

## THOMAS KELLY

In *Guru: My Days with Del Close* (Griggs, 2005), Del Close says,

“It’s the same way for ImprovOlympic. One day Charna and I will wake up and see that the old way we used to teach is archaic and outdated. It’s advancing and developing so rapidly that the only way to allow it to survive and thrive is for Charna and I to step aside and let the new guard lead it past the threshold.

I remember when Viola Spolin would come to do workshops with us while I was working here in the early sixties. She would run us through these exercises, and we would stand behind her and roll our eyes. Her style was so outdated and she was so out of touch, and we felt that her old idea of how it all should be done was stifling creativity. Very soon Charna and I will be in the same position as Viola. It will be humbling, but I’ll gladly step aside because I’ll know that improvisation as an art form has made a giant leap forward. My only fear is that I won’t realize I’ve become antiquated and that I’ll be running around looking like an old fool.”

Recently, I saw a show at an apartment/rehearsal space where 10 years before I had gone to a party. I didn’t know many people at the party so I clung to the only person I knew, my friend from improv class. I followed him from room to room talking about improv and how cool I thought it was and what cool possibilities I saw for it that I didn’t see around town. Why aren’t people playing like this?! Can this complex thing be made better if it was improvised?! I have a vivid memory of my friend being like, “Yeah yeah ok,” and smoking a joint on a bed while I shined a light on topics no one had ever even thought about addressing with improv.

Real genius stuff! I'm sure I was being annoying but I didn't know anyone else at the party and I was excited, excited about improv (that friend was Mike Brunlieb, one of my oldest friends and a consistent collaborator!). I was really excited to talk about, to be inspired by, and to have hope and ambition for improv! I was young and I knew everything. I was just beginning to explore a medium that was limitless.

I wasn't at the beginning of *The Hambook*, or rather, I wasn't on the administrative side putting input in a mission statement. Lee asked me to write an article about some improv experiments I had done, but I really liked the idea of place where ideas about improv could grow and develop! All the books on improv are just ok to kind of bad. The good books are filled with these mile markers of big takeaways from someone's career in and with improv. The bedrock thoughts that are strong enough to endure scrutiny and wise enough inspire something in someone else. Those are great but there's also a lot more around and in between these points that's harder to quantify.

Improv makes little things funny. Things that, once you try to repeat them in a written context, have already lost their glimmer, or if you try to explain them, they fall so flat that you have to assure your listener that in their moment they were wonderful. I think that's true of the books too, that when you're writing and editing your book, you keep the chapter on "yes and" and leave out the chapter on how to enter through a door in a funny way. So when I attached myself to *The Hambook*, I wanted it to chronicle the larval and the bedrock, to lift the small things and evolve the big things to be an explosion of thought and exploration.

Looking into this bedroom where I was young and excited, I think about where I am now and how I don't talk

about improv that much anymore. I don't know if I have enough material to spout at someone for a whole evening anymore. I tried some of my big ideas with different results and recently, I hit a big old slump. When performing, I'd reach into my tool box and it would be empty or what I found wasn't working the same way I thought it would. I was still able to finish the show in a way that was satisfactory, but it felt like Work.

When you begin to study improvisation, our teachers and the mantras are always about the unknown and doing something that scares you. I thought this was cool and jumped in. It was scary and exciting, and then I found tricks and tools to make it easier on myself and more successful. But then, the slump comes! Things that had worked stop working and we have to return to the unknown and it sucks and it's super uncomfortable! But this is where we started. This is what we've trained for. We have definite infrastructure in place for this. Can't we just be humble and accept the unknown again?!

I took breaks and found some stability in my life. In the calm, I heard some whispers of things I'd forgotten. I began to identify the obstacles that were in my way so I could clear them out. I would go see shows where people were having fun and I would think, "Wait a minute! I know how to do that! Why am I not doing that?!" Now, it's beginning to be fun again. It's beginning to be silly again! I wonder at the root of it all if it's a tale of two Del Closes, the one who's excited, inspired, and innovating and the one who's stuck, stifling, and forcing the new to play like the old. Very funny and smart people point to Del as this guru, this genius who inspired them and helped them discover their greatest selves. And very funny and smart people point to Del as a villain. The

authoritarian teacher who crushed a sense of joy in them, who made it hard for them to have fun in a free and open art form. I think for me, it's easier to point to external forces like gurus, teachers and theaters as what is "wrong" and feel blameless and righteous than it is to recognize my old ways of thinking that are stifling new paths that might inspire me to have fun, learn, and create. So I'm trying to be sympathetic to my past, my successes, and failures as I move away from them and on to the next thing!

So, *The Hambooke* is ending. It's a time for us to look back and remember the intention that we had at the beginning and wonder if we did it or if it became something else. I don't have a clear answer on that right now, but it's been fun to go back to visit the beginning a little here at the end.

Thank you to the authors who explored their ideas with us, who set something down on paper for us to engage with. It's not easy to write and rewrite an essay and we really appreciate that you took the time to do it!

Thank you to the artists who submitted your work for us to use! It was all so beautiful and made us feel like a real magazine!

Thank you to my fellow editors and administrators! There's a lot that goes into making this magazine happen and I am so thankful for your diligence and skills. So often, I would hit a brick wall with something and someone else was able to help or take it on so we could get these issues out. It was wonderful to meet and laugh and make this magazine that I'm very proud of with you.

Thank you to the readers! I hope you found something that inspired you, or exposed you to new way of thinking, or affirmed that who you are is great and other people think that

*Thomas Kelly*

way too! I hope this art form and this community can continue to inspire and grow into a new and greater version of itself!

## LEE BENZAQUIN

### How to Make an Improv Magazine

Definitely start with a team, from the get-go. I made the first issue myself, and it was torture having to edit just four essays all on my own. I think I pushed my own deadlines back several times because I couldn't meet them. So, get some like-minded people who can keep you in check, ideally with a shared interest in hearing diverse opinions and a deep understanding of how to edit writing. Look for people who can see what someone's *trying* to say, even if they're not doing a good job of saying it just yet. Look for people with lots of love in their hearts, who want to work hard for absolutely no money or recognition whatsoever. I have no clue where you can find people like this; I just got very, very lucky.

Look for authors with diverse opinions. Find the ones who have never taught an improv class, but still have something interesting to share. Try your best to pit opinions against each other, to provide a more broad and thought-provoking look at the art form. Reach out to artists that you admire, but also leave a submission open so that you can find people you've never heard of; those people are the ones who will write stuff that really blows you away. Make sure every writer is willing to rewrite over and over again until they produce something clear, concise, professional and unique. I have no clue where you can find people like this; I just got very, very lucky.

Ask for donations as soon as possible, because it costs a lot of money to make a magazine, whether you want it to look nice or not. It costs a couple hundred bucks a year to host a website, it costs money to print advertisements or promote your social media posts; it just costs money to



spread word. Find artists willing to donate cover designs and illustrations. Seek out theater owners willing to donate space because they believe in your cause, kind readers willing to donate money every time a new issue is published, and friends who work at coffee shops who will give you a free cup while you sit for hours and hog their free wifi. I have no clue where you can find people like this; I just got very, very lucky.

Don't make it about you. No matter how great you are, leave your opinions out of it. I mean, feel free to write an essay in the final issue, if you're positive your ideas will change the face of improv as we know it, but for the most part you should focus on creating a platform that *others* can use. There's enough books and websites that promote single opinions on improv; your publication's purpose is to show the world that there are many approaches to art, and they're all equally valid. You'll learn more by listening than you will by talking, anyway.

Just do it, and have a good time doing it. Look forward to going to your friends' places every week and working quietly for an hour or two. Don't get stressed when you have to push your publication date back a month or two; readers forget about that stuff, anyway. Do it because you care about it. Do it because, as it turns out, there really *are* other people out there who think about it as much as you do. Do it because, when you publish ideas, you get to trace the history of the art form more seriously; you can point to exact essays when someone first formally laid down a concept or idiom, and you can more accurately track progress and give credit where credit is due. Do it because, if you don't do it, maybe nobody else will.

And when it's done, when you've done as much as you can do, encourage someone else to do it. Because a project

like this might be the *only* way to encourage growth in an art form that is plagued by the notion that liking it “too much” makes you super uncool. Tell everyone how much fun you had, how grateful you were, and how rewarding it was, and hope that someone out there will carry the torch on through new generations, and do things you never even considered possible.

But to be honest, I have no actual idea how to do any of this. I never did, from the beginning. I learned a lot, made a lot of mistakes, and grew a lot as an artist and a person. I made this whole thing up as I went along, and now—as I watch the lights go out on it—all I can think about is how very, very lucky I have been.

STEVE NELSON

# Use It

Talent begs to be used  
regardless of media or magnitude  
from the smallest spark  
to the roaring blaze

Talent begs to be used  
the creative urge  
not impossible to ignore  
but irresponsible to stifle

For talent begs to be used  
and cannot lie fallow  
lest we succumb to apathy  
lulled by comfort to inaction

Talent begs to be used  
subject to degrees  
neither Fame  
nor appreciation guaranteed

But talent must be used  
action plied with ability  
allowing us to live free  
Divine gifts must see the light  
outside of taste or critics blight



On  
New Beginnings



EMMA POPE

# The Invitation

When I was a kid, I felt embarrassed by how much I loved to replicate movie scenes that moved me. I would stand, all 86 pounds of ribs and elbows, next to the bathtub, the ceiling heater blasting to mask my voice from the rest of my family, and imitate dramatic performances that I felt I would have been perfectly capable of doing on screen, had life dealt me the hand of an aggressive 4th grade drama teacher and pushy stage parents. I would have loved to have been a child actor; to slip into someone else's skin and speak their words, to wear an outfit I never would have chosen for myself, to intentionally disguise who I was and confidently become someone new. But alas, my parents were educators, encouraging my sister and I to find our voices through reading, community, music, sports and school. And instead of a pushy drama coach, I had a 4th grade teacher who truly changed my life through her compassion, guidance, and love of great books. The life I lead for 21 years was fulfilling and interesting, full of love and happy family dinners, good friends and exciting vacations. In no way did I want-for anything on paper, and yet a nagging tug remained. A tiny flicker, an unrecognized pull, an unspoken wish tickled something deep in my belly.

The belief I held at my core (which I've only been able to put words to in the last couple of years) was that everyone wants to be an artist, but only a few select people are chosen to do it. The rest of us, I assumed, were sentenced to live perfectly content lives without the passion that a career in the arts would have brought. I honest-to-goodness thought that if it were meant to happen to me, I would be stopped outside of the Limited Too by a talent agent (a New York type, someone with moon-sized sunglasses and a bag full of headshots), and this person would see beneath my shy exterior to the true, shimmering actor I was underneath. The Christina Riccis, the Jena Malones of the world, they were separated from me only by the luck of being in the right place at the right time, and then ushered into situations where their talent could blossom. The idea of actively pursuing an artistic lifestyle where you could live out your wildest dreams seemed self-indulgent, especially in a world where there is such a for social workers. When I feel this way today, I remember a Howard Thurman quote that means so much to me: "Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who have come alive."<sup>1</sup> Being onstage makes me feel alive. I want to 1 perform. Even to say the words now feels selfish. But I did, and I do.

In 2010, I was living in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, when a friend of mine asked me to sit in a rehearsal with his improv team, thus ushering me into a world I no longer wanted to ignore. He had a lot of experience in the theater, and I loved being around him—feeling that osmosis would send some of his on-stage confidence my way. We would spend our time together wading through creeks during the Wyoming spring, practicing our Australian accents and making each other laugh



with nonsense bits. I was 25 years old, and when he suggested that I sit-in for a few improv rehearsals, I became nauseous in a way that made me feel that this might be worth pursuing. I very much recognized that this invitation was what I had been waiting for, and with as clear a sign as that, I was unable to talk myself out of it. That first rehearsal, which truly I cannot remember one minute of (kind of a panic, black-out situation), spiraled into what is now my “How did you end up in Chicago?” answer, but more importantly, this was the moment when I first allowed myself to recognize how badly I had quietly wanted to be a performer my whole life.

There were a few key thought barriers that I (as well as, I imagine, many new improvisers) needed to break down as I learned to navigate the world of long form. I had finally gotten to a place where I could realize this secret dream of mine, but my brain had constructed some structures over two decades that initially worked against me. The first year of living and studying in Chicago is filled with some of the most important lessons and failures that I have experienced as a performer. A few of these lessons, garnered from teachers, experience, and observation, have stuck with me over the years, enriching work that I do in new and interesting ways as I continue to grow.

The first of these was the expectation I had set for myself as a comedic performer. Having been quieted for so many years, my now-active passion for the stage set some lofty goals for my immediate success in Chicago. I envisioned myself, punch line after punch line, throwing my audiences into fits of uncontrolled mania. My initial scenes and pieces were one long attempt at getting laughs. Pre-planned bits, funny one-liners, silly voices, I did them all. I wanted to make people laugh all the time. But guess who can smell someone

trying to be funny? EVERYONE. I hold a place in my heart for teachers who watch a new group of students make the same mistakes time and time again, and with patience, guide them to greener pastures. My iO intensive teachers were certainly of this variety, lucky for me.

My thirst for instant comedic stardom initially lead me astray from the principles our teachers kept reiterating: be believable, stay in the moment, connect with each other, DON'T WORRY ABOUT BEING FUNNY. I remember being coached by a fantastic and brilliant woman through a scene where I spent 4 minutes describing the hilarious things a pair of birds were doing in a tree near by. "That's really cool," she said afterwards, "but I'm more interested in what's going on between the two of YOU." Agree to disagree, I thought. Different strokes. Who would want to watch two people on a park bench talk about their relationship where there were imaginary birds telling each other to "talk to the hand" nearby?

I wish I could say this was an easy lesson to learn, that I took the note once and let go of the belief that a funny accent trumps whatever you are saying. But there was a decent amount of ego wrapped up in my ideologies, and part of me wanted to believe that I had driven 1,000 miles from Wyoming to a dark theater in Wrigleville because I knew something that other people didn't know. My all-or-nothing outlook from earlier in life had inadvertently given me the belief that once I was "recognized," the talent that had been churning beneath the surface would be so great that there would be little left to learn. Learning what I don't know continues to be one of my biggest challenges. It's like walking backwards through your brain until you're at the simplest seed of an idea, knocking down everything you've assumed. Yes, I

am passionate about performance and comedy and yes, I should pursue them but no, I might not know it all yet. It is hard to tamp down a confidence that is born of 21 years of killer solo bathroom material, but tamp down we must. There are still times today when I find myself playing in a way that is born from the need for a laugh, the fear of a quiet audience; for me, there is a very specific stomach discomfort that comes along with this sort of play, the same feeling that accompanies cheating at a family board game to beat your cousin and dad. For the most part, we are all here to have fun, to grow and learn, and by winning that round, I have cheated myself out of the good monopoly there is to be played. I try to be in constant check that what I'm doing is born from my own inspiration, and nothing else.

There is another way that ego can knot up an improvised piece and that's involved in the principle of agreement. Our lifelong motto as improvisers is "yes, and," as in "yes, what you have said is true AND here's a little more information to add detail to our situation." This two bit phrase packs quite a little punch, and there are layers to it that I couldn't see right away. Initially, the struggle is to accept the reality set forth by your scene partner without question. My ego hurdle on this one involves a lot of letting go: of what I had planned, of what I want, of what I think is "right" or "best," of what I can change to make the scene "better." I remember doing scene after scene and feeling panicked by the simple conversation that was taking place between, say, roommates, and introducing a secret drug addiction or an argument over lovers to fuel the fire of the scene. Ironically, this is usually when the scene takes a loud nose-dive, and we miss seeing what could have been a very interesting interaction between people who know and love each other. Even in a "transaction

scene,” where the characters are strangers to each other, the scene can live and thrive without a frenzied confession coming into the mix 1½ minutes in. What is there is there, and it’s enough.

There are many reasons this philosophy is needed in order for a scene to move along, and I find these reasons compelling enough to use in my day-to-day life as well. We have to trust each other, as performers. If I am initiating a scene with the idea that we are in an office break room, and a teammate denies that by saying something that contradicts what I’ve set up (ie: “Boss, you wanted to see me?” met with “What are you talking about? I’m your cousin and we’re in a pizza parlor!”), what am I to believe about what I’ve just done? That it wasn’t good enough? That there is a “correct” way to do this imaginary play form? If we as a team value finding the “best” idea over anything else, we are doomed never to find it. Best ideas come from anything, and are amplified by our collective enthusiasm to grow them together. Furthermore, our lack of cohesive collaborative thinking robs the audience of any opportunity to invest in what we have established, knowing that at any moment, it might no longer be true. Of course, this is one opinion, and not an across-the-board rule, but for my money, this type of play is satisfying in a way that nothing else is.

There are, however, times when this “yes” has its limitations. When I first started improvising, I took this motto as biblical truth, unquestioned and unwavering. Of course, being the basis for all of long-form improvisation, this has given me the gift of feeling trusting enough to make moves that I know my teammates will enthusiastically join in on. That has been such a gift, especially as a slow beginner to this game. Unfortunately, it also has, on occasion, left me in

scenes that I would much rather have not been in, forced to play out whatever someone set forth, regardless of my comfort. Recently, in the Chicago community, there have been discussions about the discomfort that people of color and women have felt in the improv scene. I think that this can be, unfortunately, a symptom of the idea that we must always agree with what is set forth, even when it is hurtful, inappropriate, uncomfortable, racist, etc. The trust that is required for “yes, and” to work doesn’t do its job if it is the basis of a scene where an actor feels isolated and betrayed, forced to play along in a game they didn’t ask for. It doesn’t seem like we have collectively figured out how to address this issue and still remain true to our team motto, my hope is that our credo will end up morphing into something along the lines of “yes, (when it’s ok) and...” I personally can’t imagine a scenario where good work is done if any one person involved feels uneasy or attacked. In my mind, we either work together to celebrate our humanity as individuals with love and respect, and make way for our comedy through that, or we shouldn’t do it at all. To paraphrase Howard Thurman: What the world does not need is more mediocre jokes. What the world needs is people working together to create comedy that reflects humanity. But maybe that’s just what makes me come alive.

The third lesson, another one that I continue to grapple with to this day, is that what you have is enough. One day, in the summer of 2011, my teacher had us do an exercise called “Non-Sequiturs,” where scene partners say nonsense, non-related sentences, words, or sounds back and forth. “Everything is right!” he said, “Stop thinking- there are infinite things to say!” What we communicated to each other, then, was not contingent on the words we said, but the

emotion that was behind them. Words were second in importance, and my brain could shut down the need to find the next and best thing to say. The moves we made, the words we say, the way we look is more powerful when it is driven by our guts, our feelings, rather than by what we have invented in our head.

What a gift that long-form has given me. Before the scene starts, everything in the universe is at your disposal. The empty improv stage is a vibrating, jiggling machine of raw potential. If you want it, it is there. Everybody feels it, knows what it means to come out to a blank canvas, to have infinite possibilities at your fingertips. I had felt that potential my whole life, vibrating softly in my bones, ready to burst at the seams. We take our lessons with us in our pockets- the ones that have resonated deeply with us. They sit in our subconscious, lightly pulling the reigns this way and that. When I take the stage now, as I tell my mind to be clear, I am so grateful to be here.

DINA FACKLIS

# The Freshman Five

## 5 THINGS THAT GET IN THE WAY OF EVERY BEGINNING IMPROVISER

If I could go back in time and tell my 24-year old improviser self some things, you bet your bottom dollar I would probably never stop talking. Let's just put it this way: MISTAKES WERE MADE! Trust me, these will all be spoken to later. And, in a lot of ways, these errors made me better, so I'm grateful for them.

What's funny is that I've now been teaching improv for over ten years and many of these mistakes are now being made by many of my students. In other words, *by golly, I believe I've discovered a pattern...*

And I'm going to call this "pattern," or these common mistakes, **THE FRESHMAN FIVE**. Shall we discuss?

### 1. Getting Hung Up On The Rules

God knows we teachers throw an EFFLOAD of rules at you students. There are the general ones—the "yes's" and "keep it in the now's"—and then there are rules within each of the zillions of forms you can learn. Then we load you up with

specific ways different devices can be utilized. **IT'S A LOT AND IT CAN FUCK YOUR MIND.**

Now get ready for this shit, because it's corny as hell, but it helps if you don't think about these things as "rules" but as "tools" or "devices" that are there to help you. It changes our perspective from, "Oh, hey, I better not do this," to, "Hey, this might help me right now."

**For example:** We're told all the time to supply a "*why*" in a scene... that it will help inform our POV ("*point of view*"). And nothing could be truer. "*Why's*" help you.

I often use this example. Let's say a woman wants to save her family farm. Her "why" in the Lifetime movie version of this story:

*It's been in her family forever and it has sentimental value.*

Her "why" in the Kristen Wiig version of this story:

*Her whole family thinks she is a big screw-up and she is going to prove them wrong.*

"*Why's*" help you have more fun in the scene. They are helpers... they are not rules. What's more is that they are habits you can easily develop. I do a little check-in with myself 3 lines into a scene: have I communicated my "*why*" yet?

Simple perspective shift: rules are less rules, more tools and good habits.

## 2. Making Things Too Precious

*It's showtime, folks!*

The lights, the crowd, that magical energy in the air. It feels amazing.



However, here's the downside: it can also feel like a lot of pressure. We say to ourselves, "It's a show, goshdarnit—let's give these people an amazingly perfect and hilarious show."

More often than not, this makes *"the show"* so important that fear and hesitation take over and this renders good improv decisions impossible.

We say to ourselves, "I have to make the perfect move right here," or, "Oh no, they're not laughing..." It's too much to put on ourselves and it also puts us in our heads, and guess what? You got it: we stop listening!! It's essentially a panic attack, improv-style.

If you look at more experienced improvisers, you'll see them playing *to* the piece—they give themselves up to it. In other words, they stop making the show too precious and this translates to the perfect amount of confidence. Because they realize it's all an improviser is capable of, and by reminding themselves this, they stop caring *by* caring the exact right amount. And a big part of that comes from the knowledge that there will always be another show and another opportunity. Remember that, and enjoy the show.

And side note: it doesn't hurt to make it all about **YOU** having fun. Forget the audience. Fun is contagious.

### 3. Redemption Island

#### *A little extension on #2*

"Redemption Island" mode is when you have a scene up top in a show that you don't feel great about, so you spend the rest of the show (or class) trying to make up for it. You pull out your "arsenal" of hilarious characters that don't serve the themes of the show—you start going for laughs instead of focusing on POV and serving your scene partner. You stop

being an ensemble member. It's like you're fixing something, and that, my friends, leads to desperation mode. And when has desperation ever been attractive or productive?

More importantly, this "mode" is DANGEROUS—again, it takes you out of the piece and you stop listening; you just focus on yourself.

#### 4. PLOT PLOT PLOT PLOT PLOT PLOT

When we start out, we think that, in order to make our scenes stage-worthy, they have to have a plot: We go into *Everybody-Loves-Raymond-Mode* and think we have to have some elaborate storyline: someone can't find something (usually a contact lens), or the boss is going to be here in five minutes and the report isn't done, or the dreaded personality-less transaction scene. We front-load our scenes with *problem* instead of emotion and POV and that is where we massively shit the bed.

Don't get me wrong; we can have plot, but we can't only have plot.

We want characters—characters like George Costanza and Leslie Knope—characters that really, really want something. Something that influences their entire being, not just the moment at hand. Usually, this is something is specifically silly and that makes it even more delicious. George Costanza: he wants people to respect him. What's his go-to fake job? An architect, because he thinks that sounds so smart. And his go-to fake workplace: *Vandelay Industries*, because it sounds respectable.

I like to say "When in doubt, care way too much about something silly," like George Constanza. And let that silly care inform how you deal with the scene/plot.

## 5. Making Goals Instead of Listening

Remember when I mentioned all the mistakes I made? Well, I've covered four of them so far, but there was one that trumped them all:

I tried to control improv.

I would “overdrive” and force scenes with complex initiations, make moves that weren't me just because I saw more skilled improvisers make them. I would try to do something because I thought it was cool—but it in no way served the piece. I tried to make improv my bitch, and guess what?

Improvisation **CANNOT BE CONTROLLED!** It's improv. You can't predict its outcome, nor can you rush its progress. You have to, as they say, go with the flow.

I remember when I had my first round of long-form shows at iO. I would spend the days before shows thinking about all the great characters I'd try, and I'd imagine impressing my friends or family members, or even better: my boyfriend (okay; I thought he was my boyfriend). Great plot ideas would come to mind—**BEFORE I EVEN HEARD THE SUGGESTION!** I'd revel in fantasies in which I'd make all these great connections and big thematic moves—I daresay I even would set out to create art. And forget the ensemble and me engaging with said ensemble, I was going to do this on my own; be the improv hero. A one-woman improv show with 9 other people who were onstage with me for no reason.

And improv isn't about any of that. It's about being in the moment, reacting to what just happened, listening to your scene and ensemble partners, and giving yourself up to the piece. It's a machine you create with your ensemble and **everything that happens is what's supposed to happen.**

Have you ever seen a great show where amazing connections were made and then asked someone in it, “Hey, did you plan that?” I have a thousand bucks that they said, “No.”

That’s improv. Everything happens because of what happened **JUST BEFORE IT**. Not because anyone planned it days, hours, or even five minutes in advance.

Example:

Let’s say I was going to a bar with friends and before we went I set up the goal, “Hey, I’m going to fall in love tonight.” Pretty lofty goal, and an outcome that you could never predict... and there’s even a saying out there, “It happens when you least expect it.”

So I get to the bar, I ignore I friends and look over their heads for the “perfect” dude. I stop having fun because I don’t even attempt to engage in anything that’s happening because of this impossible goal. The night doesn’t end like I thought it would, so I leave defeated, discouraged and disappointed and my confidence is shot for the next coupla days.

Sounds like a pretty shitty improv show, right?

I now say one thing before I go onstage (and before I got to bars, before I go to work, before I go go out for coffee and dinner, etc) and I tell all my students to say the same thing. Say it a hundred times. Then do it...

**“LISTEN.”**

Because it’s all you can do.

MIKE JIMERSON

# To Imagination Town and Back

I was introduced to improv when I was 28. My wife (girlfriend at the time!) was designing a poster for the Kansas City Improv Festival, and she suggested that this might be something I'd be into. Cary connected me with a woman who took me along to what she called 'Fight Club,' just a judgment-free improv fuckaround kind of thing. I had never done anything like this, and when the group formed a circle and starting warming up with Where Have Your Fingers Been, I was genuinely horrified and embarrassed; that feeling of *where the fuck am I, I want to be home RIGHT NOW*. However, a couple of finger scenes deep, I began to sing along and by the time it got around to me I was frothing a good 20 decibels louder than anyone. It took me a minute to let my guard down, stop being judgmental and just do something fun. This is where it started for me. Like a house cat whose pupils dilate wildly before a pounce, I think I was just gobsmacked by the scope of this silly game. Sure, we were adults singing about our fingers, but our fingers could

be anything, anywhere we could imagine. It was wonderfully liberating and playful. Childlike, even.

In the following year I started playing with Comedy City (a former Sportz franchisee) and shortly after branching out into the small but devoted long-form scene in town. At this point in my nascent improv experience, my scene work was all kinds of idea-based. Some kind of gamey improv-joust where players smashed ideas together and if anybody got out alive we deemed it a success. Outrageous, fantastical characters (caricatures, to be sure) and scenario-heavy initiations required an effort on the part of us players that led to hit-or-miss results. I really had no understanding of why some scenes felt great and others lacking; no analytical grasp of what made the fun ones fun.

About a year into this I had the opportunity to take a workshop with TJ Jagodowski, and what really stuck with me after that workshop is that scenes at their core, no matter what, are really just people talking to each other. It also clarified for me, though in words I wouldn't have used at the time, that great scenes are built in front of an audience, not delivered to them.

An exercise that I have shamelessly stolen from TJ and used many many times called Great Party Last Night will help me elaborate on what I mean by 'built' vs 'delivered.' Great Party is extremely simple: one person stands at a sink, neutral. The second person enters and says, "Great party last night." A scene follows. That's it! So much can be conveyed in that one line, a line that is totally neutral on paper. So, obviously, it isn't what the person says in this case, but how they said it.

In one memorable example a few years ago, Person A paused before delivering it, looking rather longingly at the

door jamb and the surrounding imagined room. The immediate sense was that these two people are leaving their home. It was simple, emotional and sincere. This moment breathed to life in front of players and audience alike. This is what I mean by built; the scene emerged line by line. It takes shape in real time in front of all of us.

In my earlier frenzy of imagination, I had been quick to set the stage, to paint the scene, to bring my imagined image to life. I would initiate, for example, as a troll perched in the entrance of a cave “Beware, brave knight, all who enter here are doomed. What brings you to my cave?!” Sure, this is imaginative in the sense that trolls don’t exist, but it places undue importance on what we are doing. It is basically declaring to your fellow players AND the audience, “This is where and who we are! Now that we’ve cleared that up, let’s behave in a way that serves this setting.” It puts the focus on the details and information of the scene; the *what*. The improvising that follows simply justifies those details. I certainly won’t say that it is impossible for this scene to be funny—funny people are funny people—but I will say it would be hard to make it interesting.

This is what I mean when I say that scene’s aren’t delivered: it’s not a series of ideas and premises laid out and then fulfilled by solid improvising. It’s not what you are doing. It is how you are doing it.

In the Great Party example, it is how Player A paused and looked at the door jamb, and how they said, “Great party last night.” Her scene partner and the audience knew immediately that it was a great party. That it was bittersweet. That these two people are leaving their home and the previous night was the last hurrah. All with one line that said, on paper, none of that. This approach puts the focus on the emotional states of

the characters and how they are to one another; their behavior. No one at this point actually knows what the relationship is—it hasn't been explicitly spelled out—but we're in the ballpark. The tender initiation, how it was delivered, tells us these two are close, vulnerable to each other. We don't know for sure if BOTH people are actually leaving, but Person A is. It isn't critical for the players or the audience to know this right away to understand the truth of the scene. And now we're at the point where details *serve* the scene. They serve to specify and expand upon that truth. Whereas in the cave example details and information *dictate* the content of the scene, here they become tools used at the actor's discretion to add definition and clarity as needed.

Please suffer this over simplified example; imagine a scene is like making a painting. The Perched Troll scene is essentially presenting an imaginative piece of line art and inviting a partner to help color it in. Both players already know what the image is, and the audience already knows what the image is; you clearly presented it at the top. Now, the audience is going to watch you color in this image. Troll Person B may choose a whacky, unexpected color for a segment of the image which excites the audience, but for the most part this painting consists of players coloring in the drawing that Troll Person A delivered. The success of this scene is 'measured' by the degree to which the promise of the delivered drawing was met by the coloring. In fact, a boring drawing will yield a boring colored-in drawing. This whole scene depends on the IDEA the initiator brought with them.

The Great Party canvas, however, is blank, and the players *start* with color. Party Person A (PPA) adds a splotch, then Party Person B (PPB) adds a splotch in response to what PPA added. PPA begins to see a form coming to life and adds a



line to give it definition. This specificity further informs PPB's next addition, and so on and so forth between the two until, color by color, line by line, they have built a painting together that no one had expected.

The colors in this simile represent the emotional choices and behavior of the characters. The lines represent details and information. In the Troll example, the colors fulfill what is prescribed by the details. In the Party example, the details provide clarity and specificity to the colors and are used at the discretion of the players.

PPA looking longingly around the imagined room:

COLOR SPLOTCH

PPA pausing to appreciate her hand on this familiar door jamb:

COLOR SPLOTCH

PPA "Great party last night:"

COLOR SPLOTCH

PPB smiling sweetly, looking around the room; "It really was:"

COLOR SPLOTCH

PPA "Damn, I'm going to miss it here:"

LINE OF DEFINITION

We already sensed someone was leaving by how these characters were behaving. This statement confirms what the situation is.

And here is what I mean by details being 'used at the discretion of the players.' PPB has been gifted with the detail that PPA is "going to miss it here." She's leaving. PPB can choose to add more color here by giving her a hug, saying something about his own feelings, etc., or he may also choose

to add a line of definition that will further clarify their situation:

“Well, hon, six-to-ten years isn’t such a long time.”

“I wish the army would just let you work from home.”

“I’m going to miss you too, but trolls and knights just weren’t made to be together.”

Each of these lines are super heavy with the weight of attempted humor, but I just wanted to illustrate that as these two players focus on how they are feeling and how they are behaving, the defining details can be whatever they want. But even after further information is added—*ESPECIALLY* after further information is added—this scene’s heart is in that first sincere moment where a woman was sad to be leaving home.

I personally struggle to play this way. I try my best to just come into a scene with a feeling or a state of mind; to focus on how my character is feeling, but I definitely struggle with that need for clarity. It’s hard to come in with a strong choice without knowing the context.

You see this all the time in scenes. I saw this in a show I was watching last night: Two people step out on stage. One person grabs a chair and the other follows suit. They sit quietly for a moment looking at each other, reading each other’s faces. “The pizza is good here.” This is information. They are only establishing that they are in a restaurant. A moment passes. “Let’s get pizza, then.” This is tentative. I think this player is hesitant to make a choice out of politeness or a fear that he will negate a choice his partner has made, so really this line offers no color nor definition. Another beat. “Your mother tells me you’re seeing someone.” And now there is relaxation. These last pieces of information have

finally set the scene and Person A can decide what kind of father he wants to be and Person B what kind of son. The dialogue picks up rapidly. They get to work coloring it in. This turned out to be really fun and enjoyable scene, but the people thirty seconds in really didn't resemble the people at the top. Thirty seconds in, the dad is wounded and jealous. The son is embarrassed by his dad's raw neediness.

I try to think, "How can I start scenes in these places?" If I can be wounded or jealous in how I behave, it won't matter where or who I am or what I'm doing. My partner and I likely won't get to an 'Ex-wife is seeing someone new' type scene if I don't explicitly state it, but if I merely behave wounded and jealous then the details of my situation will be revealed to my partner and me through an exciting discovery process.

But that need for context and information, that I so very much feel myself, is difficult to push through. That's what makes experienced players or ensembles so wonderful to watch. A scene begins, and it's like opening a door and finding people in the middle of a conversation. You don't know exactly what they're going on about, but you get a sense of who they are and, more importantly, who they are to each other.

And that is what is fascinating. Your curiosity is piqued. Your imagination is engaged. In life, you never know everything. You're always grabbing for clues to determine a coworker's mood, or looking 'in between the lines' for meaning in an interaction. Our brains are ALWAYS trying to glean meaning from the various streams of information flowing into them. In watching excellent improvisers put a scene together line by line, we're ALL doing that! The improviser and the audience member are trying to understand the context. They need it! But the improviser, trusting that

the lines of definition will present themselves as needed, foregoes that need for clarity and focuses on how they feel and how their partner's actions make them feel.

As an audience member, I LOVE watching this kind of work. The scenes are literally alive. The improvisers are listening hungrily; each word matters. And you can see in their faces the honest impact each line has. That's what makes these scenes ring true. That's what makes these characters and these reactions honest. Watching this kind of work forces *my* imagination to fill in the bits I don't yet know. I am more invested in what is happening, as I can't help but try to discern the specifics. It's people-watching, but I am in the room.

And that's just it. It's people. People talking. For all of my imagining in my early improv days, for all the impossible scenarios and faraway places that I thought were exciting, human behavior is by a factor of a million the hardest thing to get right and absolutely the most important. It is the imagination of my favorite improvisers that make them delightful, surprising and funny in their own way, but it is their insight and understanding of human behavior that makes them great.

Nine years ago in Kansas City, my journey started with me probing outward. What is out there? What amazing places can we bring to life? What interesting, singular characters can we unlock in the uncharted haze of our imaginations? And now, after thousands of joyful hours, high highs and low lows, my scope has narrowed considerably: "How do I feel?"

CHANDLER GOODMAN

# A Race to the Middle

## HOW IMPROV'S CONVENTIONS TURN POETS & GENIUSES INTO ANXIOUS AUTOMATONS

It's a Saturday afternoon in winter, 2014. A group of sporadically, almost randomly assembled improvisers loosely performing under one banner as an independent improv team—1122—are filing into the Upstairs Gallery. For a few months, this roster—Carmen Christopher, Kyle Chorpening, Steph Cook, Ray Gordon, Ellen Haeg, Alex Honnet, Tim Lyons, Lindsey Stelte and myself—have been doing shows around town. What started as barely more than a mashup (an excuse for a group of loose friends and acquaintances linked by Ray to try their hand at playing together) has taken on a life of its own. It is no one's first (or even second or third) priority but the shows have been fun and surprisingly good. We decide that we'll make a go of it as an independent team (at least for a while), but that rather than hiring a coach, we'll schedule a series of one-time workshops with veteran performers/teachers.

I don't remember who set it up or how, but today, we have two hours with T.J. Jagadowski.

Climbing the Gallery stairs, I'm terrified. Like cooking for Charlie Trotter, the prospect of improvising in front of 'T.J. is intimidating. Not only is 'T.J. widely considered the best improviser in the world, but his reputation is based on his ease and naturalism as an actor and his seemingly effortless ability to mine extraordinary comedy out of ordinary situations. This is—to put it mildly—not my gift.

I've been doing improv for four years at this point, and I am (at best) wildly inconsistent. I have ecstatic scenes—and sometimes whole shows—followed by long, inexplicable stretches where I am either stifled by indecision or taking desperate, pleading hacks at laughs. When it works, I not only feel the creative thrill having invented comedy out of thin air, but also a wave of validation (*see, I wasn't INSANE to think I might be good at this!*). However, when I miss, I'm crestfallen, regretful that I diverted attention away from my funnier teammates, and embarrassed that I had the gall to sign up for these classes in the first place. Riding this pendulum has left me hopelessly neurotic.

What's most concerning for me at this point is that there seems to be an unresolvable tension between the qualities that help me “get laughs” and the qualities that I've been told make “good improv.” For example:

- We're instructed that the best improv occurs when characters love each other and make positive emotional choices. As such, I continue to do scenes where I try playing Dads lovingly encouraging their daughters to go to prom. These scenes got exactly zero laughs, felt interminable, and ended with me wondering if it's too late to go to business school.

- We're instructed that when you "tag in" to a scene, you shouldn't make a choice that advances the plot, but instead explores a character's feelings in a different context. As such, I keep tagging in as the "best friends catching up over beers," where I immediately turn characters who were 30 seconds ago getting laughs and make them unwatchably boring. These scenes got exactly zero laughs, felt interminable, and ended with me wondering if it's too late to go to business school.
- We're instructed to "make things important." As such, when scene partners would ask me innocuous questions like, "*do you want a Coke?*" I would invariably scream back, "*YOU MEAN THE BEVERAGE THAT REMINDS ME OF THE NIGHT I LOST MY VIRGINITY!?*" These scenes got exactly zero laughs, felt interminable, and ended with me wondering if it's too late to go to business school.

You get the point. I almost went to business school.

By that Saturday morning at the Gallery, I was at something of an impasse. When I was successful in entertaining the audience, I was sure that the camarilla of veteran improvisers watching from the back of the room (the sorts who ran theaters and made casting decisions) viewed me as a second-rate laugh whore who lacked the talent or courage necessary to do things the "right way." When I did what I thought they wanted to see, I sucked. As the living embodiment improv's platonic ideal, I was sure T.J. would slowly, excruciatingly expose my every flaw. I was dead wrong.

We did a series of introductory exercises before getting to the main course. T.J. asked two people to take the stage and

Kyle and Carmen volunteered. T.J. then told us that there'd be no big wrinkle to what we'd do next: We would just do a basic improv scene, the only lay on being that every time he felt an improviser imposing an invention on to the scene that didn't authentically correspond authentically to the circumstances of the scene, he'd stop the exercise and have them start again from the beginning. What happened next is etched into my brain.

They began a scene—no suggestion. Carmen was seated facing the audience. Kyle stood very upright, profile to the audience, a foot or so behind Carmen and a few feet to his left. Carmen rotated his head and neck towards Kyle, looked up at him and said something like, "*Can I please go to recess now.*"

Nope. T.J. stopped them right there.

"Does Kyle look like he's running detention at school?" T.J. asked the group. And the truth was, he didn't. He was too stiff, too formal, too procedural. A prison guard, sure, or perhaps a secret service agent. But detention didn't ring true. I remember this sequence so clearly because it completely shook my understanding of improv, and relieved the tension I was feeling between my gut and my understanding of the rules.

In that moment, I realized, improv is not (fundamentally) about acting, and it's certainly not about positive emotional choices, moments that matter, or relationships between people that know each other. More than anything, improv is about the way the brain processes information.

Improv scenes are often called a blank slate from which we build a reality brick by brick. I disagree. Good improv



scenes are a mess of unstructured data that we quickly, collaboratively and brilliantly bring into coherent vision.

From the second an improviser steps off the sidelines and onto the stage, information abounds: the posture of their walk, the mood of their expression, the intensity of their pace. As a partner joins them, the volume of information multiplies. Then they start speaking. Within seconds, we have a jumble of visual, emotional, and intellectual data. For audiences—who watch nervously as we embark on this high wire act—the surprise and delight of improv stems from our ability to look at a bunch of jagged shards of context clues and bring them into focus. I realized on that Saturday, T.J. is not the greatest improviser in the world because he’s a great actor (though he is, and that helps immensely), but because he has supernatural recognition skills. He can assess and process information so quickly and identify it for what’s true and important at an unfathomable rate. That’s what makes it feel like magic.

Del Close himself expressed this view of improv. He said: “Where do the best laughs come from? Terrific connections made intellectually, or terrific revelations made emotionally.”

Notably absent from this statement? The notion that we should make positive emotional choices, avoid plot, steer clear of transactions, or care strongly about EVERYTHING.

The impetus for this essay was the question, “how funny should improv be?” or asked a slightly more straightforward way, “does improv need to be funny?”

My answer would be no, improv does not *need* to be funny, but “following the rules” is not a defense, excuse or substitute for doing improv that doesn’t get laughs.

Improv does not need to be funny. There are gripping scenes that—like their funnier brothers and sisters—get to the essence of relationships and situations in ways that are electric. To dismiss these types of scenes (though they’re rarer than I think most people believe) would be inaccurate and unfair. However, the idea that improv doesn’t *need* to be funny most stems from the notion that improv done “the right way” is superior to improv that is funnier but casts aside convention.

The rules of improv create a race to the middle. Conventions that are taught in classes and then reinforced by many coaches that should be positioned as little more than helpful tips have become aesthetic mandates. Worse, they’ve taken hundreds of potentially outstanding improvisers, neutered their creative energy, and turned them into nervous, uncertain and (too often) unfunny shells of themselves.

In improv, individualism threatens the established order and the primary beneficiaries of improv’s rules are the rules’ caretakers. So long as improvisers play by the rules, whether the end product is funny or not, those who control the aesthetic retain authority. Evolution is scary if you’re afraid you’ll be left behind.

On that Saturday morning five years ago, as we flailed at T.J.’s exercise, trying futilely to resist our trained impulse to apply positive emotions to situations where they made no sense, and making things important that registered as abjectly false, he told us something that has stuck with me. To paraphrase, he told us, “the further along you get, you have to trust that you’ve retained whatever wisdom there is in the rules. From here on out, un-learn everything.”

Improv is simple in concept but complex in execution. Ultimately, it's about the ability to assess what you see, hear, and know, connect the dots, and hone in on the essence of an interaction before the audience beats you there. It's about recognizing the subtle difference between a teacher manning detention and a guard in a prison yard. Any rule that interferes with our ability to do that quickly, honestly, and from a standpoint of genuine inspiration is an unnecessary distraction.

The debate is not really about whether improv has to be funny is academic, but whether the rules have value—and should be taught—is very real. To me, the rules can be taught but should be hyper-qualified as just something new improvisers should try on for size.

Improv doesn't need to be funny, but it should try to be. That's the goal. Each person's brain processes information differently, so introducing a bunch of universal rules doesn't make us kinder, more supportive teammates: It creates clutter. Instead, we need to teach people to trust their ears, eyes, and brains. If we get out of their way, the laughs will be there.



LAUREL KRABACHER

# My Approach

I believe there are many different ways of approaching improv and not every type works for everyone. I also believe there are many different ways to help a person become better at improv. Different things work for different people. I like to think of improv theories as tools. Tools that we can practice with and read about to help us become better. Not every tool will work for everyone. As I have started coaching and teaching, I have become aware of some tools I like to use that focus on building character. I don't always use these tools in my own improv because I am a fraud. I'm still trying to figure improv out and probably never will.

Have you ever locked into a character so well that the scene you are doing is easy? That the scene flows out of you so simply with absolutely no regard to the 'improv rules' you have been taught? You're just existing onstage? I think TJ Jagodowski, Mike Brunlieb, Scott Nelson, Emma Pope, Jet Eveleth, and Dan White are all examples of improvisers that do this. They exist instead of calculate. You know you have gotten to this point because everything clicks and becomes simple. You walk like the character walks, you breathe like the character breathes, you stand like the character stands; you are

that character. Sometimes I can do this! Other times, I cannot.

So I have really tried to focus on how to get to those scenes where everything is easy. These are things I have found that help me exist in a scene.

1. **Receive and give gifts.** Listen to what your scene partner says and what you say. Especially at the top of the scene. If your scene partner says you're a shithead, be a shithead! No shithead would be like, *"Yes you're right, I'm a shithead. Sorry."* A shithead would say, *"Suck my dick, Greg, you're just jealous of my Ferrari."* If you say at the beginning of the scene, *"I just love this apartment,"* filter your character through that gift you gave yourself. You're the type of person who says, *"I just love this apartment,"* so maybe you also say, *"This old fashioned is truly divine"* or, *"I think my husband is fucking his secretary."* Listen to the gifts that are given to you and the gifts you give yourself at the top of the scene. If no gifts are given, give them! Randomly say, *"I'm a spiritual person,"* or, *"My cat is my best friend."* Give yourself something so you can create your character.
2. **Know where you are and who you are to your scene partner.** Get that shit out of the way as soon as possible so you can enjoy your scene. We don't have an hour like TJ and Dave. If we did, I'd say, *"Feel that shit out. Take your time. Line by line. Bleh bleh bleh."* But fuck that! We generally only have 3 minutes so we have to make the most of it. Even it feels stilted at first, just say where and who you are. This is easier if you start a scene in the middle instead of at the beginning. Instead of starting the scene with, *"Sup, Craig?"* start it with, *"Craig! This ab machine you bought me fuckin rocks. You are, without a doubt, my best friend."*

3. **See where you are.** The objects in the room, the color of the walls. The smell. The temperature. If you start to see where you are this can help you become the character. If you see where you are you can comment on the Yellowcard poster on your date's wall. If you see where you are you can grab your lint roller from your closet because there is hair on your pants from your cat. If you are feeling lost in a scene, see where you are and interact with it. Smell the outdoors, feel the tile of the kitchen on your feet. These are gifts just waiting for you to give yourself in a scene.
4. **Don't break; commit.** Trying not to break was a huge breakthrough for me. About two years into my improv journey I started breaking a lot. It became a sort of tick. In class, Susan Messing told me I was only allowed to break once a year and that pissed me off because I hate improv rules. In another class Farrell Walsh helped me understand that I let the character go every time I broke. I wasn't truly living in the character because I was aware enough to laugh at myself. From that moment on, every time I had the urge to break, I committed harder to the character instead. I didn't realize that I was breaking because I was uncomfortable or looking for a laugh. Because breaking really is an easy laugh to get from the audience. *See: Jimmy Fallon.* I still break, by the way. Like I said, I'm a fraud. Also, sometimes my friends are so funny I can't help but laugh.
5. **Love your scene partner.** As a person. And if you don't in real life actually like them as a person, then pretend you do. Pretend the sun shines out of their asshole for this 20 minutes of your life. Trust them. Listen to them. Make them look good. Take the gifts that they give you. This

was a true breakthrough for me. Sometimes I have to play with people who I don't believe are good improvisers. Instead of trying to control the scene because I don't trust them, I love them. Instead of focusing on what is annoying about them, I focus on what is lovable about them. I have fun with them. I take the gifts that they give me and run with them. I try my best to make them look better if they are floundering. I think a truly good improviser can make anyone look good in an improv scene. Want to know how to nail an improv audition? Make your scene partner look good.

6. **Try not to listen to the audience.** Don't hear their laughs, don't hear their silence. If you are listening to the audience, you're not focusing on the character. If you find yourself focusing on the audience, commit harder to the character instead.
7. **Don't listen to your brain** telling you that "*you are bad*" or "*that was stupid*" or "*goddammit Laurel you're doing the foot-shuffle thing again—you're a fraud.*" If you find yourself in your head, commit to the character harder. If you find yourself in your head on the sides, start repeating in your head everything that your teammates are saying on stage. Literally, repeat it word for word. That will get you out of your head quickly and help you focus on the piece. All of that distraction inside your head is just your evil twin trying to make you bad at improv. Don't listen to him, he is an idiot. I use the male pronoun here on purpose.
8. **Have fun.** And if you're not having fun, fake it until you actually start having fun. If you are enjoying yourself, the audience will enjoy you. If you are floundering in the scene, try to make your scene partner laugh. Don't be so



serious about trying to do improv well. Remember to enjoy it because it really is the best.

9. **Love yourself.** Before the set starts, remind yourself that you are a fucking good improviser. Remind yourself that the audience wants you to succeed. And if for some reason they don't, *fuck those people*. This can be the hardest part of improv sometimes. Especially because I think comedians are prone to hating themselves. I hate my guts. I worry about who is in the audience and what they are going to think about me. I worry that people will think I'm not a good improviser or that I'm not funny. But before I go onstage I give myself a pep talk. You are good. You're going to kill this. Laurel, you are so sexy and cool and you totally GOT this.
10. Let's say you don't GOT this. Let's say you have a bad show. Fine. Allow yourself that. It can't be perfect every time. I've seen really great improvisers have bad shows. We all have them. I can't remember where I heard this, but it really helped me, "*Only let yourself be upset about the set for as long as the set was.*" So, yes, allow yourself to be hard on yourself for 22 minutes. But after that, you're not allowed to be hard on yourself anymore. It's not worth it. Go enjoy your life and have a better show next time. But if you had a great show, enjoy that shit for as long as you want. Relish in that shit. **Improv is hard.** And when you're good at it, you've really achieved something. Good for you.

Now, go watch people who you think are good improvisers. Think about why you think they are good and try to emulate that in your own improv. Have fun. Love yourself. Love each other. We are so lucky that we get to do this. Enjoy it.



OLLIE HOBSON

# The 5 Phases of an Improviser

I registered for my first improv class seven years and five months ago. I know this because I just searched my Gmail account with the words, “second city receipt.” And there, nestled between Myspace friend requests and Ebay user agreements, is documentation of what I consider a major turning point in my life:

Oct 25, 2010 4:06 PM

From: <chicago\_tc\_info@secondcity.com>

Total Charges: \$331.00

Total Payments: \$331.00

Thank you for registering!

Being a sentimental person, I would say that the spending of that \$331 changed my fucking life! Being a realistic person, I would say that it helped validate my desire to drink at bars six nights a week and barely put stock into planning things ever again. In actuality, it's both.

Amidst the following pages you will find these two perspectives entangled, occasionally talking over one another

to make contradictory points. And as I share my personal experiences with improv in Chicago and the community that surrounds it, I would encourage you to hold in the back of your mind that all of this was written from the viewpoint of a thirty-two year old middle class white man who has been privileged enough to spend the most recent seven odd years of his life learning, analyzing, and obsessing over the art of improvisation. It has not made me cool. It has not made me unique. But it is through this lens that I will attempt to convey the Phases of an Improviser.

## I. The Prerequisite

*(The life that leads to the first class)*

My mother Claude had been insisting that I apply to graduate programs to pursue painting, which I had studied in undergrad three years prior. Having finally grown tired of my steadfast resistance to such an arduous endeavor, she sternly offered up a more palatable request, “Look Ollie, if you just sign up for a night class at a local college, I will pay for the first one.”

At this time I was working as a barback at a cocktail lounge and had been uninspired to paint since graduating. Instead, I was spending all of my creative energy writing and recording suspiciously angsty music in mine and my roommate Matt’s makeshift recording studio. I had recently completed work on what I believed to be my masterpiece; a five track singer-songwriter-y EP that my friends and family would later describe as “fun,” “pretty good,” and, “I think your singing is out of tune on a couple songs.” In my eyes, it was a piece of art that aptly portrayed my romantic malaise, and I felt quite confident it would either be hugely successful

or help me attract my first girlfriend since high school. It did neither.

What it did do was completely burn me out creatively. The return on investment was so devastatingly low that I transitioned from being a lonely yet hopeful soul, to a lost and depressed one. My artistic drive had always been the thing to usher my life forward in moments of uncertainty, and with it now burning at an all time low, I was subconsciously searching for some kind of spark.

In a last ditch effort to promote my EP, I decided I needed to do what actual musicians do and start playing shows. The issue was that I suffered from terrible stage fright and was incredibly self-conscious about my singing voice. I don't remember how, but I had somehow gotten it in my head that perhaps an improv class could help with this. So, in response to my mother's proposition, I countered, "How about an improv class at Second City?"

## II. Novice

*(First class — 2 years)*

As I approached the classroom, my palms began to sweat and my heart began to pound. My stage fright was already rearing its ugly head. *What am I doing? I'm gonna embarrass myself. I should just leave. I don't know why I'm even here.* For five minutes I paced up and down the hallways of Piper's Alley trying to psych myself up to walk inside. If not for a classmate asking me, "Is this the right room for Level A?" I might never have gone in.

Once inside, it became quite clear that everyone else was feeling just as uncomfortable and anxious as I. This was surprisingly comforting; I began to relax. Our teacher was warm and energetic and unquestionably eccentric. He taught

us silly games and exercises that all had stupid names like Zip, Zap, Zop or Bippity, Bippity, Bop. The core lesson of most of these exercises was to pay attention to one another, or to agree, or to be okay if things went wrong. These are rather simple concepts, but when repeatedly taught to a group of adults looking for direction in their lives, they become incredibly empowering. I was hooked immediately.

As the weeks went on, my classmates and I began to follow up our new education with a few drinks at one of two nearby bars to either discuss what we were learning or just to socialize and drink. One gentleman in the class had a friend who managed a late night karaoke bar. Thus, “Let’s do karaoke!” became a weekly phrase. More often than not, a night of class ended when we all stumbled onto the street at 4am.

Sometimes before heading to the bars, we would catch the Second City Mainstage improv set that happened right after our class was over. I would often laugh so hard that my stomach would ache. It felt like some kind of medicine I was finally getting my prescription for. It was tremendously addictive.

I believe this is how people get bit by the improv bug. On top of meeting new people and bonding over a common interest, you are learning the basics of an art form and then immediately going to watch that art form being performed by seasoned veterans.

There is some skewed connection you find in what you’re learning to do and what you are seeing them do. To your currently untrained eye, it looks like the two are not particularly far apart. You don’t realize that the people you are watching have been learning and honing their craft for nearly

a decade, oftentimes more! Shortly after performing one of my first class' graduation shows, I remember earnestly thinking, *I think I know just about all there is to this!*

### III. Amateur

*(2 years — 4 years)*

Every time I have ever thought I knew everything about anything in my life, it was because I was only seeing that thing from a singular perspective. All it took was me shifting a few steps in any direction for things to look foreign again. There is always another perspective.

Like most people who finish the training center at Second City, I decided to continue my education by enrolling in another improv program called iO; a seven level program focused on teaching the theater's signature form The Harold. One of the main benefits of taking classes at a program like this, is that as a student, you are allowed free access to see practically any show at the theater. This is a wonderful benefit for anyone who is a big loser or a huge nerd.

And with regards to improv, I just so happen to be both. While going through classes at iO, I must've watched shows 5-7 nights a week. I absolutely loved watching improv. There was something about it that was so exciting to me. It was funny, it was unpredictable, it was impressive, it was strange, and of course, it was always different.

*Hey, while I'm here watching comedy, I might as well have a beer!* Another major selling point of pursuing improv is that it is socially acceptable to drink every night of the week. Don't mind if I did! Did I mention I worked at a bar? I have always felt comfortable in an improv theater because it is basically just that: a bar. Except, instead of having to talk to people, one can just sit back as others make shit up. As an introvert

who prefers to sit calmly while people socialize around me, this was right up my alley.

While friendships blossom and drinking habits grow, there is an unsuspecting facet to this whole “improv thing” that begins to creep its way into the mindset of an aspiring improviser. It is the notion of “making a team;” the idea that through either the graduation of an improv program, or through their holding of auditions, you might be selected to join one of their house ensembles. The benefits of this miraculous feat are as follows: continued education with a select group of your peers, regular opportunities to perform at said theater, and validation. Validation is the understated benefit here. For, at this point you have probably invested several years and several thousands of dollars learning, watching, and thinking about improv. In order to continue onward, one must feel that they have been correct in their pursuit. In improv especially, the confidence to believe that you belong can be incredibly beneficial to the actual quality of your improvisation (not to mention your mental wellbeing).

If you are not fortunate enough to make one of these teams, you can’t help but feel slighted and misjudged. This is normal and is often a defense mechanism to avoid giving up altogether. Many aspiring improvisers quit here. It’s a harsh reality, but as with any creative field, there is inevitably some natural selection that seems to take place. Perhaps it is to ensure that only the really tortured souls continue on; those who are crazy enough to spend all of their free time obsessing over something whose cultural significance primarily lives in their minds. I am both proud and ashamed to be one of these people.



Through a combination of advice and experience, I have found that the most helpful thing during times of rejection or doubt in the improv world is to be honest with what you are trying to get out of it. If you are doing improv because it is fun and brings you joy, then *Hey! No time is wasted!* If you are doing it to get on Saturday Night Live, then *Hey! That's a great goal, but there is a high likelihood you're gonna be awfully disappointed!* Most people's motivation seems to fall somewhere in between these two extremes. Still, I have seen people (myself included) wrap up all sorts of absurd expectations into the journey of learning how to artfully play make believe. All this tends to do is create bitterness toward other improvisers, theaters, or oneself. Over time, I have been able to avoid this regrettable side effect by reminding myself that some of the highlights of my week are spent goofing around with friends and making an audience of strangers laugh. Aside from being incredibly therapeutic, it is also just a lovely way to spend my time.

Now, what if you *do* make one of those teams? Well then, say hello to temporary euphoria! I liken it to your high school crush saying they like you back. All that “hard work” paid off. The voice in your head that said you deserved this was fucking right! You are funny! You could even be the next Julie Worthington (a made up improviser, but that's what any improviser's name sounds like to people who don't do improv)! Shortly after I had found out that I had made a Harold team, I proudly shared the news with a coworker. Their response was, “A what?”

## IV. Improviser

(4+ years)

As one of my improv teachers once told our class, “It takes about four or five years to become good at this.” I remember thinking, *Well sure, probably for most people, but if I see shows every night of the week and perform regularly enough, I could probably get there in half the time.* This is a common mentality. It is why many students in Chicago choose to go through two or three improv programs at the same time. It’s the belief that if one needs to learn A, B, and C, to obtain D, then surely one can obtain D quicker if they just learn A, B, and C quicker. But, as with most aims in life, it doesn’t work that way. You have to experiment and fail. You have to learn the “rules,” forget the “rules,” learn them again, forget them again and find out how to have confidence in what you think is good. This is what takes so fucking long. This is called “finding your voice.”

I have found that the best improvisers learn how to be comfortable without being lazy. Are able to listen without being unresponsive. Are able to be bold without steamrolling. They have learned how to be completely and utterly in the moment, always willing to make an assumption based on what is immediately in front of them. And the only way to get to this point is to perform shows, and watch shows, and perform shows, and watch shows, and analyze them, and experiment, and keep trying to be better, and not worry so much, and have fun, and make a “choice,” and be loose, and realize every moment is new. Good fucking luck! Some people can do these things more intuitively based on their natural way of being. I would argue that most of the skill sets necessary to be a good improviser do not come instinctively

to me, which is probably why I am still so fixated on improv all these years later.

I have always considered myself a perfectionist. And while in past artistic undertakings, where that pursuit of perfection often left me feeling disheartened when things didn't turn out the way I had planned, with improv, it is literally counterintuitive to have a preconceived notion of what the finished product should be. The goal is to fly by the seat of your pants, and the skill is making it look as though you knew what was going to happen the whole time. This has been both spectacularly freeing and endlessly fun.

## IV-B. Improviser/Coach/Teacher

(7+ years)

My favorite band (aside from The Beatles) is a band called Why?. When I first started listening to them, I instantly fell in love with their music but decided that their name was pretentious. *Why Why?*, I thought to myself. Every time I revisited their albums, I was disturbed by how well thought out their music was and how generic their name was.

A couple years ago, while reflecting on this, I was struck by a memory of an episode of *Tiny Toon Adventures* I had seen as a kid, wherein a parent is attempting to explain something to their child. When the parent has finished, the unsatisfied child counters by asking, "Why?" The parent responds adequately, only for the child to press on; "Why?" With every new explanation, the child demands to know more and more, until eventually, the parent gets fed up and erupts with frustration.

As a kid watching this, the concept was easily accessible; there is perhaps no definitive answer to the question of *why*, and thus, one could pose it endlessly. But now, reminiscing on

it as an adult, the notion feels more profound. Perhaps Why? chose their name because their music is actually about the pursuit of the intangible. Maybe to them, the quest for *why* is more about the exploration of life than arriving at a conclusive answer (at least, this is what I now choose to believe).

With regards to improv, I have found this same idea to be true. For instance, during an improv scene, an improviser could say something as basic as, "I'm tired." A moderately healthy amount of information for us all to discover no doubt. However, by adding some form of *why*, they could uncover immeasurably more about that character.

*I'm tired (why?) because I had to work late last night (why?)  
because no one else could work the night shift (why?) because  
they were all at Donny's birthday party.*

Now we know (or can assume) a ton about this character. They work late nights, their job is strenuous, they are low on the totem pole at work, and they perhaps weren't even invited to Donny's party (this is, by no means, the only way to flesh out a character in an improv scene, but I have found that using *why* is extremely helpful in discovering a character's motivation or point of view).

Questioning why has continually proven to me that the world is hardly ever black and white, but inherently grey. It has encouraged me to assess people not only by what they do, but also by *why* they do what they do. And it has compelled me to ask myself the same question. Why do *I* do what I do?

More specifically, why do I, seven years and five months after my first class, still spend most of my free time trying to get better at an art form that is, in and of itself, not a profession? Am I doing it to learn skills which might help me

become a professional actor, writer, or comedian? Am I doing it because I love the experience of being in front of an audience; striving to make them laugh or, if I'm lucky, feel some other emotion? Am I doing it because I enjoy creating something on the spot with other people? Am I doing it to make friends? Am I doing it because it is fun? Do I want to teach, so that I may pass on knowledge and skills that have been so beneficial to me and my life? Or am I doing it because it is an excuse to have a few drinks at bars six nights a week?

At this point, it shouldn't surprise you that the answer to all of these rhetorical questions is "yes," and they are all reasons why I am here now, writing about a community and an art form that I feel so privileged to be a part of. Of all my creative undertakings, I have found improv to be the most challenging and most formative to my current view of the world. It has taught me to be more empathetic toward others and to be more confident in the way that I innately am. It has continually brought me moments of peace and humor in an often frustrating and unjust world. It has showed the perfectionist in me that nothing will ever be "perfect," but if I can reduce the fear of failure, I might stumble upon something great and exciting.

No matter how I look at it, the spending of that first \$331 has undeniably changed my life for the better. And as long as the powers that be allow, I will continue performing with and learning from some of the funniest people I have ever known.

Long live improv. Long live group mind. Long live Chicago.



CHRISTINA SEO

# Good Vibes Only

How do I best explain the feeling of successful improvising?

I can try explaining it by talking about surfing.

You can watch professional surfers in the world, catch tips from their interviews and spotlights, compare gear online (can I afford this new watch?), but you won't know how to surf until you actually try surfing and then fail really hard, and get scared while failing. Picking up scars and picking sand out of your asshole, letting ocean water glurg out of the cavity between your brain and your nose because you pearled really fucking hard (fell in face-first like a pearl diver), it gives your mind and your body strength when you go under against your will for a little too long, only to break the surface of water, inhale precious oxygen, swim after your board, grab it, and start paddling again because each wave is different, unique, yet similar. The next day when you remember where you failed, and then relive how after you failed over and over again, you managed to catch one wave, an utterly perfect push of water beneath you, around you. When you remember how you dissolved and became the water on the surface of a wave, you release a little bit of your fear and attack attack attack that next wave, cause that feeling? It's unbelievable.

You can watch professional improvisers in the world, read tips from their interviews and spotlights, watch groups at other theaters (will I be up there one day?), but you won't know how to improvise until you try improvising and then fail really hard, and get scared while failing. Performing in bad groups, finding a good group, letting silence in a theater flood out of your brain cavity because you bombed really fucking hard (no laughter from the audience), it gives your mind and your body strength when you leave a bad scene embarrassed, taking relief in the dark sides of the stage, watching things get swept, edited, tagged out/in, as you wait for that next moment to walk back out, because each scene is different, unique, yet similar. The next day when you remember where you failed, and then relive how after you failed over and over there was one brilliant scene where you were melting into the words, you became fully present, the back walls filled with furniture, and you became someone else and it was perfect, it was working, and there was warm laughter. You release a little bit of your fear and get back up again and attack attack attack that next scene, cause that feeling? It's unbelievable.

Smiling while the sun hits the water, feeling your feet dangle with fishes and seaweed beneath you, inhaling the brine and absorbing the saltiness in your hair, that's a pretty good feeling. Getting back in that water again day after day, not paying attention to kooks and to territorial surfers at your local spot, just surfing to get better for yourself, it's hard work but it's rewarding. Attack that fear, get to know when the tide is high/low, know where the rocks are, know where to park your car, know who to reach out to join you, go see other breaks. Try bigger waves, get your ass kicked, and still go back out because that moment of catching one good wave and carving in and out of the face charges your veins like wild



horses running for the joy of feeling their hooves on the ground.

Standing behind a curtain backstage, hearing the murmurs of conversation from the audience, smelling their food, hearing the ice in their drinks lightly clinking, making eye contact backstage with your team, that's a pretty good feeling. Getting back up on stage again day after day, not paying attention to jerks and the watching eyes of veteran improvisers at your theater, just improvising to get better for yourself, it's hard work but it's rewarding. Attack that fear, get to know what shows you like, know where the bad shows are, know where to park your car, know what friends can join you, go see other shows. Try performing at bigger shows, get your ass kicked, and still go back out because that moment of laughter from one good show and feeling your energy vibe with an audience charges your veins like wild horses running for the joy of feeling their hooves on the ground.

Most importantly, go out and have fun. Be a good person. Say, "Good morning" to everyone walking in and out of the break. Pick up trash, recycle those cans and bottles. Talk to other people washing down, compliment people. Don't be an asshole misogynist who thinks that chicks going out are not as "hardcore" as dudes going out. Have the utmost respect for your peers. Have the utmost respect for the water because the water will not be merciful to you if you force it to move for you. Wait for your moment, the moment will come to you, don't force it.

Most importantly, go out and have fun. Be a good person. Say, "Whassup?" to everyone walking in and out of your show. Pick up trash that audience members leave, recycle those cans and bottles. Talk to other people getting out of a show you just saw, compliment them. Don't be an asshole

misogynist who thinks that women going out on stage aren't as "hardcore" as men going out. Have the utmost respect for your peers. Have the utmost respect for the audience because the audience will not be merciful to you if you beg or force them to laugh, they will not move for you. Wait for your moment, the moment will come to you, don't force it.

If you aren't having fun surfing, and if you aren't having fun improvising, then take a break, or consider leaving it. Believe me nothing matters more than your happiness, and if you seek that happiness in the validation of others, then you will be at a loss my friend.

I think that I can only achieve great art by having respect for everything around me, and also by being the most intelligent person I can be. My happiness is sourced only from simple things, and in genuine connections. Facades and affectations are unnecessary, trust me, just be your weird freak flag self, because at the end of it all, the greatest surfers die, the greatest comedians do too, and at the end of it all, wouldn't you like to say that you had fun? I sure do.

ANNA KADEWSKA

## New Girl

I took my very first improv class last year in June of 2018. It was fun, exciting, some of the students were racist, and I “learned” an Irish accent. You know, the basics. Being new is great. You’re learning everything for the first time: how shows get made, who gets the final say, why did that person leave, they were so great! and why is he still here when there are multiple sexual harassment claims made against him? You can decide the way you want your journey of improv and comedy to unfold, and who you want to affect in your work. It’s a very joyous, special time, with room to fail. So please, choose wisely, and be kind to everyone.

I’m hungry. I’ve been hungry ever since I took Comedy Studies at Second City this past fall (Thank You, Anne Libera). I studied comedy during the day and wanted to see it in practice at night in shows. I desperately wanted to be at the same level as my peers, who were majoring in this field; yup, you can major in comedy now. I felt behind in the game when compared to those who were younger and had more experience than me. I remember learning about what an edit was five weeks into the program, while my friends had been doing it for years. I admired that they knew from the beginning what they wanted to do and were making it

happen. However, learning improv in an environment where some are experts and others are beginners gives way to condescension. Judgment is placed on new performers; the older performers don't know who we are, and they fear we might be better than them. But, being new comes with its own benefits. Failure is welcomed, teachers encourage you, and you see everything as exciting and fun. The further you are in your comedy career, the more you have learned, and it's less acceptable to make mistakes. People see you now as more experienced and ready to take on more. Buckle up kid.

After taking a few classes and performing a little, I wanted to be around the community more, so I got hired as a host at a comedy theater. Working at a place like that gives you a different perspective of the comedy scene. There are performers who I have grown to love from my place in the audience, and I now come into contact with them in a social setting. I would see my favorite performers hanging around the bar after finishing an improv set. It was exciting to see them be normal, and not act like they're above others, especially the theater staff. I felt lucky to be in their presence. It's like Disney World after hours. Except when the characters take off their masks, the magic isn't gone.

The transition into summer means it's showcase season. Comedians perfect five minutes of their own material and perform it in front of friends, directors, producers, and anyone who is willing to watch. The goal is basically to "get discovered". It was one of the showcase nights, everyone was excited, and the theatre was filling up quick. I noticed a performer in line with their friends whom I looked up to. I was eager to meet them finally. They made their way to me, and handed me their tickets. I tried to engage in the regular small talk and be cool. "Hi, how are you?" "Do you know any

of the acts tonight?” They were not feeling my charm. *Okay, that’s fine*, I thought, and I walked them to their seats. Before I could tell them that I loved their show, they said, “Actually, we’re gonna sit over there in the back.” I explained that I couldn’t give them those seats, since they were reserved for someone else. They did not like that. They yelled at me, and sat where they wanted to. I don’t know why, but I apologized a lot afterwards. I felt betrayed in a way, but that seems strange to say since I didn’t know them personally. The image that they were giving on stage was not the same person I saw in front of me. It seemed like they were the elite and I was significantly below them in status. It sucked, and I was hurt.

Taking tickets every night, you realize who is a nice person, and who is just good at improv. You were rooting for the one who turned out to be just good at improv. But then, you meet other performers who are not just good at improv, but amazing at it, and an even better person. I want to give a quick shout out to the few performers who have given time out of their day to talk to me and assist in my growth as an artist. I’m grateful for you. Thank you.

You won’t be the same person when you start something compared to when you’re neck deep in it. But, the reason behind you wanting to embark on this career path will hopefully remain true. I remember the excitement and wonder that I had when I saw my first comedy show. Seeing the joy that the actors had on stage and them giving that joy right back to the audience in the form of laughter was, and still is blissful.

Soon enough, you begin to see a chance for your goals to not just be goals anymore, but milestones that you can achieve. That’s because there are people who were once in your place and now they’re getting paid to do what they love,

and are admired for it. These are my celebrities. Who's Billie Eilish? I want to meet Katie Klein. My version of the Spice Girls are Virgin Daiquiri. If I see anyone from the Mainstage/ETC cast, I will lose my shit. Lucky for me, there's a lot of opportunities for me to lose my shit. One of the unique things about comedy in Chicago is that the role of performer and audience member is interchangeable. Comedians that are doing a show one night are in the audience seeing their friend's show the next, sitting next to you. In places like Hollywood, barriers exist between actors and their fans. Actors rarely interact with their fans, unless it's in a way to further establish their higher status, through red carpets or signings. There's little room for that in places like iO. Sure, someone might be on a well known team while others aren't, but you're all still in the same building.

I try to know and learn as much as I can about comedy because I love it. I would be lying if I said that I didn't like the feeling of knowing more than someone and being

ahead of them in the community. I don't think I'm better or more talented than the person next to me. I might know more than they do, or they might know more than me. Yeah, I might roll my eyes when someone tells me that they're auditioning for SNL after just completing level 2. I don't think it's unrealistic to reach for big goals, but I think you need to recognize the level of hard work and perseverance that comes along with it. You're not entitled to get the things you want just because you want them and feel like it's owed to you. I can smell that privilege from a mile away.

I know more now than I knew at the very beginning. I know that when you see two shih-tzu dogs running around a theatre, you're either at peace or you're sweating out your ass; the person who can decide your comedy career is near, oh

and they created long-form improv—no pressure. I know that if you want a student comp to see the Mainstage at Second City, it will only be possible during negative 20 temperatures. I know that there *IS* such a thing as too much improv. I know that when your improv partner calls you “honey,” it’s up to *you* and *your* next line to determine who you are in that scene. I know that nothing will be just handed to you, unless you reap the benefits of nepotism. I know that if it feels right, just go for it. I know that if you need help, ask; if no one responds, then you have more answers than you thought you did. But, no matter how much you may think you know, there’s always more to learn.





# On The Community



CODY SULLIVAN

# My Queens

It is a part of gay male culture to have and worship your favorite female pop star. Your Queen. You have your Rihanna gays, your Britney gays, your Beyonce gays, your Celine Dion gays, your Jewel gays... I am a Katie Klein gay.

It was sometime in late winter 2015 and I was finally going to see The Late 90's, the best, I was told, Harold team at iO. All my classmates had seen the team before and the performers were spoken about with the deepest awe. I was behind my classmates in knowledge of the theater and it's teams. I knew I wanted to take iO's classes because my teachers in Boston recommended the theater to me. The classes were as thrilling as I had expected, but my first experience with a show at iO was not pleasant.

I was in the Del Close Theater at iO watching a scene where four men stood on stage miming masturbating as they watched a girl dress in her room, unaware. My face was set in perfect sassy gay stone, my arms and legs crossed. The friend who brought me mouthed, "Sorry." My friend had not seen them before either and I could tell she was uncomfortable. That is the silly self-imposed danger of bringing people to an improv show: if it's boring or horrible, it's your fault. After that show, no show had really attracted me. I was very

impressed with the skills of many of the improvisers I saw, but I had no show that I came back to again and again. I wanted to feel what the other students in my class were talking about. So four months later when I sat down in the same theater, presumably with a glass of red wine, I waited with baited breath hoping what my peers said about The Late 90's was true.

And it all was true.

First of all, I immediately developed a crush on the tall man who kept fidgeting with his hair and played endearing dumb people. The sweet man with an ancient frog voice had me in his pocket the instant he smiled and laughed. The shorter man with the elegant face playing an old actor was so incredible he would pause, and with one word have the entire house broken down laughing. I remember being elated at the joy onstage, the quickness and the fire with which they moved. I was amazed, but somehow it still felt a bit removed from me. I was captivated by their emotion and movements but the language was foreign to me. When they were talking about basketball players I felt like I was in a silent movie. I felt like a voyeur, until a redhead in sneaker heels shuffled forward. Before she said one word I bubbled with laughter and fell in love with Katie Klein.

Soon after that, I began to find my shows. I found those shows by going to whatever my amazing redheaded Queen was in. First, it was Virgin Daiquiri. Those first few shows I was rapturous. All the women were insanely funny and I became a regular. Every week, after the opening team bowed, I looked anxiously into the wings. Once I saw Katie Klein, Blair Beeken or Dina Facklis, a smile spread across my face and I sat back to enjoy a killer show. Blair Beeken, a bro in sheep's clothing, had me weeping every time she walked out

on stage and nodded her head with her hands in her pockets. Christine Tawfik playing any number of old women destroyed me. But in Virgin Daiquiri, Dina for me was the tops.

There is something devilish in Dina's smile. Something about the way she looks out at you makes you nervous, like you know she is up to something. And without fail, she delivers. Dina has said things on that stage that from anyone else's mouth would make me cringe with disgust. But coming from this woman, I cringe with incredulity. "What the fuck did she just say?" I ask laughing so hard I'm weeping. She is the Queen of delightful fear, so smart and so quick, you know nothing will get past her. She is a powerhouse.

Dina was the first person to give me an opportunity in the improv community. As a teacher and director, she is just as funny but adds in a backbone of such remarkable discipline. She left me with so many gems of knowledge. One of the best things she taught me was to have confidence in myself and act like I own the stage. I was in the wings of the Del Close Theater, about to sit in with one of her teams, so nervous to be performing on the stage that my favorite teams played on. I was recently out of classes and doing this show was very important to me. Right as the audience was being warmed up for us, she turned to me and said, "Remember, you're not a sit in, you're a player. Make moves like a player." It was great advice that I wish I had taken. Nerves or feeling less talented than the other players on stage will ruin you. You can't improvise with your asshole clenched the whole time. Now I take Dina's advice like poppers before shows.

As for my reigning queen, I loved Katie Klein in every show she did, but her best performances were with Super Human. I love what this team is doing now, but I hold a

special place in my heart for the first few months of shows I saw in 2015. I had never seen a group of people fucking tear a stage apart like they did, with the biggest smiles on their faces as they whipped the audience around with them. Never before had I seen improvisers play only like girls. This was no boy's club, this was the fucking Claire's in a strip mall and I was in heaven. They were talking like my girlfriends and I do sitting at home, giggling making food; they acted like my mom and my friends' moms, and they were as mean to each other as my sister and I are to each other. I found the badass wild girls that I wanted to be. These women played by their rules. This was their house and I finally felt at home in that theater.

At that time, Super Human was Blair Beeken, Katie Klein, Amber Walker, Jo Scott, Sarah Ashley, Irene Marquette and Christina Boucher. Amber always killed me when she played the aunt or the misunderstood character. She makes you feel so bad for her while at the same time playing it annoyingly enough to let you laugh at her. Sarah Ashley, so intelligent with such a sharp eye for directing, seeing clearly what makes something funny, manages to do the best valley girl impression in the world. Irene Marquette, a dark-haired, deep-voiced, out-of-left-field performer was constantly throwing off the reality of what I kept expecting. Then the barreling and screaming Jo Scott. She steps on the stage and like a precocious little kid too smart for her own good, faces the stage saying, "Dare me." And we always do. Laughing maybe more than the audience, she says things so disgusting they make you yelp. And then there was a woman who is a gay man's dream performer: Christina Boucher. One of the quickest people on a stage, playing dudes in the best way possible, holding her crotch in one moment and singing a

musical as a high school girl auditioning for her class show in the next. She is another improviser I would wait with baited breath to see walk out on the stage at the start of a show. Mary Cait Walthall made her appearance at their Halloween show that year. Mary Cait, the most physically feeling performer I have ever seen, returned from her time away studying physical theater in London. Mary Cait is a wonderful teacher; her workshops take away the bullshit habits you produce in improv and leave you bare. Her methods produce some of the most visceral scenes I've ever witnessed.

That Halloween show is probably my favorite memory being in a theater. Each performer stepped out on stage dressed in mummy costumes made of toilet paper. The silliness and the absence of fear is the key to Super Human. You can only wear toilet paper on stage if you know the scene work and the show itself will be a thousand times funnier than the costumes. And it was. Every time they did a gimmick, you forgot about it until the end. One of my all-time favorite shows was their sitcom-themed show with a pee-producing line from Amber, the down-on-her-luck star of the improvised sitcom. Jo played the loser best friend who never had her time to shine until at the end when she was about to have her big moment. Right as Jo's character was about to sneak out of the shadows, Amber wailed, "I need a latte!" So corny and so perfect. I didn't think Katie Klein was going to be able to continue the show she was laughing so hard. That is my favorite thing about a Super Human show, watching them laugh at each other. Watching them, I began to put value on talking about what you want to talk about on stage, without worrying if it would make sense to the theater at large. I began to worship silliness and give it the dignity of

drama. And I got better. They are my references for amazing performance and inform the highest standard I set for myself.

As I watched more shows and saw more players, more dream performers showed up. The women of Shebeast are all literal dreams. That team is a gay delight because of the delicious irreverence and disgust they revel in. It brings me such joy to see the balls shrink on the straight men in the audience when Shebeast gets going.

There are some moments with women on stage that I believe will flash before my eyes as I lay down to die: Alison Ringhand once said in a show as a bartender, “after midnight, the lesbians pop out like daisies.” She delivered it so real, I could see the old man she was embodying and I try to emulate that freefall into a complete character. Riley Mondragon started a scene in bed with someone, her partner made it confrontational, and she very quickly said, “Well, we should leave then.” And did. The start of the scene was nice and the audience was disappointed when her partner made the conflict between them. How many times have we seen someone make a scene confrontational and the other scene partner spend the rest of the time on stage trying to fix the fight? It was so refreshing and ingenious just to say, “Okay, bye!” I was gagged. Jenelle Cheyne on stage at her solo show eating a chocolate pudding watching wrestling as a little boy. With only her body movements and facial expressions and a few mumbling words, I knew exactly who that 8-year-old was. That communication through the body is something I envy. Then the numerous times I’ve performed with the women of Tidy (Nina Slesinger, Jessie Cadle and Rayna Caskey), all our scenes featuring sisters and mothers and little kids on the beautiful stage of the Flatiron. All three of those women perform with so much fun and at the same time are so damn



smart. I'm afraid to just list people but I had to mention some of the women that fucking kill me.

I pinch myself from time to time. I think I am the luckiest gay guy alive. The gays who worship these big pop stars have to spend hundreds of dollars to see their favorite Queen maybe once a year, whereas I get to sit back and watch my favorite Queens every night if I want to.

I do not believe I would have done improv if women weren't a big part of the scene. I would have been too scared to go into a space filled with people who looked a lot like the kids growing up in my hometown that called me faggot. But I feel lucky because I came to improv at a time when theaters had many people who looked like the women who told me those boys were dumbasses. I saw many women who looked like the girls who gave me the confidence to be proud of being a faggot. I get to sit in theaters and enjoy improv because women are there taking up space, talking about things I relate to and think are funny. And I have learned too much from watching the women performing in this city.

Now, I enjoy watching the show while I'm in it, instead of anxiously waiting to see if I'll be funny. I never worry if the audience will get my gay references anymore, I just speak about what I know. But most importantly, I copy the pose of so many of these bad ass women and stand like a fucking boss bitch and know that I deserve to be on that stage. While Katie Klein may be my favorite, I am obsessed with so many others. You don't have to pick between Britney and Christina anymore. Lucky me that I get to watch so many of my Queens every night. What could be better for a Super Fan?



JULIA WEISS

# Comedy, Caillou, and Culture

So you know that children's cartoon Caillou? With the obnoxious little boy with the terrible voice and the stupid values? It's based on a series of books by Hélène Desputeaux. When I was a nanny, Caillou was an unfortunate part of my daily reality. I hated him with a passion most would reserve for actual humans who've hurt them or a loved one—real-life people with skin and lungs, not ones dreamed up by a French-Canadian woman. But despite being strokes of pen on paper, Caillou was my deepest abhorrence. Unable to contain my loathing, I did what any rational, American twentysomething would do and I took to Twitter. But then I stopped myself. What if this fictional little prick had a terminal illness? You see, Caillou has no hair and I didn't want to make fun of a kid with cancer—even a made-up kid. So I googled, “Does Caillou have cancer?”

Turns out this is a question a lot of people have asked.

The first question on Chouette Publishing's Caillou FAQ page was the very one I had. “Why is Caillou bald?” I thought

I'd be relieved to learn that this fake kid wasn't suffering from a terrible disease. But I wasn't. Because what I found was a little piece of casual white male supremacy.

Caillou stands for all children. He doesn't have curly blond hair, a carrot-top, brown hair, glasses, or ethnic features, because he represents all children. We wanted to make Caillou universal so every child could identify with him. And they do! Caillou's baldness may make him different, but we hope it's helping children understand that being different isn't just OK, it's normal.<sup>2</sup>

Caillou represents all children, so they chose to make him a white boy. That is our everychild. A white male.

Chouette has since changed their answer—stating that the series started with Caillou as a baby and they didn't want to confuse kids by adding hair. (They kept the part about helping children understand that it's OK to be different, so like, good for them.)

Of course, Chouette didn't manifest this mentality. They didn't invent white male supremacy. They surely thought they were saying something really lovely by telling the world that a little able-bodied white boy is the blank human canvas, and anything else would be too "other" to be relatable. Chouette and Caillou merely express the values of the world in which they exist.

So why does this matter? I mean, we don't have to watch the show (and honestly you shouldn't—it's so, so bad). It matters because this stuff doesn't exist in a vacuum. Nothing does. The reason Hélène Desputeaux made Caillou male is the same reason we call women "female improvisers" instead of just "improvisers." We've got a real gender problem.

In January, iO's Charna Halpern posted on Facebook to defend herself from allegations about an alleged phone conversation with a victim of harassment. In addition to her defense, she made several tone-deaf and problematic statements about women, lying, and her community. Several fed up members of the scene, many of whom don't work directly for Charna anymore, took to her page to educate her. It was a tense conversation, Charna was defensive and caught off guard—she really hadn't realized that there was anything wrong with what she said or with her theater. That, of course, is the problem.

Foot firmly in mouth, Charna had inadvertently sparked much needed conversation and revelation within the comedy community. Harassment policies were created, revised, reposted by theaters across town. Many theater and training center owners reached out to their communities to express their commitment to fighting some really ugly, destructive problems. This is great. Harassment, abuse of power, underrepresentation, and intimidation are bad, and it's valuable that we're taking action against them. But they're ultimately not the problem.

Sexism is what lays the foundation for bigger issues like the ones we've been navigating in Chicago comedy this year. But Chicago comedy doesn't have a sexism problem, *per se*. Chicago comedy simply exists in a sexist world. And we can't just write up a policy to undo our programming.

When we shrug our shoulders and say, "It's a man's world," what we're really talking about is androcentrism. Peter Hegarty and Carmen Buechel, who studied androcentrism in 39 years of APA journals, define it as thinking which assumes

“maleness to be normative and attributes gender differences to females” (hey, remember Caillou?).

Androcentrism manifests at the most basic and pernicious level in our language. We use words like “he,” “him,” “his,” “man,” and “men” to cover either males or the collective of all people. For example, take this passage from *Truth in Comedy*, coauthored by none other than Charna Halpern:

After an improviser learns to trust and follow his own inner voice, he begins to do the same with his fellow players’ inner voices. Once he puts his own ego out of the way, he stops judging the ideas of others—instead, he considers them brilliant, and eagerly follows them!

Meanwhile we use “she,” “her,” “hers,” “woman,” and “women” to refer only to females. Limiting the use of female-gendered words while allowing male-gendered words broader use positions men above women.

Let’s take another look at the passage above, but this time with female pronouns:

After an improviser learns to trust and follow her own inner voice, she begins to do the same with her fellow players’ inner voices. Once she puts her own ego out of the way, she stops judging the ideas of others—instead, she considers them brilliant, and eagerly follows them!

Note how it is no longer generic advice for any improviser. The use of female-gendered pronouns has limited the audience. “He” has the power to define “she,” but “she” can never define “him.” “She” is other, different. “He” simply is.

Because the languages we speak have a strong impact on perception and cognition, it follows that androcentric languages imbed sexism into the speaker’s worldview.

## So what does that world look like?

The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film found that in 2015, women made up only 22 percent of protagonists and 33 percent of speaking roles in the top 100 domestic films. Women make up only about a quarter of our elected officials at the state and federal levels. On a cultural level we tend to devalue women's sports, even when our national women's soccer team consistently outperforms our men's. We tend to define women through their relationships to men, while allowing men identities of their own. A man is a Mr. regardless of marital status, but a woman is Miss until she's a Mrs. Women are generally expected to take, and give their children, men's last names. Traits defined as feminine are valued below those defined as masculine. We tend to trust men and distrust women. From infancy, we're are bombarded with messages of binary gender performance, from clothing to toys to parenting styles. Girls are encouraged to be passive, to be pretty, to be experienced by others. Boys are encouraged to be active, to be strong, to do the experiencing.

So there's an angle. An idea of where we are and of how we've gotten there. So how has culturally ingrained sexism influenced our community and comedy at large?

Because humor is considered a masculine trait, we assume men's proficiency in comedy. We simultaneously assume women's deficiency. A mediocre man has an easier time making a team than a decent woman. Female dominated shows have to be significantly better than male dominated shows to be considered just as good (the same is true for people of color, LGBTQ people, and anyone else who doesn't meet the Caillou standard of humanity). Samantha Bee's new late-night show is incredibly smart and funny,

Jessica Williams is consistently the best part of *The Daily Show*, *SNL*'s women are outperforming the men weekly—and yet we're still inundated with articles, forums, and discussions about why women aren't as funny as men. We aren't even given the respect of "whether or not."

I was privy to a conversation among men from a prominent Harold team several years back. They were angrily discussing a woman on their team. "She pulls so much focus." "She plays for laughs too much." "She's a selfish player." These were dudes who cycled through sure-fire homoerotic gags every show knowing they'd hit. But this woman had the audacity to be FUNNY while they were being funny, and sometimes she was FUNNIER than they were. They compared her to another woman on the team, the one they liked to play with, the one who tended to be a more passive support player. Passive support players are valuable of course, but when we demand that women play that way and punish them for being active—that's our sexism showing.

This bias is often echoed in team selection and performer promotion. A man who is hilarious and goes for the joke may find himself on numerous teams within a theater; a woman who is the very same may not even make it onto one.

As a performer, I've had coaches and teachers fail to see and note instances of sexism in rehearsals, shows, and classes. Conversely, as a coach, I've had male performers talk and laugh through note sessions and actively refuse to participate in exercises I would bring into rehearsal.

We've all seen or experienced men shouting over women, negating women's choices, using derogatory language on stage. It's not surprising. People who don't want to have the



more challenging conversation will dismiss that as “bad comedy” instead of unchecked sexism.

And that may seem small, but it's what makes us say, “He's bad to women, but he's a good friend. He's kinda douchey, but he's funny.” Our androcentrism, having positioned men as inherently more valuable humans than women, has kept us from holding these guys accountable for their actions.

## So let's go back to #Charnagate.

The stage has been set for something like this for a long time. We've been evolving beyond the limitations of language, and challenging the imbalances we've inherited from a forever of bullshit. This feminist fire has been burning in Chicago for a few years now. And now, thanks to a dumb comment by a powerful woman, the community has been engulfed.

Women suddenly felt empowered to open up about experiences they'd kept secret, frustrations they'd only spoken about amongst themselves. We saw conversations once reserved for kitchen corners at house parties leap into the spotlight. Men were shutting up and listening and evaluating their behavior. Of course there were perhaps too many men who feared a “witch hunt,” who searched their histories for any misstep an angry woman might use against them. There were a lot of “See? Not me!” white-knight posts from well-intentioned men who perhaps wanted to distance themselves from the Bad Guys. And the Bad Guys, for the most part, were noticeably silent. But overwhelmingly, the reaction was productive and led to long overdue action in the community.

We've seen men and women take responsibility for their own prejudices and problems and start to grow and change.

Men have been examining their own behavior, women have been speaking up. What a great start.

When news broke about *Trailer Park Boys* actor Mike Smith's arrest after assaulting a woman, costar Lucy DeCoutere quit the show. She won't work with a bad dude. Right now, that's what we as a community need to do. We need to break off our personal and professional relationships with our community's known predators, regardless of their talent. We need to hold people accountable for their behavior and comments, on and off stage. That's the only way they'll grow and change. We need to stop compromising our values, our good hearts, and our commitment to equality. We need to hold ourselves responsible for what this community and ultimately what this industry can be, instead of playing into the same old bullshit.

We're told not to be too sensitive. Not to sweat the small stuff. To have a thicker skin. But it's saying "he" when you mean "they" that perpetuates male superiority. And it's demanding that women be passive and pretty to be attractive to men that quiets us up and makes us stop being goofy when we're kids. And it's casual sexism that fosters the environment that protects and harbors predators, abusers, and harassers. Anton Chekhov put some very valuable words into a woman's mouth in his play *Uncle Vanya*. "The world won't be destroyed by war or fire, but by the petty little violences we inflict upon each other every day." To paraphrase—Even I, a Russian man in 1896, can recognize that microaggressions are real. And they matter. And they'll be our undoing.

So let's stop. Let's change. It'll make for better comedy. And besides—this shit gave birth to Caillou. And isn't that reason enough to undo it?

LUCIA RIEUR

# Good Show!

Please accept the following as my formal petition to ban the phrase “Good show!”

There’s an inherent bias I need to acknowledge: I hate compliments. I’m awful at receiving them and I only genuinely trust them when they are third-party compliments. Huh? Third party whats? Third-party compliments are the greatest thing in the world: the product of someone telling you a compliment that they overheard another person say.

Them: Hey, you! Our mutual friend was saying how genuinely they appreciate your presence.

You: What!? A brief reminder of the human capacity for good? Thank you!

Third-party complimenting is the sweetest action. It is not stealing a compliment and giving it as your own; it sites sources and keeps receipts. With third-party compliments, there is no question that the intention was positive and that the original speaker was honest. With a regular compliment, anxiety can sneak in. *Did the speaker really mean that? Oh, they had to give a compliment. Did I compliment them first? If I did, they can’t possibly be honest, as compliments have an unspoken reciprocity.* Disagree? Next time you compliment someone, see how they

respond. If it's with a compliment, you can send me a check % The Hambook.

Out in the world, the social norm of compliments is mostly harmless (albeit annoying and momentarily anxiety-inducing). In improv, it's convoluted. I'm not asking you to give in-depth notes about what the performer or team could have done better. While constructive criticism is important, that's not the role of an audience member. But "Good show!" has become a tired phrase.

Telling a performer, "Good show!" is the improv equivalent of saying, "Oh, fine, thanks!" to "How've you been?" Just as "fine" can be a nicety that we use when we don't want to bring others into the grittiness of our lives, so can "good show." The only difference is I very rarely hear improvisers even asking audience members how the show was. The unsolicited nature of a "Good show!" should make it feel more sincere- but it doesn't when it comes from within the community (if any non-improvisers happen across this essay, please feel free to keep your "Good



artwork by Kat Wertzler

shows" coming—they boost my self-esteem for a moment before my anxiety returns me to homeostasis).

Rather, I have found that there are three main scenarios where improvisers interact with "Good show!:"

1. When their team is talking about their show
2. When they've just done a show
3. When they've just seen a show

While they each carry their own issues, they can all be addressed by my obvious and perhaps trite plea for us to cut “Good show!” out of our vocabulary forever.

So your team is talking about your show! Maybe it sounds a little something like this:

**Coach:** How’d you feel?

**Teammate:** Good show, I had fun!

**Coach:** Why’d you feel good?

**Teammate:** Huh, uh, well, it was a fun show.

**Coach:** What was fun about it?

**Teammate:** I like playing with my team!

Fantastic! It’s so great that we have fun with our friends onstage. In fact, sometimes that level of fun between players can be what turns a bad show into an okay show or an okay show into a great show. For a few years, I was on a team that adored breaking the fourth wall. We loved how it allowed us to explore our realities and set up our teammates, while balancing the line of masturbatory behavior and art. Above all, these breaks opened up opportunities for us to have dumb fun that we would then use to inform the rest of the show. One teammate’s immense, genuine love for Ocean’s 11 could lead us to spend the rest of our set in a heist. Our resident Danny Ocean’s love for the subject was contagious and the rest of the team loved matching the energy. Ground breaking improv? Maybe not! However, the fun contagion spread to our audience and created what would be defined as “A Blast.”

Perhaps having fun is the end goal either for the individual performer or for the team, but that needs to be communicated before it becomes the metric for a show’s

success. “Fun show!” is just as easy a trap to fall into as “Good show!” One person’s fun show may not be another’s. That’s okay. Maybe your teammate gets off from a batshit, bananas tag-run! Or they’re hot for being edited into solo-scenes! Or they’re absolutely gaga for absurdity! A team needs varying definitions of fun to produce an interesting show from varying creative sensibilities. This is where team communication comes into play.

If my team hadn’t communicated with each other about fourth wall breaks, the same show could have flopped. We need to know what our teammates have fun doing so we can set each other up for success. But when we gorge ourselves on our own idea of fun, we potentially starve our teammates from fun of their own. I don’t think we spend thousands of dollars on classes just to have fun. I don’t think we rehearse weekly just to have fun. Or pay for rehearsal spaces and coaches out of pocket just to have fun. I think we care about improv as an art. I think we really care about continuing to grow even when we’re out of classes. If fun was all we cared about, I would have never witnessed frustrated teammates sitting through post-show notes with their bodies poised to bolt out at the soonest possible moment and I would never participate in any self-flagellation over choices: *Was that a selfish tag? Why did I make them a pedophile? Geez, I was heavy in that show while some people barely went out.* If we don’t care about growing and putting out work we’re proud of, we need to question our motives.

As a firm believer in practicing what you preach, I’ve been actively trying to combat this from within my own teams. The result can be a little ugly. While my teammates were talking about the scenes they enjoyed and how the show

was *good* and *fun*, I abrasively blurted out, “I didn’t like that show, I don’t think it was good.” I was met with defensive examples of what we did well. And it’s true- we did have select moments of doing well! But from my perspective, it also wasn’t a good show! Nothing was connected, scenes lacked clarity, and we were all flopping around looking for common ground.

When everyone is saying, “Good show!” it can be increasingly difficult to dissent, to speak up and say, “We’ve had better! I felt this show was okay at best and I think there are some things we need to work on to improve the quality of our work.” In my efforts, I’ve come across as aggressive and negative. Whether it was real or imagined up by my own anxiety, I felt as if people on my team wanted space from me for the rest of the night. I later sent them a message saying sorry for *how* I spoke but not for *what* I said. It’s called breaking a habit for a reason. Things can shatter and get messy. So apologize! Reinforce your love for your friends while standing by your ‘not-good’ feelings. Are we so afraid that we feel the need to sweep the lackluster under a rug of *good*?

A couple years back, I was in a show which was alright at best: energy was low, we slit someone’s throat for no reason, and lacked strong POVs. In notes, our coach started off by saying, “I mean, you all know it was a fine show. But you also know that though you guys are good enough to get away with a fine show, you can do better.” There’s no need for this to be something that we only allow coaches to say to us. It sets up such an easy framework of acknowledging former success and future potential simultaneously.

So you just did a show! You feel okay about it and aren't going to use it as a reason to quit improvising anytime soon, but it certainly wasn't very good. Maybe the house was quiet, maybe you got in your head about something you or a teammate said, or maybe you're having a bad day. Whatever the reason is—we know when we don't have good shows. I'll be the first to admit when I'm being too hard on myself. I'll also be the first to admit that a lot of shows aren't going to be that good or memorable. That is not a bad thing! I can't remember every peanut butter sandwich I've ever had, but I still love eating peanut butter sandwiches.

I can remember a couple of peanut butter sandwiches I had in college. I was in my dining hall fixing myself a post-dinner PB and bread when I eyed chocolate chips and mini marshmallows at the dessert station. I plopped those suckers on that sammy and popped it all into the panini press. Crunchy bread followed by goopy peanut butter intermittently swirled with chocolate with pockets of intense marshmallow sweetness. A magnum opus. If someone came up to me while I was eating my panini-pressed PBCC&M and said, "Good sandwich!" I'd send a humble, yet proud, "Thank you," their way. If someone came up to me and said, "Good sandwich!" while I was eating a plain PB sandwich that we both know was an average sandwich at best, I would wonder, *"Why do they feel the need to say that? Do they pity me and my sandwich?"* My sandwich would taste worse.

While it's important to assume best intent when someone says, "Good show!" that doesn't change the fact that hearing "Good show!" often blows. During an extended run a team of mine was on, someone on the team we were paired with would tell me, "Good show!" every week. It was weird! It was



also not true! My team and I would talk and acknowledge that while it wasn't a good show, there were merits. My "Good show!"-giving friend was not being mean, but it's frustrating to feel as if you have to silence your thoughts and say, "Thank you," so as to not come across ungracious. So don't! Still say "Thank you," because you do have a heart, but then share your thoughts on the show.

"Hey, wait a minute! Can't that sound self-deprecating or as if I'm fishing for compliments?" If your tone oozes with self-pity, maybe. If you keep your cool, no. Constructive criticism is not an insult even when it's self-directed. Point out things you liked in your show while setting goals for the next. Still feeling uncomfortable? Remind yourself that in any other artform, this is just how people talk. Musicians don't gush over each other's flat notes after concerts. Bakers don't ask for recipes while swallowing down another's burnt cinnamon buns. Mathematicians will straight up say, "No, you solved that wrong. It's not 3.13, it's  $\pi$ ."

**Them:** Good show, You!

**You:** Thanks! I thought we definitely did a great job of keeping up energy and I'm looking forward to improving our grounded scenes.

**Them:** Wow! I love that you actually give a shit about this stuff!

We create our culture. By practicing honesty in these conversations, we're reinvesting ourselves in the same vulnerability that we love to watch on stage. Moments ago our audience had enough faith in us to watch a set that was probably fine, but could have been awful. After shows, we can either build upon this trust through our discourse or we can throw it away.

So you just saw a show! You have some peers who performed and you had a fine time overall, but for whatever reason, the show was ultimately just another drop in the bucket. It was fine. You certainly don't regret coming but it's nothing to write home about. You see your peer, you have the urge to say, "Good show!" DON'T! "Good show!" is ultimately a disservice to the performer and a cop-out by the giver. I know what you're thinking: "Lucia! I went to the show to watch and enjoy it, not to give notes on it or, I don't know, write an essay on improv theory!"

Unfortunately, I'm selfishly asking more of you, sweet improviser-showgoer. "Good show!" is easy. "Hey! That character that you did with the bugle-like claws who just wanted to hold a balloon but popped everything they touched was some freaking dumb fun!" is hard. It's verbose. It's clunky. It takes way longer to say. But—it's thoughtful. It's aware. It's shining a light on what hit, and by default what did not. Your peer did a 20-some minute set in maybe an hour-long show. Can you not remember one thing they said that made you laugh? What about a character you liked? Maybe a move that tickled you? A reference you loved? A silly voice? This is not asking you to have a hyper-critical eye; it's asking you to remember the fun you had five minutes ago.

Can you genuinely not remember one part of the show that you enjoyed? If you can't, "Good show!" is only giving *you* comfort. It's not altruistic. It doesn't promote growth. It's not supportive. It is lying. No one expects to be told, "Good show!" Question why you feel the need to say it. Imagine how you'd reply if your peer responded with, "Thanks so much! What made you think that?" If you really can't think of anything and feel the need to speak, tell your peer, "I love watching you play!" or maybe throw an "I'm glad I got to

come tonight!” out there. Or, don’t say anything at all, sweet pea. Remember: you were there to watch, not talk.

We shouldn’t get stuck in our heads about having perfect shows or good shows for that matter! However, the frequency with which we say, “Good show!” supports the norm that a good show is a given. The improv scene is becoming oversaturated—a fantastic problem to have. Yet most of the time we say, “Good show!” it’s not to simply make someone feel welcome. As a community that is based on support, there is a fear of coming across as unsupportive. Our audience members are often our peers. Our peers are often our performers. The way we speak to one another impacts both our personal and professional relationships.

In a city bursting with talent, your reputation with regard to attitude and character can be the determining factor to what shows you’re asked to do. People who are negative or hard to work with have a way of being phased out; kindness is worth more than talent. More importantly, these are our friends we’re talking about! We know how shitty shows can feel and want to be sure they realize that their worth is not defined by a 10:30 pm show on a Wednesday to an audience of seven. It would take a huge shift for us to all start engaging in radically honest language and say things like, “That show was okay. I laughed, but I felt your pacing was off and that the team could work on editing to help this in the future. The potential is definitely there though and I’m excited to see what you do in the future.” Instead, we focus on reassuring our friends in a manner that feels artificial. As improvisers, we oscillate between the roles of performer and spectator. We have a greater responsibility to our community to engage with shows in an active, radically empathetic

manner. In an art form that relies on vulnerability and creativity, “Good show!” is a warm-hearted indifference: a kind but ultimately useless gesture.

MEGHAN BABBE

# Screaming in my Freezer

I grew up next door to a very beautiful girl. Her name was Christian and we would carpool to school and volleyball practice together. She was 5'10, blonde and gorgeous. When Christian and I first became friends we were in middle school and we had a lot in common. We both dressed pretty much the same, and had the same hairstyle: hair parted straight down the middle. She pulled it off. I did not. The gap between Christian and I widened as we got older. I remember the first day she picked me up for volleyball camp and she was wearing tiny spandex shorts. I could NOT get into that. "Well, if that is what you are comfortable in!" I insisted as I climbed into the car wearing what can only be described as the athletic version of khaki capris. Christian started wearing makeup and I started having my mom braid my hair. Two braids on either side of my head. Braids two days a week and then you can wear it down all crimp the rest of the week! Fellas, form an orderly line.

Christian started having boys talk to her at her car after school and I started lying about having gotten my period. "Ugh yes, it sucks! And it only kind of hurts, right? I mean,

that's what mine is like, for sure. Welp, I'm off to be the oldest person at my tap class! I just took up tap! I'm 16!"

I knew that Christian was cool and I knew that I was not. But I spent YEARS pretending to know what she was talking about and liking what she liked. It. was. Exhausting. I liked wearing cartoon turtle t-shirts. I liked wearing a white tank top as a bra. I had fun doing tap! I liked myself.

Flash forward fifteen years as a woman in comedy, I often feel like I'm back in that car riding shotgun while Christian talks to me about how hot Sean Patrick Thomas is in *Save the Last Dance* while I'm still focused on how cool Julia Styles' combo of hip hop/ballet was during her Juilliard audition. As a feminist in comedy, I feel pressure to express myself and my beliefs in ways that at times, don't feel authentic to me.

I've been in Chicago doing comedy for the past 8 years and during that time, a lot has changed in the world. One of these things has been, thankfully, more light shed on the inequality that exists for women in every field. But this has also brought about some unique challenges. Why has something I believe in so wholeheartedly created so much complexity and ambivalence for me when it comes to my comedy?

If fifteen year old me had been asked to describe her "personal brand" it absolutely would have included the phrase "animal friends." Nowadays, being asked to do that is more painful than period cramps (It does hurt! Everyone lied to me!). The debate about how much of a person's internet presence should contain political commentary, versus how much of it should be jokes or authentic reflections on how cute their friends are, is ongoing. And as a feminist comedian, I feel all sides of this debate/pressure immensely. What's the correct ratio? Should 1 out of every 3 posts be about

feminism? What if it's a day everyone else is posting about a certain topic? Why do we say "suck my clit" when that sounds like a pretty horrible thing to have happen to you and shouldn't we be using that phrase to better educate people about how to actually stimulate a clitoris? These are the questions I ask myself.

If I don't incorporate feminism into my brand, am I not participating in these important conversations? I left Facebook two years ago when the comedy community in Chicago was calling out the years of abuse and harassment that had been plaguing it. I deleted Facebook not so that I could tell people I did it at parties and they'd shout, "Good for you," as they carried me from room to room on their shoulders, giving me money which was great but also respect which was better, but because I felt totally overwhelmed. I couldn't get online everyday without feeling a sense of dread and sadness. If I really posted my feelings, it would have just been long videos where I screamed in my freezer. But what of the likes?

I feel like if I don't adopt feminism as a clear part of my "personal brand" that I am not participating in an important conversation. I feel like if I don't weigh in on every issue or news story that I'm not making it clear where I stand. While the conversation extends in feminism, I think we can all recognize that the important work in intersectionality can be done away from Instagram stories.

If you had asked 15 year old me how she would describe herself it would definitely been, "Hermione as a Dixie Chick." Answering that question now is much more complicated but still contains some version of the Dixie Chicks. While expressing feminism online can sometimes feel like a performance, there is pressure to carry that over into

reality. Take the character you are performing online and bring her to life.

There is a rise of coveted titles like “bad bitch” or “kween” and while, like Christian referring to senior guys as “yummy,” it seems freaking awesome, I don’t know that it is authentic to who I am. But I hate the feeling of being stuck between either being a “bad bitch” or a “boring bitch.” That the way I may choose to express myself isn’t just a weakness, it is what makes me uninteresting. And if the internet has taught us anything, it’s that we should all be very, very interesting.

I have a nephew who is 2½ (follow me on all platforms for adorable nephew content) and the other day after a bath he was walking around with a hand mirror when he discovered that he could use the mirror to look at his own ass. This delighted him and while I laughed at him at the time, it is exactly how I have felt trying to navigate a way to post FEMINIST CONTENT that is articulate but funny and somehow different from what everyone else is saying. And to be honest, what he was doing looked like a lot more fun. Christian is doing well. She lives in Las Vegas and is married with kids. She appeared in the background of a *Real World* episode once. She looked very cool. More than that, she looked like herself. I hope that whenever women take the stage they can feel like themselves, in whatever that means to them. If you feel pressure to perform feminism based on how you’ve seen it performed, shed that feeling of responsibility because if you are truly a feminist person, you’ll always be a feminist improviser, however that looks and sounds.



ATRA ASDOU

## Ins and Outs

Hello. I am an ethnically ambiguous performer. Oh no. Should I start with that? Is that “MY BRAND?” Is that what I feel deep down inside me, or is that the role I think theaters want me to play? That which will set me apart from others, get me noticed or have me accepted as “woke?” Ugh... wait... will it actually set me apart from others, or will it leave me in this gray area where no one knows what to do with me? Should I have just introduced myself by name? A weird name people are terrified to mispronounce or altogether careless about? A name that makes me all at once different and “different.” Both outside and inside at the same time, like a clit-tickling Jackrabbit Vibrator™. Let me start again.

Hello. I am a clit-tickling Jackrabbit Vibrator™. No no no. That’s already a brand, doofus. You can’t just claim yourself as a pre-existing pleasure brand! Non-sexual metaphors for ins... and... outs... OK!

Hi. I am a plastic-topped, circular, wooden handheld maze. You know the one: Where you have to get all of the little silver ball bearings through impossibly small cherrywood notches until you reach the center of the circle-maze? You can find me at The Science Store and eventually, your junk drawer.

That game contains small, shiny marbles that roll around trying to find the ins and outs of the maze, repeatedly running the same path, reflecting its surroundings off its metallic sheen, all to get past the same notch that all its other chrome homeys have gone through. The cramped doors are the manufacturer's tributaries, symbolizing gateways toward success; these are the machine cut passages, that when busted through reward the pleasure centers unlike anything else.

It's addicting. To want to bust through and get the all of the validation that comes from reaching the center. Success! Finally! Sweat, tears, years and money have been poured into reaching that sweet, sweet center! I've followed the set path and got my reward! But guess what? It is temporary. Fleeting. You have to gear up and pour out more bodily fluids, clocks and cash all over again on the next thing and it may not be as successful. And you start to doubt your success and work... it wasn't "cool" to play that game for so long, and all your friends are actually into much cooler games because it's not the 1800's and we have computers now and don't need Edwardian puzzles, stupid.

Sometimes, the work you put in and momentary success you felt from it doesn't matter when feelings of shame and inadequacy show up. When they rear their heads, the feeling of pride in goals that have been accomplished goes away and the mind races to point out every shortcoming. Shame and inadequacy appear right when strived-for opportunities have not panned out, and they force your peepers onto other people's papers while saying, "You aren't succeeding because you're spending too much time doing the wrong thing (even though said thing is what you've possibly enjoyed doing). And it is the wrong thing because it isn't what everyone else has done or is striving to do. To get in, you have to be what

everyone else likes.” And if your shame and inadequacy are like mine, they also tack on a, “now that I’ve exhausted you and blown out any ideas of your place in the world, what you deserve, who you are, and what you’ve done with your life, I dare you to try going about your day. When you inevitably fail to gather the energy to motivate yourself I’ll be there as you spiral farther down into a pit of guilt.”

Hi. My name is Atra, and this is the third page, where I finally tell you my thesis: navigating the impermanent state of being “in” or “out,” whether it’s by how you identify as a human being, your play-style or how you are accepted—or not—by your fellow human beings or institutions, is very a very draining part of being an improviser/actor/comedian/generally creative person. It’s amplified if, by your very genetic make-up and lifestyle, you start out life on the “minority” side of society.

When I was younger, my parents hated the thought of me having a lot of friends. Lucky for them, I was a very heavy, mustachioed weirdo who didn’t know she was supposed to put on clean underwear every day. So making “too many” friends was never a concern. My mother is still known to offer her motto to my younger cousins as she chews through some glazed Jewel-Osco donuts over the phone: “A person shouldn’t have too many friends; one, two maybe. But that’s it.” I’ve chalked it up to a vestige of her Iraqi upbringing: Mistrust any living or non-living thing and keep family close (because family generally won’t actively work toward turning you in to the government and getting themselves wiped out in the process<sup>3</sup>).

So my mom didn’t like me to have too many friends and to this day she reminds me to trust sparingly. To some extent,

I get it: Keeping to yourself means the chances of you getting hurt are lower, but the other side of it is that it makes you afraid of being yourself around people, and so, like an Iraqi-American kid in the U.S., you adapt. But, it's not so easy to blend in. Then, years later, you try to figure out why you always feel "out" when you should feel "in" and it comes down to this: All this time you've been protecting yourself from stepping "in," so you're never really sure if you ever belonged, and anyways, it's safer to stay "out" by your own volition than to have someone cast you there. Is that confusing enough?

## SOME THINGS THAT A PAIR OF TINY DEMONS NAMED *INSECURITY* & *INADEQUACY* FEED ON:

- I keep applying to put up shows but no one accepts me!
- I keep auditioning and I keep getting rejected!
- I walk into [INSERT NAME OF INSTITUTION HERE] and nobody talks to me and it's hard to talk to them when I think they don't want me around. Nobody there looks like me! How am I supposed to get "in" and meet people if I'm not "in" anywhere?
- I finished all these classes and got nothing to show!
- I ask people to work on things with me and we don't end up following through!
- I guess so-and-so are best friends now because I see them hanging out via Facebook and Instagram posts, all the time! Are my improv friends my real friends or are we just friends because of improv? Where is the line between professional friendship for networking purposes and friendship for friendship's sake?!

- My peer group's "tribes" have already formed and I don't think I belong because they're already made! Everyone's always hanging out on Instagram Stories! Do I even have friends!? How do I make friends!? DOES ANYONE LIKE ME!? DO DO I LIKE ME!? WHO AM I!?
- Moose Tracks ice cream dipped in a bag of Lucky Charms. No bowl. Just spoon.

"But, Little Puzzle Maze," some might say to me, "You're at iO, you're 'in the mix' at Second City, you were asked to write for *The Hambook*. You must not feel these things, so you don't get to talk about feeling 'out!' There are people who would kill to be invited to those things!"

To which I say... Uh. Yes. I do feel these things. And I hope no one is killing anyone over improv. Or over anything at all, for that matter.

I can talk about feeling "out," because even when I accomplish something, I still am capable of feeling unsatisfied and "out." I mean, I don't feel this way all the time; I am generally confident and can name why I feel like I feel when I'm not, but this article isn't focusing on the times when I feel foot loose and fancy free. I, like you, am human. Unless you are a literate lemur, in which case I say, "Hi, ohmygod I love your stuff!!! I knew this day would come. Lemurs are so freaking cool, I mean your name is Latin for 'Spirits of the Night' but of course you know that, you can read!!"

Anyway, I am capable of feeling like I'm missing out on things I should be doing or could be doing, and allowing those feelings to hold me back from things I could be doing or should be doing. Sometimes, I can feel this way even when

I've reached accomplishments for which I've worked very hard. The usual response is, "Um, you should feel grateful. So many people don't have what you have." Which, in turn, for me, adds a layer of guilt. So I'd like to say:

To have one's experience compared to anyone else's experiences or lack thereof, or to be told to be grateful for where you are when you feel lost and are trying to get found, is sort of an invalidation of one's experience. And feeling "out" is a valid feeling, even for those who others view as very much "in." You wouldn't say to someone "Oh, I'm sorry your grandma died... but, like, you have SOOOO many other relatives, though." Would you? Maybe you would, you monster! Add on that juicy layer of *'ism* and you got women and people of color that are generally encouraged to settle, to keep from aspiring and dreaming as big as white male counterparts... to the point that when a woman or a person of color achieves number one status, it is a huge deal and is heroically celebrated. That's the narrative when those most popularly known and easily named off as "The Greatest" are mostly white men.

This kind of thinking may be where feeling "in" and feeling "out" comes from. That comparison. Have/Have Not.

I would like to be clear: I am not saying, "My feelings of exclusion are the only feelings that exist in this world and they are channeled through my body and no one else can or does go through this experience on any kind of relative level, ever. NOT EVER! I am the voice of what it is like to feel 'in' or 'out,' and I lay claim to it, and no one else can get to do that! COPYRIGHT, ME! 2017! WGA REGISTERED, BITCHES! TM!"

I am not saying that at all. That would be wrong of me. It would be wrong of anyone, I think. It doesn't matter where you're at. Insecurity and inadequacy continue to gnaw until they are sated on feeling part of something our community has labeled "big and rewarding," whether it's Second City, iO, The Annoyance, The Crowd, The Shithole, The Playground, The Bathrooms At A Subway Without Buying Something First. Doesn't matter where "in" is. Feeling gross while obsessively chasing "in" is better than feeling that dreaded lead of a societal weight that is "out."

"I don't like going to [INSERT NAME OF INSTITUTION HERE] because I don't feel welcome," is a slightly different beast. "It's so cliquey." There's a theory I have about the "cool kids" of comedy. Assuming we were all once some variant of bullied nerd, all these bullied nerds from school got cool in comedy and finally have some ownership over their social lives. So, they close themselves off and protect what they have earned. I was at a show where the vibe was very chill, and it was known to welcome all sorts. I felt invisible. I noticed I'd literally been standing outside of a human circle other performers had formed, chatting and laughing post-show. This also happened at a party later that week. I noted that pattern... I was at a party and at a show, both times outside of a circle of people trying to find a way to step in and converse. And once I did, both times, not one person made eye contact with me. So, after awkwardly laughing along to a joke I've only caught half of, and trying to add my take before being talked over, I mumbled that I needed to go to the bathroom to the person next to me (very good party skills, Atra) and shoved my hands into my pockets and walked with my head down to a toilet I don't need to use

until I pieced together some semblance of confidence to walk back out and try again and again and again.

I have a sweeping, unproven, generalized theory that a comedian who has reached some sort of fulfilling success is the happiest person on Earth. For about a minute. Then, they think of all the things that could go wrong, and how they're perceived, and what they are trying to portray, and it all goes to shit until something comes along and makes them happy again, like [INSERT ANY KIND OF APPROVAL OR VALIDATION HERE, BY SELF OR OTHERWISE].

So is being "in" ever enough?

There's comfort in knowing that no matter how "in" you are, you will always be on the outside of something else. It shifts. Sometimes even outside becomes in, too. *The Chris Gerbard Show* comes to mind: That show would be considered alternative even to the alternative, or outsider, and now it's being replicated by comedy fans, because they love it. It's "in" to do "outside" stuff like *The Chris Gerbard Show*, which means in a few years, it'll be "hack." And oh god! What an awful thing to be! (See a separate non-existent article titled: "Stop Using 'Hack' to Make Yourself Sound Cooler.")

Something on which I've been *ruminating on* (a word that I like because it reminds me of cows chewing, and of course the lemurs reading this know that—they read!) is being comfortable enough to accept that "out" feeling not as a rejection, but as a counter to "in" and knowing that where there's an "in," there's an "out" and visa versa. I'm of the mind that nothing will ever be stable in anything that has to do with the entertainment business: financially, mentally, socially, or otherwise. I can only control what I put out and the work that I do. Why chase what people are considering



“in” for the sake of being “in” when it’s just going to change anyways?



PETER KIM

# The Room of Requirement

You know what my favorite part of the Harry Potter world is? The Room of Requirement. Not only did Harry, an orphan, finally get to see his parents in it, the room was a sentient, ever-morphing space that gave him exactly what he needed, when he needed it. As a performer, the audience has played that role for me throughout my career. In 2009, I started doing stand up, and I required the audience to be my therapist. I told them my innermost thoughts, and learned that they would let me, as long as I made them laugh. As I found improv, the audience became a partner, in more ways than one. And as I started performing sketch comedy at the Second City, the audience became my master.

“Your only job tonight is to stand up there for 3 minutes, and try not to shit yourself.” It was a rainy Monday evening, and I had just taken my first stand up class with Kurtis Matthews—a salty veteran comic in San Francisco. “Ok, I can do this. I can ‘not shit myself,’” I thought. “Coming up next is a very funny guy, please give it up for Peter Kim!” My stomach free-fell into my pelvic floor as my bowels attempted

to escape through my rectum. There was a muted smattering of applause as my legs transmuted into lead pillars. I hoisted myself on stage, gave the host the limpest of handshakes and looked up, directly into the spotlight. As I clumsily reached for the microphone Kurtis' curmudgeonly voice rang through my head. "Always take the mic off the stand and get it out of the way. If you don't, you will always try to hide behind it."

He was right. The mic stand felt incredible in front of me. The flimsy black pole somehow created a powerful barrier between me and the audience. Some of them were paying attention, others were scribbling notes into their tiny notebooks. It felt warm behind the pole, as if that rickety piece of cold metal shielded me from their piercing judgmental thoughts. I was terrified that they would not like me, or worse yet, hate me.

After what felt like an eternity, I pulled the stand away and set it aside, and I felt powerful! Naked and vulnerable, I launched into 3 minutes of absolute hack horeshit—scorn worthy premises on different types of alcohol affecting me in different ways, all buttoned up with a closer about fucking my dog (I didn't even have a dog). The audience was silent. I was afraid they would hate me, but the truth is I hated myself. Nothing about my set was funny or revelatory, and they let me know through their silence. As I sulked off stage, Kurtis came by and asked, "Did you shit yourself?" "No," I said. He looked away and sighed, "Then go back and do it again."

I went back every week and started to honestly talk about my life, instead of trying to be funny. The audience started to nod and laugh as I revealed embarrassing things about myself and why I found it funny. I got to say a lot of difficult things I would have never been able to say out loud. Being raised by Korean Christian immigrants, I had a difficult time coming

out. No one I knew was gay and when I asked my mother if she knew any gay Koreans, she responded with, “There are no gays in Korea. And if there are, they’re probably Japanese.” So when I realized I could say anything to my audience, I always knew I’d come out of the closet to a group of random strangers in the dark corner of a bar. It was a long process, but the audience was there to give me the courage to say the words that have been swimming around in my heart, out loud: “I love man-cakes.” I said it over and over again until I was strong enough to say it to my friends, family, and eventually Facebook.

As I honed my set, 5 minutes at a time, I was starting to get bumps of endorphins from making the audience laugh, when I wanted them to laugh. There was an addictive power to comedy that I didn’t realize existed, nor realized that I needed. The instant validation of a laugh became the best drug and I was trying to score every night. I was so unhappy for so long, it seemed like I finally found a panacea. But like most drugs, comedy was just a patch for a deeper wound that needed healing: Loneliness.

Soon after I started stand up, I took an improv class as a way to become a more natural stand up comic. On the first day of class I learned that I didn’t have to write my own jokes, and could just show up and act dumb with a group of funny people. Finally, some new friends who accepted me for who I was, and I could be gay as hell around! Ok, duh, I was hooked. Stand up, and the lonely nights of waiting at open mics took a backseat as I spent most of my time and energy obsessing about this new art form.

When I started out in improv, my audience was made up of my peers, my coaches and at rare times, non comedy friends that came to support my new obsession. In those

training years, my audience became my mentor. The audience, as a whole, is smarter than us, therefore we must always attempt to be a step ahead of them. Their laughs told me what to heighten and how to do it. I tried on different choices and learned what worked for my voice and what worked better for awkward white boys. I learned timing, especially the space between the laughs. I learned how to notice tension and silence, and how to build it before breaking it. The audience taught me the rhythm of comedy.

In 2012, I left San Francisco to pursue comedy full time in Chicago. As I grew into my comedic voice and started to perform improv regularly, my audience changed. In short form improvisation, my audience immediately became part of my shows, where they consistently inspired my games and scenes with their suggestions. In long form improvisation, the inspiration came at the top of my show, and whatever inputs the audience gave us after that got organically folded into the piece. I started to notice a symbiotic relationship with them, rather than one of manipulation like stand up.

As I advanced and started getting reps under me, I learned that the audience can be like a Stradivarius violin: if primed and skillfully played, they are capable of myriad beautiful notes and timbre in a single performance. Their laughs ranged from reactions of surprise, recognition, repetition, recall, tension, release and, of course, status. I learned why people laughed and how they did it. The loud guffaw of a surprise laugh was noticeably different than a cackle of a status laugh, a knowing, higher-pitched sound that signified the relief of watching a fool with lower status on stage. After a while I started to realize that the show cannot exist without the exact amalgam of people in the room and the show that has been done can never be done

again. It's like we were all in on an inside joke together that cannot be retold, you just had to be there. The audience became the nth player on my team, my partner in crime.

Audiences start becoming tricky at the professional level, which is a singular experience in Chicago. When I was lucky enough to be cast in one of those rare jobs performing live comedy at the Second City, I had to trade in the comfort of like-minded peers for a paying constituency. Art was compromised as commerce became my King. My audience changed from fellow improvisers and theater/comedy fans to corporations, weekend warriors, bachelorette parties and worst of all, tourists. I quickly learned that they didn't pay to learn a life lesson through our beautifully acted piece of satire, they paid for us to make them laugh, and it better be happening quick and often. And why not? They worked hard all week, then dedicated a part of their precious weekend to our show. Throw in booze and late hours and our audience started to get rowdy and feel entitled to the entertainment they paid for, manifesting in talking back, screaming and yelling inappropriate comments. The audience became my master and I, their slave.

I had gone from a warm, supportive, motherly feel of an improv audience, to the wild, raucous, and at times, contemptuous audience of an Old Town comedy club. In 2016, I left my job at The Second City after experiencing increased aggression from our audiences. People shouted, "pussy" to my castmate during a sweet scene between a man and his depressed wife. They shouted, "don't clap for him," when I came out in drag in a scene about two friends discussing gender fluidity. They yelled, "whores," at my female cast mates, and whispered, "fag," as I would leave the stage during a blackout. This broke my heart. 7 years ago, the

audience allowed me to come out of the closet and now they were yelling hate speech.

The worst part of it was that not only did we face the aggression, we were not able to engage with them due to the nature of scripted work. Because we implemented the fourth wall, we couldn't break character or the scene and it infuriated me. I would often break scene anyway to call out their behavior and be promptly admonished by producers for doing so. "Let the house take care of them, just do your job." As this behavior continued, the job became less and less fun. Here I was, with a revue and cast I loved so much but every day I walked into work, I shuddered at the thought of having a cantankerous experience with my audience.

After I left, lots of people had comments, opinions, and more hateful things to say about what I should have done and how I should have handled these "obnoxious people." All of them were straight white men who could never be hurt by slurs, but were itching to tell me how I should feel about them, and how comedy ought to be brave. And then came that damn sign<sup>4</sup>, and reviewers stopped reviewing shows at Second City, and instead lamented on how sketch comedy was dead because the audience was told that hate speech would not be tolerated. Fellow comedians came out of the woodwork to tell me how much they hated that sign, something that was put up after I left. Every single one of them also happened to be straight white men who were disgusted at the idea of "censorship of the audience;" literally none of them worked at Second City. But everyone is entitled to their opinion, right?

As a comedian, I knew that I was never going to be impervious to heckling, but I never wanted to be stuck helpless behind a fourth wall again. I wanted direct access to



a dialogue with my audience so I decided to go back to doing stand up. The truth is I had never stopped performing stand up during the last 7 years, but it was always deprioritized even though it was my first love.

When I initially went back to stand up, I decided to only do crowd work—meaning I would not do any pre-planned material and only use the dialogue with my audience as my set. I wanted to take the best of improv and stand up and smash it together. At first I was terrified at the prospect of improvising stand up, but it turned out to be quite liberating, and I found the performances to be way more intimate and engaging than either traditional stand up or improv.

Soon after I left the Second City, I started a show called *Crowd Sourced* and invited stand ups and solo acts to ditch their material and only do 8-10 minutes of crowd work. As expected most performers were not thrilled with the idea, but ended up having incredible, magical sets. The audience was engaged and supportive like an improv audience, but the performers got to speak directly to them like a stand up show. The vulnerability of the performers was palpable and the show could not exist anywhere else. We jumped without a net, and the audience leaned in and caught us.

Comedy, as an art form, is unique in that it solely exists to elicit an instant response from our audience. And whoever says, “I’m not a comedian, I’m an improviser,” is full of shit. Because let’s face it—even if you are doing the most grounded, longest form of improv, and you are the most dedicated actor and craftsman, if you aren’t pulling laughs, you’re not doing it right. Nobody’s trying to watch an improv show that’s not funny (unless you’re doing dramatic improv). Without laughs, there is no energy, no rhythm, no timing. Therefore without the audience our work cannot exist.

Furthermore, while most other forms of art can be practiced privately in our workspaces, we must practice public failure and humiliation in order to get better at comedy. Thus the fates of the comedian and the audience are tragically intertwined.

So, what then is the role of our audience to us? I think it varies depending on the night, the gig or the venue. The audience is a clean slate that become projections of what I need them to be, at that moment in my life, my very own Room of Requirement. Nowadays, as I perform stand up, I try to keep in mind the lessons I learned from my journey and have a real dialogue with my audience. One thing I do know for sure is that for the audience, the role of the performer has always been the same: to entertain. The audience does not care how we're feeling or where we're coming from or what bit we're trying to work out. The audience is there to laugh, escape and at best, be inspired. And in order to entertain, I try to be as open and vulnerable as possible by eliminating any barriers between me and my audience; whether that be my insecurities, the weird mood I'm in that day, or a skinny black pole that holds the microphone.

SARAH WAGENER

# What We Wear & Why We Wear It: the Clothing Survey

On a Wednesday morning this past December, halfway through my hour-long work commute to Hyde Park, at a busy intersection in the Loop with hundreds of people around, a woman I did not know charged me, grabbed me, and punched me in the face. She yelled my race and gender identity before swinging and hitting her right fist into the left side of my skull. Like past traumas I have experienced in my life, this one has had far-reaching, powerful, lingering effects.

Like I do, like we do, I healed, and am healing. Healing came in many forms: therapy, warm food cooked by the other *Hambook* editors and neighbors, handwritten notes from friends, flowers sent from my siblings in Los Angeles, deep hugs from my parents in the Chicago suburbs. So often for me, though, the most comforting energy in a time of healing comes from engaging with art. And the fellow improvisers

and theatre artists in my life delivered art in this time of need in abound.

My then Harold team, Roundabout, prepared an incredibly thoughtful care package that came hand delivered in an NPR canvas tote. Alongside Oreos and bars of chocolate (I may or may not have a sweet tooth) was “Roundabout’s Feel Good Guide,” a carefully curated list of movies, music, and books that might give me comfort as I healed. One of the books listed on the “Feel Good Guide,” a book I had never heard of, was included on loan from a teammate and friend. The book was called Women in Clothes, written by Sheila Heti, Heidi Julavits, & Leanne Shapton. This book was so powerful during my healing, and it was, interestingly enough, the catalyst for *The Hambook’s* Clothing Survey.

As the book’s website<sup>5</sup> describes, “through original interviews, conversations, [and] surveys,” Women in Clothes “...explores the wide range of motives that inform how women present themselves through clothes, and what style really means.” The authors asked women about their clothing choices, and each chapter revealed a different conversation with a different woman, or a compiled summary of many women’s responses to the same question about clothing. I read a few chapters of the book each night before bed this past winter, sleeping next to it for a good portion of the healing period into spring. The book surprised me, made me laugh, rekindled my interest in fashion as a means of self-expression and even self-love. I loved learning about how other women think about the clothing they wear, how they make choices about what to wear and how to wear it. Slowly over the course of the spring, I began purging my closet of items that no longer felt that they fit my life or the energy I

want to embody. Just last week, I delivered a grocery bag full of dark-colored, high-necked sweaters to The Brown Elephant. I am finding so much joy in wearing bright colors, showing more skin, wearing bold prints and unique patterns. I'm feeling more lighthearted in dressing. I find myself taking up space in a different way.

As an improviser, I have always been very aware of what I wear onstage, what I have been taught about what to wear onstage, how the audience perceives me based on what I look like and how I dress, how I play into or fuck with that perception of who I am, and when and how I break "the rules" in dressing for improv shows. As I read Women in Clothes and thought about my clothing choices as they relate to improv, I wondered if other improvisers thought about the same kinds of things. At a *Hambook* meeting this past spring, I asked my sweet *Hambook* boys if I could develop a survey for Chicago improvisers inspired by the surveys in Women in Clothes. They enthusiastically said yes, and helped me make the survey better.

This spring, we sent the Clothing Survey via Google Forms to a variety of improvisers in the community representing different ages, identities, backgrounds, lengths of tenure, and experiences in the Chicago improv community. We received 69 responses (you can't make this shit up). Survey responses were collected anonymously, and computer IP addresses were not tracked. The survey consisted of 36 questions in several sections, including: Getting Dressed; Hair; Shoes, Hats, Accessories; Teachers and Institutions; and The Audience's Perception of You.

It's interesting; strangely, I feel like the effects of the event of last December have somehow been positive for me. My friends have heard me describe this attack as like receiving

a punch in the face by the universe that awakened me to what and who is meaningful to me in my life, and what is not working and thus can be released. Healing has shown me how much love and support I have in my life, and has reminded me of my own strength. It provided clarity that has led to me exploring a new direction in my life; I start a new job in mid-August. It has led me to making some more playful, more whimsical fashion choices (I'm looking at you, technicolor Zara sweater and you, bell-sleeved floral Nordstrom Rack button-down). And, it led to the creation of the Clothing Survey, the results of which I hope you find to be as powerful, as moving, as candid, as fun, as frustrating, and as brave as I find them to be.

Thank you to everyone who participated in this survey. Thank you for boldly being you in the fashion choices you make on and off stage. On behalf of the entire *Hambook* editorial team, I proudly present the summary of findings from *The Hambook's* Clothing Survey.

Sarah Wagener

## How would you describe a good outfit to wear in an improv show?

- One that provides the improviser with the confidence and comfort, and the ability to play without personal inhibitions.
- Depends on the venue. A smaller or more DIY space, I feel more flexibility in what to wear. Bigger venues = business casual.
- I like to cheekily say dress like your meeting a significant other's parents for the first time.
- It needs to:
  - a) look nice enough to show you give a shit

- b) not distracting (logos/text, obscuring face/eyes)
  - c) comfortable to play in
  - d) generally at the same level of dress as the rest of the team
- Comfort. As a woman, I leave no space for the audience to objectify.
  - Something that suggests you put some level of effort into it without trying too hard.
  - No boob or crack plz!
  - Clean clothes are always a good start!
  - An outfit that balances neutrality and style, an outfit that doesn't distract but still leaves room for individuality, self-expression, and comfort.

Do you ever wear certain clothing even though you know it may be impractical or difficult to wear while performing? If yes, why?

- Some shows/venues require dress code. I felt it was expected of me to be in a skirt/dress for Second City conservatory shows.
- Vanity, for sure. There's probably some sort of internalized misogyny behind it—perhaps something like “Well, at least I'll be valued by my appearance if not by my talent.” However, sometimes I think it comes from trying to trick myself into a better mood. There are times where I'm not really in the mood to do a show and wearing something that is impractical but that I like and feel good in can make me feel more show-ready.
- Sometimes I just wanna look cute and fun, and we're doing this for free so why not have that.

- I spent too many years doing Business Attire Improv™ in heels and I just find them to be uncomfortable. I also like feeling like I can do or be anything or anyone, and a flat shoe lets me do that.
- I will wear heels for sketch shows because I think it looks more professional, but they are trickier to perform in.

In your opinion, is there anything that should never be worn by an improviser while onstage?

- Flip flops!
- Nothing should be considered off limits.
- Anything that would inhibit movement or that looks like pajamas to a paying audience.
- I'm pretty anti-hat in improv since it can limit visibility of the actor's face.
- Cargo shorts have no place in anyone's closet, never mind on a stage.
- I guess there are things that are more practical, easier, more comfortable for the audience to see or the performers to wear. But I think attire rules can be icky.

Do you have body hair that you like to show off?

- I have chest hair. I might occasionally undo the top button on a shirt, not necessarily to show it off, but to just seem a little more casual/fun.
- Mmm... I mean I don't usually shave my pits or legs, but it's not something I need to brandish as some sort of performative feminist signalling.



## What did improv teachers teach you about dressing for improv shows?

- I've been told that as a woman, the audience should be focused on my improv, not my body, so I shouldn't show too much leg or cleavage.
- Dress with respect for the audience.
- "Your clothing should not be funnier than you are."
- Most of the rules were about women's hair, cleavage, and legs.
- To not wear things that would call attention to myself or put too much "personality" on stage—no hats. Nothing too sexy. Typical patriarchal BS. You have no idea how much I used to agonize over this shit.
- That everyone should wear pants.
- In the 90s, my Harold team coach made sure we never wore jeans. I wore colored denim on occasion.
- They emphasized minimizing distractions (logos, hats, jewelry) and maximizing movement.

## How do you conform to or rebel against the dress expectations at the theater where you most frequently perform?

- I'm a cis white man, so I think most of the expectations were developed with my convenience and comfort in mind.
- I made a basic rule for myself. Like a bar/floor that I don't go under. I can over dress but never go below the bar. Regardless of where I play.
- If I am getting paid, I will be much happier to comply with a dress code. If I'm not getting paid, I will make sure what I'm wearing is presentable, but I am much, much, MUCH

more likely to stray from a stricter dress code. Because... Pay Me.

- I don't. I'm boring and basic as fuck. I dress like a dad.
- I always did my own thing within certain boundaries. I wouldn't let them tame my hair or my titties, tho!
- I let myself wear what I want, which most often does not involve breaking any rules. I did wear sweatpants once because I felt beautiful in my outfit and the sweatpants were part of it.
- I want to respect whatever theater I'm performing at by looking like a professional (Professional in the sense that I'm representing a theater I'm proud of.)
- At Second City my nose-piercing makes me feel like I'm rebelling a bit even though it feels like every other person in the community has their nose pierced. Also even though I pin my hair back, I still feel like it is still pretty unkempt for their standards. At iO and CiC I don't really feel as if I have anything to rebel against? I feel like my style naturally jives with it.
- At the Annoyance I will literally wear whatever I want and treat my shows there as a time to try out fun outfits. At iO, I tone it down slightly meaning less ripped jeans and graphic tees, and at Second City, much more professional looking.
- I suppose I conform—although I prefer solid colors to plaid. There's just so much fucking plaid.
- I also found on my Harold team that there wasn't a uniform aesthetic for the group, or at least at each show some people would get really dolled up while others would look excessively casual and that disconnect annoys me and I think it can be distracting. On my team at CiC, I think

everyone tries to look nice and put together and I like to engage with that.

- I'm not afraid to perform in a t-shirt or shorts.

## How do you think the audience sees you when they see you onstage?

- I hope they see the character I am more than me.
- Tomboy-ish and casual.
- Generic white dude.
- Like some rebellious, middle aged, liberal arts professor.
- I think they see a nice looking person that is surprisingly very funny.
- I don't think I stand out too much, but I think as a femme presenting person there is a bit of "prove it" attitude. Like I have to prove that I deserve to be there.
- That I act masculine. Which is why I try to wear bold lipstick to offset my persona.
- Sexy kewtie pie weirdo. < - my dream. but who knows.
- As a huge dude.
- I think I probably come across as approachable, friendly, feminine, and relaxed. I likely fit their stereotype of "somewhat quirky, brunette comedy girl."
- They probably think I'm a little "wacky." I imagine they cast me in their minds as the "wacky best friend" character.
- I don't think about what the audience thinks about me.
- Unattractive but trying.

## Does the audience's perception of you matter to you?

- Yes, I don't like it when I feel that my look is taking over my performance, there are times when dressing effeminate makes other performers "pigeon hole" my "type" of

character, thus effecting my perception to an audience. I like being neutral to the audience, respectful looking and neutral. I like to own my own look.

- Of course.
- Absolutely not.
- Yes, only because it helps me to play to/against that type.
- Only in the sense that I care about the audience's perception or reactions, and I want them to feel at ease, and that their money was spent on something resembling a professional theatrical performance.
- Yes. I have subversive politics and am closer to bi than straight. But I'd rather be a trojan horse for my ideas than a literal expression of identity when I'm performing improv. That would be different if I were doing stand up or reading my work, playing music.
- Only insofar as they're the audience so THEY matter.

Do you dress to match that perception of you, or to counter that perception?

- The audience's perception of me personally makes absolutely no difference to me because me personally and what I give on stage are two very different things. What I want the audience to "get" about me is that I'm very fucking good at improv, and it truly does not make a difference what I wear or do not wear on stage. What I - Do- onstage is the only thing that matters. So, the perception of the audience based on what I'm wearing is not a thing I ever think about, nor is it something that I care to address.
- I don't know! In general, in my life, I think I try to look put together or dress with a particular style because I don't love my physical appearance, or at least don't think that other

people/our culture is predisposed to love how I look. So I try to temper that by dressing in a certain way that makes the rest of me digestible and understandable.

- Neither. I dress according to other concerns and interests, and the way I dress produces that perception. I don't consciously attempt to conform with or rebel against how I will be perceived.

## What are some things you admire about how other people dress in improv shows?

- I always admire a performer who has committed to a look that they enjoy and reflects their personality, even if it isn't personally appealing to me. When performers dress sharply I always assume they care about the show and as an audience member I feel comforted by that.
- I think I like when people dress to show care for a show but have a little bit of forward-thinking fashion mixed in. It's a tricky balance, because if you go too hard in dressing individualistically you risk standing out and in some ways affecting the group mind/cohesion. But if you can show you know how to dress I think it can draw an audience in.
- I like people who dress neutral.
- When people do wild, bold things, it's exciting.
- I like when you can tell someone feels good about what they're wearing.
- I do like a coordinated team look.
- When people don't all look the same.
- I came up outside of Chicago where there wasn't really any focus on what you wore to perform a regular improv show. I think it's nice-ish that people feel the need to be "more dressed up than the audience up here," but I also know for

*Sarah Wagener*

a fact that dressing up for a show does not matter. Does.  
Not. Matter.

DERRY MACDERMOTT

# Dear Cis Comedy Male Gays

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 LGBTQ+ 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. Because 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.



ALISON BYRNES

## Island Living

When I was three, my sister was born, and in a home video from around that age, you can hear me yelling, “Camera me! CAMERA ME!” whenever my parents tried to record her sitting in a tiny rocking chair or inching across our living room floor. In another tape, I’m 10, and we’re living in China for a few months because my dad is leading a study abroad trip. I’m recording a tour of our apartment for my friends back home, and I am commanding. I’m owning a spotlight that isn’t there, and forget a microphone—my voice is more than loud enough.

In both cases, these videos were unearthed when I was in high school, and I watched them with my jaw dropped. I didn’t recognize her—that shouting, smiling person—and I wished I did, that she felt more familiar. I wanted to be like her. Which meant that I must have peaked sometime between age four and 10. Which is fucking humbling—aren’t we supposed to get better with age? Instead of marveling at how much I had grown, I was realizing, instead, how fully I had lost this part of myself—my ability to ask for the attention of other people, to believe that that was okay, even to own that I needed it. The sadness I felt at seeing evidence that I did once have this ability told me I was worse off without it. As I grew

up, attention had come to feel like something I needed to apologize for, and when I let that happen, a part of myself went to sleep.

I sang and danced and acted when I was little. In fifth grade, I starred in our end-of-year play. But after that, I hung it all up in favor of what would occupy me for the next 12 years: being mediocre at sports. Tennis, basketball, skiing, rock climbing, golf, track, soccer, and swimming—you name it, I've been mediocre at it. My friends were all playing soccer, and I wanted to play, too. Youth sports are a religion in Western Washington, and once I was in the recreational sports pipeline, I didn't get out— Isn't adolescence all about going along to stay a part of the group? I was having fun with my friends, but as well all got older, they got really good. I was blessed with a wonderful, but inferiority-inducing group of friends who seemed to excel at everything they did. I was good enough to be on the team, but never to score any points. I got very comfortable being the most middle-talented person in the room, and I came to think that mediocrity was a fundamental part of my identity. I didn't consider that I was dedicating all of my focus and drive to things I didn't love, or didn't even always particularly enjoy. And over time, I stopped admitting that I even liked performing. It was a logical and helpful conclusion to draw, given that I hadn't performed for a decade. Instead, I was living on singing in the car, a short stint as a synchronized swimmer, and making my mom laugh at the dinner table.

The idea to move to Chicago to do improv after graduating college felt like it landed on top of me, out of thin air—I didn't have it, it had me—but as soon as it did, took on an air of inevitability. As graduation approached and plans had to be made, I watched myself make big decisions with

certainty and focus about something that had only recently surfaced in my conscious brain, and it surprised me. It was weird, but I didn't question it. It was weird that I didn't question it. The friend I was going to move with changed her plans at the last minute, and I was left with the prospect of either moving to Chicago entirely by myself or to another city that had more friends but no improv. Even though I knew it would mean building a life from scratch by myself, it only took me all of 36 hours, and a couple pro-con lists, to decide to move ahead with The Chicago Plan.

Although the plans I made with myself felt solid, the rest of the process didn't fall into place right away. I had spent so many years telling myself, and everyone around me, that I didn't enjoy attention, that I knew my plan wouldn't make sense to the people who knew me. When I started having to answer questions about what I was going to do after college, I said that I was moving because I wanted to write. That was true, and it still is, but I also knew that I could write anywhere and had no reason to move, by myself, to a city I'd never been to, if that was really my only goal. I signed up for classes as soon as I unpacked my suitcase, but told anyone who asked that I was only doing improv to make friends (no one pays \$300 every two months just to make friends, even though it was definitely true that I needed some). Once I started class, things didn't click into place the way I hoped they would, either. Classes asked for me to be the opposite of who I was used to being—reserved, cautious, private. Improv made me sweaty. I didn't enjoy it a lot of the time; a three-hour class was two-and-a-half-hours of anxious anticipation and boredom, and 30 minutes of doing scenes that gave me fear black-outs.

I was here, I was in classes, but I was scared to enjoy them, to try anything, to admit I wanted to get good. The years I spent telling myself that I wasn't a performer, that I didn't want or like attention, weren't going to fall away so easily. Those false beliefs had become tangled up with my sense of self and I struggled to undo them.

Looking back, I can see that when I was growing up, even through the noise of my loud denials, I still sensed that performing meant a lot to me. That made me afraid to fail at it, so I didn't try. If I did, and failed, whatever that might mean, I knew I would be far more devastated than when I didn't meet my expectations for sports-based achievement. And through sheer repetition, I had internalized a belief, calcified by fear, that I was destined to never be as good at the things I attempted as I wanted to be. Plus, the few times I dipped a tentative toe into the performing pool, I was shot down—one year, I screwed up the courage to audition for my high school's spring musical, and after I didn't make the chorus, returned to the familiar and decided to run track that spring instead.

Besides a fear of failure, my secretly held knowledge that I loved performing contained another kind of fear—a fear of being seen. The absence of this was what I saw, and envied, in those old home videos. For me, to ask for attention, whether implicit or explicit, means declaring yourself worthy and admitting a deficit at the same time—neither of which are things I'm comfortable with. As much as anyone else, I struggle with self-worth and self-esteem. But where I really excel is in grappling with self-reliance and self-sufficiency. No woman is an island, but I have tried to be—never really needing anything from anyone. I didn't travel here on purpose, but it's where I've ended up. When boats pass by, I



tell them that it's warm, and sunny, and I'm content. It's called the Island of Strong Independent Women, and on it I am everything I need. To ask anyone for anything, of any kind, is to admit reliance on another, and thus, defeat. If I sound like an idiot, I know. But still, I can't help but feel that to need, want, or even enjoy the attention of an audience is to admit that I'm not enough, that I need something from other people in order to be my happiest self. That's asking too much. The bald neediness is embarrassing.

I was listening to an episode of *Off Camera with Sam Jones* a few months ago, and I stopped in the middle of his interview with Jenny Slate to write down something she said. *"I like being looked at as a performer, I really want to please people, I need a lot of attention, and I want to show that I'm special. And I feel at peace with that, I do."* Because it's not. It's not embarrassing to need something from someone else. To need attention from someone else. From a close friend, or from a crowd. It's essential. Without it, you are operating at a deficit. I argue with myself about this, insisting that it is incorrect to believe that needing something from other people makes you broken, but I do allow that I may not be able to entirely internalize this fact. Instead, I can teach myself a smaller lesson: receiving attention from an audience is a good thing, performing is a good thing, and enjoying it doesn't mean you have a bigger hole inside of you than the person next door who doesn't perform (but who knows?, might be happier if they did). Performing doesn't demarcate a lack; it opens a door. It means that you get to connect. To have a positive impact on someone else. To look your scene partner in the eyes and share an experience. To know that the audience likes you. To like them for liking you, and for showing up, and for giving you their attention.



HANNAH STARR

# Sobriety in Improv

The improv community has a drinking problem. Our institutions are in business because of their liquor licenses, we get people to come to our shows because of the promise of free beer or, better yet, the opportunity to bring your own (can you believe?). We pay our performers in booze because it's cheaper than actual money and on opening nights we pop champagne to celebrate. We do shows that are drinking games and turn drinking games into shows with the idea that they will be funnier, cooler, and more memorable if the audience and performers are fucked up. Our world is saturated with alcohol, which, oddly enough, I never noticed when I was also saturated with alcohol.

For me, it began innocently. It began with a love for being on stage in front of an audience. I did my first play when I was six (Tiny Tim in "A Christmas Carol," thank you very much) and never looked back. For me the joy I got out of it wasn't so much because of the culture surrounding theatre as it was what happened on the stage; being present, reacting in the moment. You know, actor-y stuff. And it was the same in improv. The idea that you could create anything out of thin air along with the wild rebellion of not knowing what was going to happen had me hooked from the first scene I ever

did. For me, being on my high school improv team was all about what happened on stage; focusing on getting better and growing as a performer. Maybe I took myself too seriously (I definitely did) but I saw that what we were doing on stage was important and revolutionary (it was not, we were literally playing Freeze). I treated the art form with such reverence that I reported the rest of the improv team when they smoked weed because it pissed me off that they would perform under the influence of something. That was always my rule: If I was on stage I needed to be completely sober.

There was a shift that happened in college, though. I started drinking for the first time and it was really fun, until it wasn't and I couldn't stop. This shift took a while, but more and more I found myself craving drinks and making excuses for why I deserved one. Bad day? Have a drink. Good day? Time for a drink. Monday? Definitely drink, Mondays are the worst. My rule of only performing sober started falling to the wayside. Doing Improv became less about doing what I loved on stage and more about trying not to be lonely. It seemed perfect that this community was obsessed with the two things I loved more than anything in the world: Improv and alcohol. And while this community didn't cause my alcoholism, it certainly normalized it. I didn't know how bad my drinking was, because I thought that was just what we did. We would pre-game before shows, we would have beer backstage, we would drink after shows at the bar and do it all again the next day.

It didn't matter how many blackouts I had, how many injuries I got, or how many people I hurt. I laughed it off, comparing myself to the great comedians I so admired. I didn't ever stop to think about the fact that those comedians are dead.

We hold up the reckless and call them our heroes. We name theaters after people who destroyed themselves. Faces of addicts literally take up entire walls at our institutions for us to point at and go, “That. That is what I want.” The lifeblood of improv is creation, yet we put destruction on a pedestal and call it the pinnacle. The myth that we need to be tortured to make good art is alive and well in our community, and it’s simply not true.

I was pretty high-functioning. When I did occasionally decide that I needed to cut back I could make it for days or even weeks at a time without drinking but I started blacking out more and more often after weekend binges. I went to a meeting for my kind of people, scared and hungover, but someone there told me I didn’t look nearly as bad as they did when they went to their first meeting so I took that as a sign that I didn’t have a problem. Things progressively got worse, and very quickly. I couldn’t go a day without drinking, and when I did, I would shake. If I ran out of milk I would put Jack in my Reese’s Puffs because dry cereal is disgusting and whiskey is the best. I had gone from never performing unless I was sober to not being able to perform unless I was drunk.

I started taking a medication intended to keep me from drinking. Essentially, if you drink on this medication your body rejects the alcohol. You get severely sick and your body expels it in any way that it can. I had made it a couple days without drinking, but there was free beer at a house show I was doing and I figured one beer wouldn’t get me sick. Of course, I couldn’t have just one beer, and the next morning I woke up on my bedroom floor in a puddle of vomit and piss. I laid there, not able to move, and thought, “I can’t keep living like this but I’m scared to die.”

I left Chicago for a rehab center outside Portland, OR (which is probably the most hipster way to see Portland) and stayed there for three months. When I came back I expected to hop right back into comedy, but the booze-centric culture of the scene came into sharp relief when I no longer could drink. It became unsafe for me to see shows or do shows. When I did do shows I always had the phone numbers of fellow sober people handy just in case. I always left immediately after shows, which very quickly started isolating me from the community. After all, a lot of times teams are formed at the bar, show ideas come to fruition over drinks, and you bond real quick when you get fucked up together. I felt like there wasn't really a place for me anymore, which sucked because I essentially had gotten sober to do comedy.

The actual act of doing improv also became much more difficult when I got sober. Early sobriety feels like learning to walk again. You spend so much time trying not to be the shitty person you were when you were drinking that you analyze every interaction, every decision, every move you make. I became riddled with social anxiety, wondering if the things I said to people were okay, or if I was manipulating them. I was spending so much time focusing on controlling my impulses that it inevitably bled into my improv, which is an art form completely reliant on immediately acting on your impulses. The fear of messing up in life and in scenes kept me in my head all of the time and the completely unscripted nature of improv terrified me at a time in my life when I was trying to regain control.

My saving grace came in the form of a friend who had been there through the rough times in my drinking and understood that my sobriety was a life or death thing. Joel approached me about forming a team that would perform an

improvised 90's sitcom. Having a solid structure and the same cast of characters made improvising sober much less terrifying because I had a roadmap. *99 Problems* was born and for the next two years that was how I relearned to improvise without booze. I got to do shows with my best friends, and the fact that they all understood the importance of my sobriety and that they still wanted me there was something that I desperately needed, even though I didn't realize it at the time.

I will admit there are times that I romanticize what my improv was like when I was drinking. I've spent a lot of the past five years chasing the freedom I felt on stage when I was drunk. The myth that we are better or more open to creativity when we are under the influence still gets stuck in my head. I'll admit, there are scenes from my drinking days that I still remember because I made bold choices I believed I never could have made sober. Truth is, I didn't trust myself enough to think those kinds of choices were possible in my improv.

The truth is, we do our best work when we are fully present, and you can't be fully present when you've been drinking. I can also tell you as someone who is often the only sober person in the room, that improv performed when drunk is sloppier, more aggressive, and just kind of boring. This is the job that we want, so why are we drinking on the job? Alcohol limits the scope of what's possible on that stage, but I can understand why we turn to it. Because improv can be scary. Because we're afraid to fail. The truth is, when you do fail, it's not so bad. At the end of the day, we're playing pretend. So, if it's just playing pretend, why don't we let our full selves out onto that stage. Trust our instincts and the wild, awesomeness that's within each of us?

I'm grateful to be sober today. I now am at a place in my sobriety where hanging out at the bar after a show doesn't really bother me and I don't crave alcohol as much, because life now is so much better than it ever was when I was drinking. It's not perfect, but it's better. And I now know a small army of sober performers to commiserate and collaborate with when you normal people are too much (How you leave drinks with liquid still in it I will never know).

There is still a long way to go in making our community and institutions acknowledge that we are a scene riddled with addiction and that we need to be more inclusive of sober performers. How can we do this? Maybe if you produce a show where you typically give out beer, why don't you give out some La Croix as well? If you are going out with your team, maybe find a place that has food options rather than just a bar. And it's different for everyone, but I know that I like being included and invited to functions, even when there's booze. I can make the choice about whether or not it's a good idea. Also, I swear to god, if I see another AA scene performed by people who have never been to an AA meeting I am going to throw something at the stage.

And for my Sober Sallies out there: You have a clarity of why you do this that many people don't. Stay strong. Let your freak flag fly. We've already been to hell and back, what's a bad set going to do to you?

I'm Hannah, and I'm an alcoholic.



JIMMY PENNINGTON

# To My Fellow Improvisers

Dear Ind,

I hope this finds you well. Whether you are beginning your work in performance, or continuing a life in performance by studying improvisation specifically, I hope to speak to you about some things that I have learned. I don't know that I have wisdom, but I do have experience; and in my life I have found that I learn most from the experiences of others rather than well intentioned advice.

## Classes

Where do I take classes? Do I start at the most well known and established theater, or do I start somewhere smaller until I get my confidence?

I would say that it doesn't matter, except it does. If you are in a small area where there's only one place to take classes...then there you go. If you are in an area where there are competing schools of thought, then it's still fairly easy. Go to the student shows at the theaters you'd like to take classes with and start where the students are having the most fun. It

seems like too easy an answer but really, even if the show isn't the highest quality, all bad or unhelpful habits can be coached or directed out of a performance. Conversely, being inspired and playful is very difficult to teach someone once they have been told how they must perform.

Realistically, it matters less where (or if) you take classes than where your head is. Improv classes are a tool in the arsenal of a well rounded performer, but they require some investment of not only money but also revelation; you must be engaged and instinctual in order to improvise well. This means giving your inner creative instincts a very real voice. In front of people you don't know. You can learn a lot about a person by what they find funny. The people you meet in class will likely become your future collaborators, friends, partners, etc.

The level 1 class at most theaters is usually very basic and sometimes cheaper than the other levels. There is no rule that says that once you take a level 1 class, you must finish that training center immediately. On the contrary, most honest theaters allow you to skip level 1 if you've taken an improv class anywhere ever. I would consider taking a level 1 class and then trying a different theaters' level 2 class and comparing the experience. Another good idea is to talk to your fellow classmates about the different experiences they've had. Also, ask your teacher what their opinions are.

DO NOT take all the classes at once. It is tempting to jump all in and take concurrent classes once you move to a city with a few training centers. I would advise resisting this temptation. I did not take many classes at once (as a matter of fact, I only took one training center's classes) and it has not been a limiting factor in performing at every theater in Chicago. I have had many students who have done this and

their experience has been....not good. One place is telling you to say yes, the other one is telling you to be a freak and you just get confused. It seems like reading 3 philosophy books at once; when you're done you just feel more confused.

## Teachers

If you are signing up for a level one class, you may not have enough information to decide which teacher you'd like to take class from. I would suggest not worrying about it too much. Because most level 1s are basic, the teachers are usually very good at helping you find your feet.

As the levels progress, you might want to start seeing the shows your prospective teachers are performing in. See if you like the way they perform or if they inspire you. Talk to them after the show about their classes. What do they focus on and how is the class structured to help you? The teachers I know would be happy to discuss this.

A word about cults of personality. There are teachers who inspire and educate, there are teachers who critique and drive personal growth and there are teachers who support and build confidence. All are valuable. Be wary of those who promise more than they can deliver. If, for example, you are singled out after class to join a "private rehearsal" for "students who show promise" and it costs extra? Tell them to fuck off. If your teacher makes you feel sexualized, marginalized or powerless you can anonymously report them to their supervisor and sub into a different class. The tricky part is if your teacher makes you feel small or powerless. If that happens because you have tried to be "edgy" or "alternative" by "playing" a "racist" to really "turn a mirror" on "real" "people", consider this; you haven't earned the capital it costs in trust to push that yet or likely ever so chill.

If your teacher makes you feel those ways because they have some weird “I gotta break you down and build you back up” narcissism thing well...to each their own.

Your teacher isn't your therapist and improv isn't therapy or therapeutic<sup>6</sup> nor should anyone sell it to you as such.

Class should empower you to trust yourself to do what you need and want to do on stage regardless of what your scene partner does. You should, over the course of a few classes, start to feel confident that you know what the fuck to do when you start a scene. If after, I dunno, 5 levels you're still uncertain of what to do when you get a suggestion, maybe you aren't getting your money's worth. Or maybe you're not cut out for improv. I can't tell you this.

## Shows

If you're doing shows, you're succeeding. Getting up on stage and putting yourself out there is the reward for taking classes. Some places place you on a team, some places allow you to make a team and submit shows and some places let you audition to join their ensemble. If none of those things happened for you, then you have options. I think these are all of them. These also represent the most frequent conversations I have about performing improvisation.

1. Quit.

This is the easiest option because it costs no money or sweat equity. You took the classes, made a few buddies, had some laughs. And really, you don't even technically have to quit because there's no one to tell. You're not quitting, you're just no longer taking classes or doing improv. If you feel the need to tell people you are quitting, then I'm gonna go out on a

limb and say you want someone to convince you not to (they shouldn't) or you want attention. Chill out.

2. Create a team out of other people who you like.

This is a good option if 1 doesn't work for you. You grab some like minded people, form a team and put yourselves out there on the "indy show circuit" (not an actual circuit but kind of is). If it's fun and people like it, maybe you end up in a better place than the folks who got placed on teams and end up with the same result except better because you have ownership. I'll also say that an indy team has a significantly better shot at satisfying your creative needs in improv than any group put together by producers or some nameless talentless "commission." You can kick dickheads out without asking anyone and you can perform where you want and actually try to make some money. Notice I said try.

3. Keep retaking classes at the place where you didn't get cast and auditioning for their teams.

Have you ever read *The Myth of Sisyphus*? If this is your plan, I highly encourage you to read that book. Actually, I highly recommend everyone who performs to read it. Short version: there's a greek mythological King who is condemned to push a boulder up a mountain, but every time he nears the top, it rolls back down. He has to do this for, oh, just eternity. It is a punishment built to create the illusion of possible success like capitalism or gym advertising. Seriously though, it's unfortunate that theaters won't just tell you they aren't ever going to be interested but it's reality. Theaters are largely run by well-intentioned

people who are terrified of being perceived as unsupportive. They won't say this because they want you to find your way and have success, even if they aren't the place for you. Move along.

4. Continue going to shows and drinking at the theater but loudly complaining that you are a victim of (insert poor excuse and/or straw man here. The only people I've seen do this are white guys so it's not hard to pick the low hanging fruit of excuses). Just shut up. You were never funny or talented.

If you have been cast or are putting up your own material, you may start to get curious about economics. This is common. You may wonder, as we all have, "hey, there's a full house and I'm not getting paid dick. What the fuck?" This is a great question. Institutions exist to create performers, not to necessarily employ them (like universities and PhDs or wherever they go and fitness trainers). I know we all want to get paid to perform, but with some theaters you can't draw blood from a stone and with the Big Successful Ones people aren't gonna stop performing there for free with the hope of one day getting a job anytime soon. So if you really want to get PAID, produce your own shit, do your own marketing, sell your own tickets. You aren't doing any theater some huge favor by being there until your name sells 150 tickets to multiple shows in a run. Improv Team 6893 might be a great improv team, but if 75% of the theater is filled with students paying \$0 you can do the math. Most theaters do rentals so you can put your money where your mouth is and make that sweet cash by producing your own content. That way you can skip the indentured servitude of house teams.

## The Bar, Baby!

The performances are where people are really utilizing and perfecting the craft of performance within an ensemble and the bar is where guys fucking ruin it. Don't be this guy. I'm not a complete idiot. I know people are gonna fuck. Improv is funny people being fun when it's done well. Funny people are fuckable people. Funny people fuck other funny people. But. If someone isn't leaving with you at 9pm, they shouldn't be leaving with you at 2am. And if you have a substance abuse problem, get help. I am literally always available to speak privately with anyone who thinks they might have a problem. I was a daily blackout drinker. I spent money I didn't have on drugs and alcohol. I got help and you can too. If you are able to party successfully, then be fucking careful. There are wolves among us. We all must be diligent in exposing and confronting those who would exploit or assault people. If your theater doesn't have a loudly explained way to address repeated unwanted advances or harassment, then find a new theater.

## 5 Years

After about 5 years of doing improv (an arbitrary number. It could be 3 weeks), you should be wondering "what now?" Dear improviser, I have no fucking idea. I do know what you shouldn't do. Don't start blocking progress. Make room for whomever is coming up and help them find their voice. This artform is stagnating and suffocating under the flab of entitlement. If you are a straight cis gendered white person and you have not been trying to amplify marginalized voices by adding them to your precious little improv groups then you are currently a part of the problem. Ignorance is not a feasible defense. If you care about improv existing as a

relevant performance option, your number one job is making improv spaces diverse. And that starts with you.

What I did was I got an agent and started trying to make that sweet Sonic money (and actually made some sweet “white supremecist in an episode of Chicago PD” money, which is both less money and certainly less comedic). I have written and performed countless shows for The Annoyance, acted in plays at other theaters, filmed commercials for products ranging from incredible to inedible, done some independent films, joined SAG, found out how much that cost vs how much I was making and wept, just really kept moving toward what I want to do; through all the professional doubt, success and failure, improv has remained a constant source of creative play and discovery. And that’s really what I want you to take from this. Improv has been and is the place where I can exercise my imagination and explore whatever instinctual weirdness my friends and I want to mine. If you can manage your expectations, improv can be your endless summer.



On  
Thinking On  
Stage



TYLER SAMPLES

# The Thinking We Don't Think About

What if I told you there's a step that goes before "Yes and," that it does most of the actual work in a good improv scene, and that it limits everything we do?

How's that for salacious, huh?

We'll get there by way of an example:

I walk out and sit in a chair. I lift my hand above my head and flick my fingers as though over a series of switches. Then I say, in a serious voice, "All systems go, Houston."

My scene partner steps out on the other side of the stage, holds their hand up to their ear and says, "Roger that, Phil. We got a big party planned for you down here."

Then we do a scene about an astronaut coming home from space.

But here's the thing: I didn't tell my scene partner I was an astronaut coming home from space. At all. I just used this little incredibly important skill I'll call "allusion" to make it

seem like I did. And then they used an epically essential skill I'll call "inference" to figure it out. THEN, they made an allusion of their own to acknowledge mine and start building the scene. That, my friends, is an incredible feat of cognition and processing. And it happens 7 nights a week, usually around 8 or 10pm, for upwards of \$10 a ticket. Magic.

In order to make those allusions, not only did I mentally comb through physical movements and patterns of speech that I think of as signifying "astronaut," I was also scrubbing through to pick the ones that I thought would best signify "astronaut" to my scene partner. Personally, the first thing that comes to mind when I think of astronauts is that I had a friend who worked tech for an event firm, and would often interact with the VIPs. He said Neil Armstrong was the biggest asshole he'd ever met. But alluding to my character's asshole-ness isn't likely to make my scene partner immediately think, "Oh, Tyler is an astronaut."

So instead of drawing on my own direct associations, I instead did a mental search for the cultural shorthands that I thought would most broadly convey who and where I was: I flip switches and reference Houston. Maybe I also make my movements weightless (I've seen *Apollo 13* and *The Martian*, I know what's up). I do all this decision-making in the span of a few seconds.

On the other end of the stage, just as quickly, my scene partner is decoding my allusions by means of... that's right, inference. They watch me sit and know that must mean something, because that is clearly a conscious choice on my part,<sup>7</sup> and if it's a conscious choice, that means it is intended to communicate something. They see me diddle my fingers in the air and know that's a conscious choice too, and quickly their brain starts narrowing down what it could be. "Is he

tickling something? Doing ASL? Are those switches?" Then they hear me talk in jargon and reference Houston, and their pattern recognition circuit is fully tripped, because they have also seen *Apollo 13*, or at least heard it referenced, and they know that talking to Houston means NASA, and that the person most likely to be talking to NASA is an astronaut. And once they have that all figured out through intuition and cross-referencing, they respond with an allusion of their own to communicate what they have inferred ("Roger that, commander") and add another allusion that I will then need to infer ("big party planned for you down here," why would they be throwing a party? etc).

Now, I can't expect that they will make the exact set of inferences I want them to, or that even if they make those inferences that they will act on them. They might think (or decide) instead that I'm an actor on a movie set, and yell, "Cut! Alright Phil, let's do one more take." Or that I'm in a simulator and say, "End simulation, great job Phil." Regardless, they understood that I was making allusions, and used their powers of inference (relying on their own personal and cultural references) to surmise what I likely intended.<sup>8</sup>

All this, allusion and inference, before "Yes And!!!" can even start. That's sublime.

"A-ha! But what if I elect NOT to make an allusion, you pedant?! What say you then?!" says affronted reader John Q. Strawman.

What I say is that obviously improvisers don't have to make allusions, but scenes are difficult without them and necessarily become less grounded. If you elect to forego allusions, what you'll need to use instead are statements that are based not in experience, but in definitions. To be an astronaut on a spaceship without relying on cultural

references or other allusions, I have to go out and say, “I’m an astronaut on this spaceship.”

But here’s the thing: even though I’ve removed allusions, my statement still requires inferences. Because now my scene partner needs to figure out the context for the statement, “I’m an astronaut on this spaceship.” Because people don’t generally need to define themselves without an external reason prompting it.<sup>9</sup> So first, they need to decide if it was diegetic or non-diegetic.<sup>10</sup>

If it’s diegetic, it means that my character had a reason to say it, and there are a few possible contexts for why they would:

- My scene partner’s character needed to be told that, which means their character didn’t know it before.
- I’m experiencing a mental health episode or on drugs (always a fun, empowering choice).
- I’m trying to lie.

In all 3 instances, their character either doesn’t know me, doesn’t understand me or has reason to doubt me. The scene’s start, and likely most of its duration, is going to be focused on exploring why my character said that, and it’s going to be really difficult to get past that. It’s going to be a slog of a scene.

If that initiation is non-diegetic, it means it wasn’t something I intended to be coming out of the mouth of my character, it was something I was telegraphing as a performer. Usually that happens when I want to make sure there is no ambiguity about the context I’m establishing. Which is a completely reasonable course of action, but my scene partner still has to respond to what I said in-character (dialogue very rarely has the luxury of being non-diegetic). So since it wasn’t

diegetic, that means my character didn't have a reason to say it. That means they can treat it as it is: a sort of non-sequitur from my character that only warrants confirmation, not engagement.

“Yeah Phil, I know. Hey look, it's the Great Wall of China!”<sup>11</sup>

Or they can choose to respond in kind:

“And I'm the chef on this spaceship.”

And now they just kicked it back to me to justify why we're talking like this.

Regardless of how my scene partner elects to respond to the non-diegetic initiation, the scene is fundamentally weaker than it would otherwise be, because the audience was made mindful of what they can see that the characters can't: the performers. In other words, we've gone meta. And meta, my friends, is real hard to pull back from once begun, because it's incredibly difficult to not be aware of something you made me explicitly aware of.

So allusions aren't necessary, but they are vital. They allow both the players and the audience to more readily accept and move past the basic believability of the characters, and focus instead on the characters' experience of the scene. Definitional statements undermine character's believability, and as a result create scenes that often focus solely on explaining the characters' existence in the scene.

And inferences aren't just necessary or vital, they're inescapable and automatic, because your brain is a big old pattern recognition engine, and when it can match an input to something it has experienced and understands, it will.

“But, and so, who gives a flip, Tyler? I guess this is kind of interesting to think about, if you want to get academic about make believe, but you grabbed my interest by saying all this somehow limits improv and you haven’t paid that off at all!”

Well, Ms. Socratic Dialogue, I’m getting there.

So allusions make us smooth and cool and believable as improvisers, because what we’re alluding to are the symbols and signifiers that collectively represent something already defined. I don’t need to say I’m an astronaut, I just need to do and say astronaut-esque things and, assuming I do and say those things effectively, I can trust that my scene partner’s brain will use inference to reconstitute those parts into its intended whole: an astronaut.

But those symbols and signifiers can only come from one of two sources: personal experience and cultural experience.

My parents are park rangers, so if for some reason I want to initiate a scene about camping, I have a lot of signifiers to draw from, because I have a lot of experience with camping.

“Hey Phil, there’s a whole cord next to the host trailer; let’s go grab some while they’re collecting fees.”

That right there is a sentence I have said. So if I want to allude to being a camper, I can just recall being a camper and reenact it on stage. Those signifiers feel strong and present to me because they’re so personal and accessible.

On the other hand, I’ve never been skydiving. So if I want to initiate a scene about skydiving, I can’t rely on any first-hand knowledge. But I can use my cultural knowledge of skydiving, of which I have a decent amount. I know some people who have skydived, and they’ve told me a little. But



mainly, I've seen it happen in a lot of movies and tv shows. And from those many sources, I can pretty confidently say that when you're skydiving, it's really windy so you have to yell really loud, and everybody is amped up and barking out jargon and orders at each other.

“OK, YOU GIVE YOURSELF A THREE COUNT AND PULL YOUR CORD, RIGHT ABOUT 15,000 FEET. IF YOU GO DARK, DON'T WORRY; YOUR TANDEM PARTNER WILL GRAB IT!”

Based on what I've seen, I believe this to be a pretty accurate depiction of something a skydiver would say.

So here's the problem with allusions: when I make one, I'm using signifiers that I believe will most effectively communicate the idea I have. If my scene partner doesn't have a reference point for those signifiers, if they don't know that a cord is a unit of measure for a large pile of firewood, then the allusion will fail to communicate my idea and they cannot support it. And that's not a dire or rare situation; my scene partner knows I was trying to communicate *something* and will make their best guess (“Yeah! Let's get it and plug it in!”) and I, being a good and giving improviser, will support their choice and move forward with the scene. But you know what I probably won't do? Make that reference again. Why would I? I was trying to connect and communicate with my scene partner, and I used something that I thought they'd understand but they didn't.

Or maybe I will do it again! Maybe my skydiving initiation was solid and my scene partner was an outlier and I think generally folks will understand it in the future. Or the camping initiation felt fun to me and I could handle the mess

that ensued. Know what's nice about both of those examples? Neither is especially important to me.

If instead I was drawing on my own experience as a teenager coming out to my parents and my scene partner didn't get it, I think I'd be much less inclined to try that again in the future, definitely with that scene partner and probably in any situation that didn't feel incredibly safe. Because that experience **is** important, and vulnerable, and powerful, and having it be misunderstood or someone making their earnest but incorrect best guess wouldn't feel like it was honoring the place that experience holds for me.

Instead, I'm going to focus less on trying to bring those deeply personal experiences to the stage, and focus more on allusions that I think will have a higher rate of communicative success. Which will probably be cultural references.

Oofta, cultural references. The problem with these is, if I'm trying to use what I think will have the highest success rate, I'm going to use the references I think my scene partner and the audience. And at the average Chicago improv show, those references come from mainstream American culture, which tends to be dominated by white, cisgendered, patriarchal stories and perspectives. And on top of that, I'm more likely to make references to older parts of this culture than newer, since the older references have had more time to percolate.

So if I need a holiday I'll say Christmas instead of Eid. If I need a singer I'll say Huey Lewis instead of Cardi B. Not because the former references are more important to me, but because they're easier to rely on being understood. And because I just wanted to reference a holiday as part of my character's reality, not their defining feature. I don't necessarily want to devote energy and focus in the scene to

educating my scene partner. *Especially* not if it's about something that carries a lot of weight in my personal history or identity, because instead of being accepted I'm being asked to, in a way, justify it. If my experiences or culture are marginalized or not culturally normative, it will take a lot of emotional and mental work to bring them into the improv I do.

What that leads to is an art form where every scene and show is only as strong as its weakest link (in terms of reference level). And not to put too fine a point on it, but in improv, there are a lot of weakest links when it comes to reference level, both in terms of personal experience and cultural experience. While our demographics are changing in wonderful ways, the average improviser is still a cis white man in his early 20's with a college degree. That means the average improviser has certain paucities when it comes to personal experience (by virtue of privilege and youth), and little unsought-exposure to culture references outside the mainstream. The average improviser is a goldmine for not catching allusions and fucking up cool scenes.

And now, my dear reader, we've come to the first pin. You remember that, way back up there? I'll wait while you look.<sup>12</sup> We're going to talk about how all of this crashes down on the head of inference.

See, the problem is, it's happening all the time. Parts being fitted to wholes left and right. It happens when I come out and sit down in my astronaut scene, because that's clearly a conscious choice on my part. But my sex as a performer isn't. And yet oftentimes, that will get pulled in as an inference by my scene partner and my character will be assumed to be a man. Probably a white man, even if I haven't made that choice yet. What if I had gone out with the intention of

being my favorite astronaut, Mae Jemison? Look, they called me Phil and everything. So now I either have to be stupid Phil or be like, “Well, actually...” and explain that I’m not who they said I am. It’s easiest to go along with it and play Phil. It’s not the end of the world being Phil instead of Mae Jemison. For me. A white man. But what if I’m genderqueer and constantly being made a he? Or if I’m a POC of mixed race and my characters are constantly being labeled as one race or another?

The truly pernicious problem with inference is that so much of it goes unquestioned or examined. If I unconsciously have an assumption that every person who looks physically male is a man, the only way I will ever assign someone a role counter to that is if I am directly told to. They will have to say, “I am a woman.” (Dear Reader! This is pin number two! Go find it<sup>13</sup>.) We are now in the territory of definitional statements, which, as described above, remove focus away from a character’s *experience* and instead put it on a character’s *existence*. Instead of being an astronaut who is a woman and talking about spaceships, I instead have forced us to focus on how this astronaut in a spaceship is a woman. I have moved their gender from being *a* trait to their *defining* trait, all because otherwise they wouldn’t be allowed the trait at all.

“Now, Tyler. What do you suggest be done about all this?”

Well, Professor Resolution, the most immediate answer is I suggest you go broaden your horizons and challenge your assumptions. If you want your scene partners to feel safe and heard and seen, you need to be able to catch their allusions and make inferences in good faith.

Expanding your reference level is pretty straightforward: experience more things. One way to do that is just be really interested in other people, what they like and what they've lived. That can be difficult, but it's also something you can practice. I have found that the easiest place to start is with childhood injury stories. Ask people how they got hurt. It opens up a world of other stories.

Ask your fellow players what they're listening to, reading, thinking. Make space for them and make it ok for them to not tell you if they don't want to do that work. This is your journey, not theirs. Start making a point to consume media and culture that's outside your bounds. Pick a genre of music, or tv, or book, or movie that you've never given time to and dip your toe in. Even only hearing one Fela Kuti song is better than never hearing any. The truth is that the internet has made it incredibly easy to partake of the interests of thousands of different types of people, and you should delight in that. As you learn these new references, employ them. Try them out in scenes. Maybe/probably most will fly over the heads of your scene partners and audiences, but you don't know until you try, and if we don't constantly constantly try, improv becomes smaller and less vibrant as we endlessly regurgitate things we know everybody knows.

Beyond that, do actual in-person things you haven't done before. Take up knitting, go to a Sacred Harp meet-up, do mushrooms, etc. Even better, invite your fellow performers to join you. In all, value the experience as one worth sharing.

Checking your unconscious inferences is much harder. Own up to it, privately if not to your peers, and accept that it doesn't make you a monster. You're a product of a larger hegemonic culture that prioritizes and demands exactly those kind of inferences. But that doesn't let you off the hook, it

just means you shouldn't waste time feeling guilty about it, you should instead just focus on getting more control over it.

One thing you can start doing immediately is not letting your defaults be your defaults quite as much. Try to notice in yourself if you make decisions that aren't necessitated by the dialogue. Are you assuming your scene partner's character is a woman because the character has indicated that or because your scene partner is? If somebody calls for a doctor to walk on in a scene, are you expecting it to be a male performer? Or a white performer? Maybe for a little while force yourself to assume the opposite and see where it takes you.

Also, if you notice unconscious mental shorthands in a group you perform with, raise it as a concern in a group discussion. Ask how people feel about it, if they've noticed it, and what seems to engender it. If you have a coach or leader, bring it up to them and ask them to help manage and train the group out of it.

Even though improv as an art form is only as strong as its weakest link (referentially speaking), that doesn't mean they're the only ones who need to develop mindfulness. It's everybody's responsibility to get better about what we assume without thinking; we are all different from each other and we all in some form or fashion defy at least one of the categories society boxes us into. And that, dear reader, is awesome. Everyone deserves the chance to have their unique frame of reference honored and celebrated.

So... what if I told you there's a step that goes before "Yes and," that, applied correctly, can expand the horizons of *everything* we do?

YAZMIN RAMOS

# Character vs. Stereotype

A while back, I was drinking at an intimate house party, having a great time with new friends. Everyone was joking and smoking and I tried apple cider for the very first time. It was disgusting but I drank single every drop. I would eventually need it. Someone suggested we play a board game, and we all were very onboard with this idea. Our host had a ton of different options. They had games that were cerebral, games that were silly, but everyone decided on *Utter Nonsense*. I had no idea how to play, but agreed to go with the flow. I didn't want to be an inconvenience by not yes anding their decision. The dealer handed out seven white cards, each one reading a phrase. I glanced at the hand I was dealt and read the first card, which included something about dropping a deuce at the Cheesecake Factory, and the second card, which said something about living with your parents. A classic joke and a classic burn! I read the third card and saw the word "terrorist." I quickly shuffled to the next card. To my dismay, the phrase was racist. The fifth card was sexist. I started to convince myself that I was likely reading the phrases incorrectly or taking them too literally. I blamed myself,

because after all, I didn't know what the rules of this game were and my new friends were definitely not racist. The dealer pulled a yellow card with the word "Asian" on it. My stomach turned. The rules required everyone to read one of their white cards in an Asian accent. Everyone was laughing and having a great time as each player read an inappropriate phrase in a cartoonish Asian accent. Then it was my turn. I searched for the least offensive card, took a deep breath, and uttered, "You have a face only a plastic surgeon would love."

The right thing to do would have been to refuse to play the game. I should have opened a dialogue about why a game like this exists and ask what we think that means or says about our society. I should have pointed out how the offensive phrases just so happened to be on white cards. I also could have stood up from my chair, flipped the table, then left. However, I didn't do any of those things. Instead, I repeated to myself that it was just a game I was playing. It was a stupid, offensive game and I convinced myself that it would be over soon, the next game would start and that would be so much more fun.

It is with complete honesty that I admit that I have, at some point in my comedy career, succumbed under the pressure of the bright lights, the obnoxious laughter or complete silence of an audience, to playing a stereotypical/offensive character and/or allowing it to happen on stage. I have also endured being forced or watching other improvisers be forced into a stereotypical character box. Most, if not all, improvisers have likely had similar experiences.

Some characters had a southern accent so the implications of unintelligence, gun-loving antics and incestual characteristics have shown through. I've witnessed all shades of improvisers adopt a Mexican or Puerto Rican accent



without playing the reality or the truth of that character. I've heard derogatory words aimed at the LGBTQIA communities. I've seen a black man, playing a wizard, get told on stage that he doesn't belong there and that his kind was the type that lives off of government cheese. I've seen improvisers sit in a chair and call it a wheelchair, making inappropriate assumptions about people with disabilities. I've been called a "dirty little Israeli whore." The list goes on.

As comedians, it is our duty to hold up a mirror to society, to mock the masses in hopes to enlighten them on an underlying social/economical/political subject. Of course, you want your audience to have a good time, and if that's your overall objective, then that's fine too. However, it is important to realize the kind of effect we undoubtedly have on an audience. They come to theaters ready to listen, to be entertained, to be pushed to think introspectively and analytically, with their dildo and sex store suggestions on deck. Improvisers hold a great responsibility on stage, trying to be fast enough and witty enough to keep the audience engaged. Playing up a stereotype is an easy way out of the high pressure to engage the audience.

When creating characters, the audience and performer connect by creating a general depiction of a type of person. However, there is a definite distinction between playing a character and playing a stereotype. Characters can be developed through the adaptation of a physical or emotional trait of a person or a point of view. Characters have identities, and a good improviser will honor that identity. We are constantly studying the movement, speech and way a person fills the space around them. Your brain stores it away, and the next time you see them, your brain looks for the familiarity in their presence. So when you play a character, the

audience resonates with them not because of the accent you put on or the nonsensical statements about their life, but because of their point of view, because they recognize themselves or someone they know in that person.

Think about someone who is very close to you, like a relative, a friend, a parent or a significant other. How does this person speak? What is the speed of their cadence? What kind of tone does their voice carry when they speak to you? Do they use their hands? How do they walk? Are their steps quick and together or spaced out and slow? How do they hold their shoulders? What is their hair like? Is it short? Is it long? What's their style? How does that affect their movement? How do they hold objects? What are some things they like? What are some things they dislike? Now, imagine that you step on stage and embody those characteristics and create a character out of them. This character may not necessarily draw immediate laughter from an audience who would gratuitously laugh at a rendition of a Mexican man selling tamales on the corner near the U.S.-Mexican border, but it's a real character and the performer has an opportunity to play the truth of their wants. If a performer does know a Mexican man selling tamales on a corner near the U.S.-Mexican border, then the performer will know the truth of that experience, not necessarily having lived it.

Think about a state in the United States that you've never visited. In that state, there is a small town. In that small town lives a small family. In that family, there is a person named Human Being. What do we know about Human Being? I don't want to invent something, I want to think about what we know about HB. We know HB has a small family. We know HB lives in a small town. We know what state that small town is located in. We know the region of the country

HB lives in. That is all the information we have. We can create an impersonation of HB by knowing what region of the country they live in, sure. What else do we know about HB? What do they like? What do they not like? The problem is we've never been to that town. We don't know that family, and we've never met HB. If we've never met HB or experienced life like HB has experienced it, how would we know how to portray someone like that?

Sarah Jones is a multi-racial, multi-ethnic actor, playwright and poet who appeared in a multi-character off-Broadway show titled *Bridge and Tunnel*. She also gave a TED Talk and spoke at the 2011 Chicago Humanities Festival. Jones is known for performing as multiple characters of different backgrounds without playing up stereotypes. One of her characters is a homeless woman from New York City. She doesn't discredit the experiences of the homeless woman by making her something or someone she isn't, like asking for change or talking about how dirty life is (two common preconceived views). Instead Jones gives an insightful, charming performance as that character and does and says what that character would. The character has a distinct cadence to her speech and talks about her life experiences and views of the world. She gives that character depth. She makes that character three-dimensional and not a two-dimensional idea of what it's like to be homeless. She doesn't escape the reality of her situation. She simply allows that character to be true to her experiences. Jones also plays a Chinese character with a Chinese accent but doesn't create the offensive portrayal one might find in a game of *Utter Nonsense*. Jones has never lived as a Chinese woman, but she is able to create a strong narrative that doesn't undermine what being a Chinese woman is like.

It is unfair to say that performers are unable to play a character unless they have lived that experience. It is very limiting. None of us have lived every experience ever. There are performers who are talented and intelligent enough to play the reality of an experience without creating a negative view of the group of people that character represents. Perhaps the Mexican man selling tamales on the border loves romance novels and wants to find their muse in a scene. That's it.

Character work is so important. Use physicality. Use emotion. Use intelligence. Use respect. Use a specific point of view on a topic. Be conscious of what you say and how you say it. Break expectations. Understand that stereotypes are boring, low hanging pieces of rotten fruit. The use of these techniques won't kill comedy. They will help you be a better improviser and a better person.

When I left the party, I decided to look up reviews of *Utter Nonsense*. Roughly 65% were five-star reviews. Most consumers commented that the game was in fact, offensive, but that it was still very fun. They suggested refraining from playing with someone who is politically correct. It's not about being politically correct, as much as it's about being an empathetic human being.

AUDREY SCHIFFHAUER

# Play What You Know

The best thing about improv, for me, is having the chance to be something you are not. To be on stage in front of people not as yourself, but as someone else. We get to say things that out in our daily lives, we would never want to say. Improv is also an escape. A chance to clear my brain if I've had a bad day and live in a different world. Lastly, and perhaps most importantly, improv gives me a chance to be sexist.

There's something powerful about pretending to be someone you don't like. It makes you realize that although you are one person, you can temporarily mold yourself into any human being. That even though you've had an entire life full of experiences that shape your personality, you can still embody your polar opposite. It's just fun to let words come out of your mouth that you would never sincerely say to someone. This opportunity is very fun and indulgent, but it's also cathartic. Satirizing a real type of person allows you to criticize them in their own voice. However, for women, that power comes with a heavy price tag—a lifetime of sexism, and knowing that somewhere in the world, the man that we are embodying probably exists and is living a full life. The feeling of power comes from knowing that the words you are

saying have been genuinely spoken by a person who truly believes them. Women have earned this power by living through sexism - sexism that any cisgender man has never had to experience it. And that's why, my dudes, trying to share this power on stage with us can very quickly backfire, no matter how good your intentions are.

The reason female improvisers play shitty husbands, catcallers, sexist bosses and mansplainers is because that is a chance for us to satirize our daily life. Getting catcalled sucks—it's rarely happened to me, thankfully, but the few instances stick out in my head and piss me off every time I think of them. Catcalling someone in an improv show as a character is a way for me to turn the situation around to an audience and say, "Look at what I'm doing. Watch it happen, think about it, laugh at it, and remember it." I get to take an event that happened to only me and made me feel small and uncomfortable, and use it to get a whole room of people to laugh about it together. And it really is fun! It's not this angry, bitter release of emotion—it's truly a fun experience. It just happens to be rooted in negative emotions—we hate these men (or at least their actions), and we pretend to be them so they no longer have power over us.

A couple weeks ago I was at a street festival and a guy complimented my boyfriend's jacket. He jokingly held out his wallet and phone and said, "I'll give you everything I have." My boyfriend said, "I can't, sorry. Actually, she," pointing at me, "bought it for me!" The dude said, "Oh, can I have her?" and then we walked away because, you know, that was a weird thing to say. It was a shitty little interaction that made me feel like men think they can trade in women for stuff—he couldn't have a jacket, but he could have a girl. Long feminist rant about objectifying women, etc, you get it. My point is,

now I want to play this guy in an improv show. I want to make him stupid and insecure, and I want my friends to play his friends who hate him. More importantly, I want one of my female friends to play a woman who says, “Excuse me? What the fuck did you just say?” and go off on me as this guy. Doing that would feel amazing! I get to take a guy who pissed me off, play him in front of an audience, and make everyone laugh and say, “This guy is an idiot. Also, he seems pretty sexist, and I think I hate that.” Me playing him on stage allows me to pull the true emotions behind sexism—insecurity, fear, ignorance—to the front of a character. Playing these types of characters has become really fun for me. Yes, it’s a chance for me to have fun and release some negative energy, but it also comes in handy as a defense mechanism. I’ve been to a lot of improv jams where someone is trying to be funny and is just being straight up sexist, and I’ve gotten good at recognizing it immediately and calling out exactly what they’re saying. They were trying to get a laugh out of making me look bad, but now instead, I get laugh out of making them look bad and undermining whatever they were trying to do.

All of the language I’ve used about playing sexist characters being cathartic, being an emotional release—as soon as a man chooses to initiate a sexist scene, all of that goes away because he is now in charge of what happens in the scene. I’m not really talking about dudes that are straight up sexist, the ones who think they’re being hilarious when they call you a bitch. I’m talking about men who fully intend to satirize these men, to say, “Isn’t it insane that men call women bitches? I want to point out how terrible that is,” and then attempt that by walking on stage and calling a woman a bitch. This automatically fails because you are not letting me

CHOOSE to be in this type of scene; you are forcing me. Satirizing sexism is fun, but it's not really something I want to do in every show. And more importantly, I need to be in charge of when I do it. If I pimp my male friend into being a douchey frat bro, believe me, I want him to be the biggest douche in the world. However, if I'm on stage just hanging out, waiting to play a doctor or a ghost or whatever, and my well-meaning male friend comes on stage and says "Alright, pledge, you gonna suck my dick or not?" I am not having fun. I am not in control. And if we are doing a scene in which we satirize sexism, you bet that the woman needs to be in control of it. Otherwise, what is the point of doing it? Are you trying to satirize sexism by making your female friends uncomfortable? Then guess what, you're doing it wrong.

Satire takes a lot of effort—rehearsal, writing, collaboration rewriting. If anyone can pull off 'improvised satire,' it's gonna be the people who are directly affected by whatever they are trying to satirize. Let people of color make fun of racism. Let queer people make fun of homophobia and transphobia. Trying to do it yourself will do nothing except make the people you were trying to 'help' feel uncomfortable and pissed off. Don't make me a verbally abused wife because you're trying to point out how fucked up it is that so many women are verbally abused. Instead, let me come on stage and choose what our relationship is like. If that's a subject that I want to touch, I will take your hand and guide you. If not, let's just do a scene where we're at a wedding and we hate everyone there but we love the mozzarella sticks.

Don't get me wrong, I've seen men do this successfully—satirize something they haven't personally experienced but believe is wrong. It's possible, but it's hard. You have to set



yourself up in a scene so that everyone on stage knows EXACTLY what's happening, and then you have to let yourself lose. I'm not writing this to say, "Hey dudes, go try this! You can do it!" I'm just saying that obviously it is possible, but oh my god, so many men try it and fail and ruin shows for their female team members. One last piece of straight-up advice: if you do this and women on your team call you out on it, I highly encourage you to not get defensive. If a woman on your team tells you that something you did made them uncomfortable, please just fucking believe them. Don't judge them, don't make them prove it to you, don't get pissed off; just accept it. We all make mistakes, and most of the time as long as you are apologetic and actually, genuinely trying to learn from your mistake, all will be well.

Improv is about sharing the stage and trusting people. I put my trust in my teammates to help me have fun and not throw me into uncomfortable situations. Men have to trust their teammates to do the same, and understand that the people on stage with them come with different life experience, and that if they want to play with something, they'll bring it up. When you're improvising, be sure to be open, trusting, playful and, if you feel like it, totally sexist.



JONALD JUDE REYES

## That's Racist

It was a pretty low-key night. My girlfriend at the time, a Taiwanese immigrant, and I, a Filipino-American, had just finished eating dinner at a restaurant nearby and started driving home. As we were in the middle of a conversation, I spotted a hole-in-the-wall liquor store in a small strip mall. We figured we pick up some beer as our nightcap. Knowing exactly my beer of choice, this trip couldn't have taken any more than 10 minutes but this brief point in time would unfortunately last me to this day.

Inside the store, we casually observed to see if there were any new beers that could potentially override the usual go-to. The place was mostly empty. The lone checkout person had already been in conversation with a seemingly close local. After a stroll through the aisles, nothing spotted our fancy so I picked up my favorite beer (again, at the time) Red Stripe. 6-pack in hand, we made our way to the front of the store. As we approached the counter, the local had been obscuring the checkout person's point of view and he didn't notice us immediately. They were in a light-hearted conversation about a girl the local was dating. Then the man had noticed we wanted to check out. As he moved out of the way, the checkout person muttered his last sentence before seeing us,

saying, "...I don't know about her. You know how those Filipino people are. They eat dog..."

And then he and I made eye contact.

I could swear the eye contact lasted for 20 minutes, but realistically it was a 2-minute stare. I, frozen in time, fell into a whirlwind of mental confusion. A blatant racist remark spouted directly into the air before my eyes and with my idiotic whitewashed brain couldn't understand... "What. Just. Happened?" My then-girlfriend had snapped the tension and grabbed my beers, placing them on the counter. The man smirked with false coy knowing exactly what he did. He rung us up and then she said with no hesitation, "You ever eat dog? It's really good."

The checkout person was taken back. "You eat dog?" he said. She replied with a cold stare, "...yup." And I did nothing.

I replay that situation in my head constantly to this day. As a child, I was dealt my share of "ching-chong," "the karate kid," and smelly food judgment. That was ignorant child's play that became learning lessons. But as an adult with an adult job, growing out of such child foolishness & carrying a routine lifestyle, I numbed my Asian-American mind into a full-time assimilation, as if nothing could ever go wrong. And certainly, not anything race related. Yet here, in that liquor store, it was like someone told me I wasn't who I was.

Imagine someone explaining that your character, preferences, and affinities were not at all a matter of choice, but a matter of ancestral heritage and gender. "You are really good at math. You can do martial arts. You do not show emotion. And you eat dog."

I lost my sense of regaining control of the situation. I lost my identity. And I lost power.

## Isn't Improv Fun?

“So you’re a funny kid. Or maybe you’re shy. Or perhaps you’d like to think better on your feet. So why not join the hot, new cultural phenomenon known as IMPROV?! It’s an amazing conceptual tool that a lot of actors use and a sure fire way to make lots of friends. Get out of your head and onto the stage today!”

But then you really learned what improv was.

The journey one person goes through in finding his/her own improv voice is overly self-analytical. Sometimes even self-grueling. If you’re a veteran, you’ll understand this better and if you’re new to the scene, this could be the beginning of an amazing ride with very high highs and yes, very heavy lows. Teachers and books like to compare improv to jazz with assumption that you already know how to play and what you add to the jam makes the jazz session groovy, but what they don’t tell you is whether your instrument is out of tune or broken. You need to fine tune your instrument, get all the gears tightened or loosened, and keep practicing so that you can make great music with anyone at any time.

I’d like to start at the crappy part of learning improv. Where everyone understands how to play scenes. EVERYONE except... *you*. You are alone. You can talk about your feelings and problems with your new improv buddies, but when it’s your turn to try the “hot new” improv scene exercise, it’s completely on you. And yes, everyone is judging. And if you’re reading this and thinking, “bull shit,” then you’re lying. You and everyone in that class or workshop or rehearsal are watching and listening for what’s funny or interesting, whether good or bad. You’re gauging an estimation of quality in your brain and giving it value to form an opinion to the scene or exercise. And that’s judging.

Now that you know everyone is judging, you either try to literally do what you think *works* or you do what you think is *funny*. Both are valid means of actions. I've been in improv sets where my personal game plan was to not play any characters and to only be true self with heightened thoughts of sarcasm. The personal logic behind that was, "I say funny shit, so let's see if it works on stage." It worked in one instance by getting one-line laughs but not in another instance where my scene work was sorely lacking.

This is where I take the jazz metaphor and switch it to a Jackson Pollock painting. Now take all your improv friends—they're all doing these types of paintings and you try to do the same thing, but every time you finish a new piece, someone says, "you're just throwing paint on the canvas." And every time your improv friends finish a new piece, they're getting, "Now, *this* is art!" Ain't that fucking frustrating? But you don't give up.

You do the work. You take more classes. You join or create indie improv teams. You get your improv reps in and you slowly get recognized within the scene. What is slowly happening in your brain is a release of acknowledging the judgment from the audience, and even yourself. You go through your moments of fearlessness and your moments of being "too heady." An understanding of the improv art form is culminating in your thought process and you can tell the tempo or energy of a scene. You begin to discern the games within scenes and a whole new world opens up. Your presence is become more recognizable by the comedy community and there's a comfortable feeling of being ready to improvise at any given moment. You've finally found your voice and now you're empowered!

You go up to play at an improv jam, some people you know and some you don't, and then suddenly the initiating line is: "You know how those Filipino people are. They eat dog."

Alone again.

It's one thing to be presented with a racist situation in real life but it's certainly a different situation to be presented a racist situation on stage while performing in front of an audience.

Will you freeze and stare for 2-minutes? Or will you paint your Jackson Pollock painting so someone can say, "Now that's art?" Do you have the tools reserved for such a situation and are you mentally prepared to differentiate yourself vs. you the improviser? Do you even have to separate the two? All of a sudden everyone is judging you all over again.

## The Goal

Before I continue with my essay, I must clearly state a few items.

This essay is written for non-whites. This is also written for allies who are open to understanding and wanting to help progress.

I'm not denying that there could be an extension of lessons or morals that are relatable, but unless you are physically and visually different looking than the majority population in America, then you will still never truly understand the feeling of racism. The experiences of an African-American are definitely different from a Latino-American, as much as it's different with an Asian-American. And overall, a Caucasian could not understand the true consciousness of racism in America.

Ladelle McWhorter writes in “Racism and Sexual Oppression in Anglo-America,”

As a white person, I have been told many times in many different contexts by many different people (most of them white) that I am necessarily and irremediably racist, regardless of my avowed convictions, and that my only honest option is to acknowledge that I am racist and then actively work to expose my racism and oppose it with deliberate antiracist efforts. Note the similarity to alcoholism. The alcoholic is told that she is by her very nature alcoholic, whether she consumes alcohol or not, and that her only honest, healthy option is to acknowledge her alcoholism and then actively work to expose the addictive aspects of her personality and oppose them at every turn. Racism, like alcoholism, is now held to be a condition of the personality or psyche that is so basic as to be ineradicable, a sort of enemy within that can never be vanquished but must be managed by means of strict self-discipline throughout one’s entire life. (2009)

I also want to note that I am obviously not here to solve racism, but I am an artist. And I do believe that art is activism. I am also an improviser, and there are so many schools of improv. Should a racist situation arise on stage, there could be countless methods of handling the situation. What we’re doing here is laying out cards on the table and gathering a sense of what can be done. The biggest point I want to encourage is for the improviser to not cede his/her power (voice) on stage.



## What Are These Concepts?

What is racism? The word has represented daily reality to millions of black people for centuries, yet it is rarely defined – perhaps just because that reality has been such a commonplace. By “racism” we mean the predication of decisions and policies on considerations of race for the purpose of subordinating a racial group and maintaining control over that group. (*Black Power* by Stokely Carmichael and Charles Hamilton. 1967.)

In improv, we incorporate imaginary information. We build characters through spontaneity and create details to a performed story. A situation or scenario is presented and through dialogue and sounds and acting, we develop a small play. These details make up the “policies,” if you will. A lot of teambuilding happens here. Whatever “rules” we create in this world, we’re agreeing with it so that we’re building upon it. We’re continually establishing relationships, justifying with backstory, and doing what is needed to ensure that our “policies” are true to the audience at all times during the improv set. What makes improv better is the player committing more genuinely because we want the audience to buy into our story. Improvisers are molded into this group mind of only one singular thought process, and it can go as far as to overlook racial differences.

Yet the heart of the quotation above from *Black Power* is race. It becomes racism when the policies downgrade a group of people due to their race. And in learning this art form, we’re continually pushed into this team environment.

In the striving for “agreement,” any form of “difference”—whether it is based on gender, race, or sexuality—is subsumed into the larger groupmind. Anyone whose views diverge too far may be accused of trying to impose an inappropriate personal or political agenda. Feminist, “ethnic,” and gay perspectives are often viewed warily and allowed only in the most homogenized constructions. Thus, it seems that the “universal” groupmind for which classic improv strives, is too often simply the heterosexual white male mind. (“Chicago-style Improv-comedy: Race and Gender, Rhetoric and Practice, Vol. 1” by Amy Seham. 1997.)

Improv (the comedic, performance style that makes a crapload of money today) was built by white people, mostly male. Through their experiences, they created these performance guidelines. But their experience as white men is surely different from other races’. And furthermore, there is a variant in status. The status of a white male in America’s society today is that of a generalized norm. *The accepted*. Whereas other sexes and races are automatically marginalized due to preconceived notions, assumptions, and stereotypes accepted as truths. Thus a minority performer may already have a lowered status within a scene from the audience’s perspective. And, on the other side of the stage, the improviser using self experiences as tools to play within scenes may tend to play a lower status.

Respecting status is ultimately what keeps Long Form improvisers from always telling their scene partners that they are crazy in response to the unusual. Allowing your reactions to pass through filters created

by environment and status is what keeps you from walking out of most scenes. Filters give you a reason to be patient and hear the other character's logic. (*The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual* by Besser, Roberts, and Walsh. 2013.)

So when status comes into play and race is on the table, the judgment should be on a more sensitive alert. A scenic example: a white male improviser driving a car and getting pulled over with pot in the vehicle tends to play to the white male stoner situation. Whereas, a different race playing this same scene may fall into the repercussions or criminalization of the illegal act. And this is due to the reality of what is happening in real life.

The UCB crew makes a great note of utilizing your filter to add patience. Giving more time to exercise your character can provide you more time to figure out a small game plan or rebuttal within the scene, if necessary. But again, that's just one method of action. What if you're playing a high energy scene and your brain is stimulated at a faster pace of process? Reaction at a faster tempo is essential to not deflate the scene, so now what?

Mick Napier explains in *Behind the Scenes* (2015) his approach in sustaining a character, and writes, "Thinking 'yes, and' too much is powerless saccharin in improvisation. Aggressively and relentlessly pursuing your vision in an improv scene—even if that vision is quiet, subtle, lovely, or vulnerable—is a much more valuable and proactive way of approaching improvisation."

Let's think about this. When you're ready to improvise, you may have your go-to characters, moves, or even funny one-liners. Mick says to be aggressive and don't let up on your vision as a character (whether that be close to your true self

or not). Susan Messing more bluntly says, “Don’t drop your shit.” Whatever this mask is that you’ve created for yourself, you cannot let it up, and once a racist situation arises, you’ll be more prepared than you think. These go-to characters or moves are on your tool belt and in a way, you’ve been waiting for this type of situation. Let your experience guide you and protect you, so you know how to attack.

Furthermore, let’s rethink our concept to the ultimate all-mighty words: “Yes, and...”

Mick does a wonderful thing by noting how powerless the concept of “Yes, and...” can make an improviser if overthought. You do not need to literally “Yes, and...” everything that is situated in front of you by your scene partner. People will say that this is the marks the difference between “good improv” and “bad improv.” But again, I’m writing this essay with the goal of empowerment. You can attack the scene and call the shit, *shit*. Or you can let the shit lay there, let the smell linger, even step in it, and never make note of it. Either way, the shit is out there. It’s on you on how you’d like to “Yes, and” it.

## Let’s Play

A friend of mine, Nelson Velazquez, Artistic Director for Salsation Theatre Company has taught workshops specifically speaking to this issue (workshop entitled, “Talking Taboo—Playing with Race, Gender, and Other No-Nos.”). The following are a few of his general notes for when racially charged scenes are allowed. I’ve selected a few that are straight to the thought and concur with my own personal sentiment on how to handle these situations, should they arise. They are as follows:

- Scenes that call for some racial situation to be discussed and that is the major point of contention between the characters on stage. For example, if a black woman brings a white boyfriend home and the family has issues with it, it should be played to see what comes out of it.
- Play what you know. If you're LatinX, play a LatinX character. If you're Filipino, play it.
- Attempt to overcome the stereotype. This can be a gray area for improvisers as there can be aspects of stereotypes that are comedic. Work with what's given on stage, and the actor portraying it. Playing a stereotype for the sake of playing a stereotype should be avoided, but rather try to make a statement as to how stereotypes can be wrong or even if they're true in some regards, that the characters are not shackled in expressiveness within the limits of that stereotype.

Nelson adds a couple of general notes on what to avoid:

- As mentioned before, don't play a stereotype to just have a cheap, thoughtless character on stage.
- Don't use trigger words like the N-word or any kind of racial slur. We haven't had enough discussions in the community to support the usage yet and thus it will put players on stage off and probably turn the audience against you.

Again, with various schools of improv, and various experiences inherited within each improviser, your personal method of handling such a situation lies solely on you. I've been in a situation where a white performer initiated a scene within a sweatshop and felt it necessary to use an Asian

accent. Because it was the top of the scene and her initiating line didn't set any strong details of our relationship, I simply went meta and said, "Yeah, I'm not sure I want to play an immigrant when I ask for a raise. That was also a bad accent." With that response, I still acknowledged her doing the accent ("Yes, and...") and established that our game is her pitching me things to say to our boss in hopes of a raise. Some improvisers may think to edit. Yes, you could just edit the scene, but that could be interpreted as ignoring racism.

Do you want to ignore it and have all improvisers matter or do you want to play with it and let all Black / Asian / Hispanic improvisers matter?

## In Closing... For Now

Before I end this essay, I did want to share something I found in *Something Wonderful Right Away* by Jeffrey Sweet, 1978. He interviews members of the Compass Players and The Second City. The following is from his interview with Roger Bowen, an actor well known for his role on M\*A\*S\*H:

SWEET: Why do you think there have been so few blacks in this kind of theater?

BOWEN: I think that satiric improvisational theater is definitely a cosmopolitan phenomenon and the people who do it and its audience are cosmopolitan people who are sufficiently liberated from their ethnic backgrounds to identify with whatever is going on throughout the world. They know what a Chinese poem is like and what Italian food tastes like. But I don't think most black people are cosmopolitan. I think they're more ethnic in their orientation, so when they're black actors, they want to do black theater.

You see, ethnic art tends to emphasize, enhance, and reinforce certain ethnic value, to say, "Our group is a good group." But when you get out of that and you identify with a larger intellectual environment, you say, "Well, gee, that was pretty narrow stuff." You get a concept of the brotherhood of man and how much alike people are rather than how different they are. You become de-ethnicized and you become a citizen of the world. And the thing you busted out of becomes a chrysalis, a discarded self, and the tendency is to turn on it.

Black people aren't at that point. The ethnic experience is very enjoyable, but it excludes the outer world. It's always "Us against them." In some ways it makes it easier for a person to get along because he doesn't have to fight every single battle.

Now a cosmopolitan has to fight every single battle there is because he can't say, "Me and my tribe say, 'Fuck you,'" because he has no tribe anymore. The cosmopolitan person also, by the way, is in a position of having to improvise a whole way of life, whereas in the ethnic society, much of it is handed to you; it's a received tradition.

A white man said this during the late 70's. He talks about how honing in on an ethnic type of humor in scenes segregates an audience and excludes other performers and the audience. Not everyone is going to understand this ethnic humor or in his case, "black theater." He says it's narrowing, but to me, I believe it to be intellectually stimulating and more thick in observing different cultural backgrounds. It's a chance to see something different on stage and more realistic to what is outside of the theater building.

Roger Bowen points at an “Us against Them” mentality, but I’m curious to know who is the “Us” and who is the “Them.” Supposedly “the cosmopolitan” is the know-it-all who has to uphold a seemingly privileged lifestyle, instead of dealing with strife. The thought of having ethnic humor played with Roger Bowen seems to have implications of white fragility. Almost 40 years later, would Mr. Bowen still have the same thoughts about comedy?

And now, after taking in the thoughts of this essay, do you?



CORIE ANDERSON

# Improv Trouble

## HEGEMONIC GENDER AND SEXUALITY IN LONGFORM IMPROVISATION

In her book *Gender Trouble*, feminist theorist Judith Butler writes about the topic of gender with the intent to trouble it, to challenge and confuse the category that so invisibly shapes our identities. Butler's use of "trouble" is not meant to be negative, but rather is thought of as a practice that citizens should feel empowered to employ in the face of systematic control. In this essay, I hope to trouble long-form improvisation in a similar way by incorporating Butler's ideas on gender performance as well as broad ideas on gender as a hegemonic creation. I will assert that, in order to be successful in improv, the actor must understand the performative aspect of gender. Furthermore, the actor must realize the responsibility she has on stage to use these ideas about gender to call attention to the cultural hegemonic order of the real world. That's all she can do. Where the actor and audience go from there is up to them.

## Gender and Improv Performance

Judith Butler tells us that “gender reality is performative which means, quite simply, that it is real only to the extent that it is performed.”<sup>14</sup> Rereading her work, I was struck by the similarities between her discussion of gender and my own ideas about the art of long-form improv. Like Butler’s gender theory, improv does not exist until it is performed. The stage is an empty and neutral space before the first actor makes her move in a scene and begins to build a world for the audience. Only through these performative acts does something come alive on stage. Butler continues:

Because there is neither an “essence” that gender expresses or externalizes nor an objective ideal to which gender aspires; because gender is not a fact, the various acts of gender creates the idea of gender, and without those acts, there would be no gender at all.<sup>15</sup>

The gender that Butler refers to here is the male/female binary, and her views thus cement the idea that gender rigidity is neither natural nor normal. This system is present in every part of society, from the moment we are born and given a pink or blue baby blanket to the one of two little boxes we check on applications our whole lives. From our first waking moments, we are told there is a right and wrong way to be gendered, or to act out the gender we are “assigned” by society. I agree with Butler here and will go a step further in saying that this practice of acting out gender can be harmful. To continue with this analysis of quality, what then would be a “good” way to express gender? I would argue that the perfect expression of gender is every expression, since every gender is singularly constructed through cultural and historical influences on the gendered individual and thus

could be nothing more than what it is. Here, awareness of this cultural gendering is key.

There is no single true gender expression, and similarly, there is no objectively right way to improvise. Butler writes, “as a shifting and contextual phenomenon, gender does not denote a substantive being, but a relative point of convergence among culturally and historically specific sets of relations.”<sup>16</sup> The art of improv, in its purest form, is not constrained by ideals. It is rooted in the diversity of artists. Therefore the goal of an improv set isn’t to craft the perfect joke, but rather to discover what happens when these specific people stand on a stage at this specific point in time, when unique human beings bump into each other and create worlds one improvised act after another. A perfect set is what results from this spontaneous interaction between people and ideas and has nothing to do with it being good, bad, or even funny.

## The Symbolic Order and Hegemonic Discourse

Improv and gender exist in the same world and thus are both historically and culturally influenced. They also both adhere to the same symbolic order, which is “the social world of linguistic communication, intersubjective relations, knowledge of ideological conventions, and the acceptance of the law.”<sup>17</sup> Gender is produced and reproduced through these ideas of the symbolic order: language (e.g., gendered pronouns), relations with other gendered beings (e.g., female defined as not-male), and the adherence to social rules (e.g., gendered restrooms and sections of clothing stores). Improv is a part of this symbolic order too. So when performing in this world, an actor must think about what she is creating for her audience. Why is the audience seeing this show? What are

their expectations? What does the actor want them to take away?

Furthermore, what is the duty of the actor to her audience? By asking herself these questions, I hope she comes to the conclusion that I have: the actor's role in long-form improv is to build a world on stage that mirrors the real world in order to expose the hegemonic forces that invisibly encase the audience.

The symbolic order exists to reinforce cultural hegemony, which in its most basic form, is the social and political control of many by a few in power. Judith Butler breaks this down in relation to gender, "these limits are always set within the terms of a hegemonic cultural discourse predicated on binary structures that appear as the language of universal rationality. Constraint is thus built into what that language constitutes as the imaginable domain of gender."<sup>18</sup> The binary definition of gender is not an accident. It has been specifically created by those in power to constrain citizens. Institutions take advantage of this binary (and every cultural system that is communicated as "norm"), with whole ways of life and industry built around reproducing the male/female dichotomy. The gender binary is most ubiquitous in language. Only now is our society dipping its toes into upsetting this gender system with many people identifying as genderqueer and choosing to use pronouns other than he/him and she/her. This enlightened shift must be portrayed on stage, and not in a way that calls attention to how new or strange these changes are, but to show that just as men and women exist in the real world and thus on stage, so do people who do not identify with either of those genders. In her brief time on stage, the actor must understand that everything she does and says communicates a morality. By using her platform to call

attention to hegemony, the actor thus portrays a morality that favors a diversity of voices, specifically those most often denied positions of power.

In improv, the stage acts as a sort of magnifying glass for the audience, providing a close-up view of human interaction much like a movie or play would. Improv goes a step further than these scripted art forms by providing the audience an unedited experience. For example, while taking the train to work one morning I noticed two strangers sitting next to each other. One looked at the other and smiled and they started talking. I was somewhat far away and didn't have a great view but I was still fascinated by this interaction: What were these people saying? How did they feel about each other? Why did they both decide to start a conversation here and now? If this same scene was in a film, many of these questions could be answered simply because it would be created for an audience who may ask these questions. The scene would most likely have high quality sound and image, close-ups of characters' faces, and perhaps even provide context within a larger plot. In long form improv, again this same scene could take place. Like in the film, the audience would have a much easier time seeing and hearing this interaction than they would in real life, as it would be staged for their viewing. However, an improv scene is not written. The actors do not rehearse lines or, during filming, are not "cut" to wait for better sound or change camera angles. In improv, the best takes are not edited together. The actors interact in real-time on the stage, just as those two people on the train were, just naturally responding to each other. As this improv scene unfolds, the audience sits feet away, able to see every line in the actor's face and hear every intonation in her voice. Improv is real life in a way that a play or film can never be, and because of this, long-form

improv is perfectly situated to expose cultural hegemony, not only in regards to gender and sexuality but also race and class.

If you are looking for this essay to break down how exactly to mirror reality on stage in order to expose the hegemonic powers at play, you will be disappointed. I did not write this to tell the actor how to improvise or the audience how to enjoy a performance. But at the most basic level, I think the actor needs to stay informed. I encourage her to volunteer with a homeless organization instead of taking another improv class or go to the library and check out a history book instead of seeing another show. She needs to vote, attend community meetings, and watch documentaries about countries she has never visited. The way to create rich and realistic worlds on stage? Learn about the world around you. Learn about other people. Who is suffering? Who is benefitting from their suffering? Why do we do the things we do? I don't think every improv set needs to be intensely political, nor do I think it should be prescriptive. Of course, it can also be funny but it doesn't need to be. When the actor and her teammates are knowledgeable and active citizens, their points of view will naturally collide on stage. It will be magic.

## The Actor

The body is the most accessible site of hegemonic forces that constitute identity. How someone looks is usually the first thing you notice about them: haircut, style of clothing, the way their voice sounds, or how they walk. These aspects of a person are clues to deciphering their gender, something we all have been conditioned to do, whether it's intentional or not. In addition to physical appearance, sexual desire is often used to label a person's identity. These categories can be just as

inflexible as gender: a man who is attracted to men is said to be gay and a woman who is attracted to women is said to be a lesbian. A man who dresses or acts in a “feminine” way is seen as gay also, and the same is true for a woman who leans toward the “masculine.” This is what Judith Butler calls “the heterosexualization of desire” which “requires and institutes the production of discrete and asymmetrical oppositions between ‘feminine’ and ‘masculine,’ where these are understood as expressive attributes of ‘male’ and ‘female.’”<sup>19</sup> Each time an actor is on stage, her physical appearance and what the other actors know about her sexual preference can inform how she is gendered in a scene.

I am a lesbian. I have a short haircut, do not wear much makeup or jewelry, and I dress in mostly pants and button-down shirts. Most often, when I am performing, my scene partner will use the he/him pronouns when referring to my character. If I am playing a kid, I will be called a little boy or given a typically male name. As a woman who presents herself in a way that could be described as “masculine,” I am constantly forced to play men on stage. My sexual identity is also a factor when I am labeled or when I choose to play a certain gender. I do not know how much thought my scene partners put into how they gender me in scenes, but I think about it a lot. It is worth noting that most times, there are a majority of men on stage and in the audience, and I am one of few women performing. This makes my gendering even more problematic, I think, as my strength in being a woman and representing women’s voices is silenced. I also gender myself on stage. I will frequently call myself a male name or put myself in a situation where a man would most easily fit. This is partly because, truthfully, I worry that if I were to play a straight woman in a scene the audience would not find it

believable because of the way I look. Could I call a male actor my husband without wondering if those watching are raising their eyebrows in disbelief? Could I play a mother or a princess, roles that are usually reserved for the “feminine?” My discomfort with how I fit into identity categories in real life bleeds into my performance style. In these cases, I’m unable to be truly present in a scene.

The very nature of long-form improvisation is that the actors do not wear costumes, use props, or perform on a set. The stage is usually sparse, containing only a few black chairs. Actors use words and object work, or the realistic miming of an object, to describe the scene around them. All the while, the actor’s own personality naturally bleeds into her characters. There is nothing to hide behind on stage. The actor looks like herself when she is playing a character, and so this gendering based on appearance and personal details is common and most likely subconscious or accidental. This is both the issue with long form improv and its greatest strength. It’s a problem when actors cannot suspend disbelief on stage and end up using something about the actor to inform the character. However, this blending of actor and character is what makes improv so unique. In improv, the artist is the art.

## Make Trouble

With this essay, I hope I’ve called out the practice of gendering actors on stage, and more broadly, gendering people in the world. Though gendering happens one person at a time, its practice has been built into the rules and order of our society through cultural hegemony. This essay is not a comprehensive analysis of hegemonic discourse, nor should it be. Because, just as improv is a sneak peak into human



interaction, this essay is only a quick look behind the curtain of our society. We live in a world where structures invent and enforce strict rules of gender (and race, class, and sexuality) for their own benefit. Though it can be overwhelming, it can also be exciting, because once you realize that the world around you isn't so stable, you can begin to change it. I encourage the actor to use her platform to tell cultural truths. I encourage the audience to invest in the truths that artists tell, but always with a healthy dose of questioning. It is thus my hope that actor and audience, together as citizens of the same world, leave the improv theater angry, awake, and ready to make trouble.



ALICE STANLEY JR.

# Destroying the Scene on Principle

Last month in a *Baby Wants Candy* (the full improvised musical) show, the title suggestion was “Harry Pothead.” Naturally, thus began an hour of kush and Hagrid jokes. It was an audience homerun with a plethora of weed and/or magic puns to pull from for songs and bit characters. And then, right at the end of the show, after Voldemort had been murdered and everyone was blazin’, someone established the last Horcrux was Harry’s virginity. I didn’t particularly love this move, but “yes, and” or whatever; it had been said, so we had to honor it and get to that closing number. But then my teammate realized (and said aloud) that we had already been established as third year students—making Harry thirteen years old. Although we were poised to end the whole shebang in mere minutes, the show came to a screeching halt as Hermione fumbled with her time turner, Harry cast a spell to make himself 20, Ron noted no one else was of age, and finally we all did a magic incantation to grow up. It was horribly messy, not funny, and certainly tarnished what had been an easy A of a show. Probably, since adults were playing

these kids, if Harry and Draco had just boinked, we sang, and the lights went out, no one would have left the theatre thinking about statutory rape. But, maybe someone would have. So was the ugly politically correct literal song and dance worth it? Yes; it is essential to present the highest social consciousness on stage, even at the expense of humor.

If you're an improviser, you've been in a made-up ethical quandary before. There are certainly some real-ass comedian creeps out there, but more often, we're on stage making it up and sometimes make mistakes. Last year I was playing Genres at ImprovAcadia, a short-form theatre in Maine, with mostly newbie tourist audiences. At some point, we switched from a romantic comedy to Indiana Jones, and I decided to have my face melt off. It wasn't, you know, an award-winning move, but that's what I thought of as a person who has never seen any Indiana Jones movies. When the scene switched again, I became an ugly burn victim in a drama. My Inner Correctness Monologue started whirring as the game neared close. I couldn't have this person "lose." What if someone out there was disfigured? In a totally boring and gross way I practically screamed, "But I'm so glad you love me just the way I am!" and squeezed my scene partner before the host could call the game. It was a super weak button, but oh well. So. Get. Freaking. This. We came back from intermission and as I was introducing 185, I, for the first time, looked at the front row. A man with severe burns all over his face was staring up at me. I felt validated by my choice to ham-handedly go for heartfelt in my previous scene.

I've noted when other players tank moments for the good of the context. During a Second City Mainstage set a couple years ago I remember someone creating a scene where an actor was supposed to be some guy's sidepiece, and although

it sort of negated the set-up, she just berated him for cheating on his wife. Honestly, she was so ridiculously aggressive, it became not only more feminist but also probably ten times funnier than a typical scene about a girl asking some dude to break-up his relationship. I remember watching the little indie team Jane Barb at the Chicago improv co-op The Playground many moons ago. Shelby Jo Plummer was playing a pregnant woman. She was about to walk out of a room, and Jesse Kendall told her to take care since she was a mother. Shelby stopped the flow of the scene to correct, “Not technically yet. Not until the baby is actually born.” It was out of character for her character to get into nit-picking details of “motherhood,” but that’s a misconception that impacts pro-choice conversations. She had to take the opportunity to get the correct vocabulary into an audience of 50 people’s brains and ran with it. This weekend, I played a show with Bri Fitzpatrick, who established a group of girls on stage as K-Pop stars. I started doing peace signs and gave myself a high-pitched voice. A teammate frankly and overtly laid on, “Yes, we’re an all-white K-Pop group.” Phew. None of us were offensively donning improv yellowface. Bri even gleefully added, “This is appropriation!” making the joke of the scene our characters’ ignorant whiteness and not insulting impressions. I applaud these as the right moves to make.

There are roughly 100,000 improv scenes a day in Chicago. I think comedy will survive if some of them fail in the name of something better. From my perspective, it’s always worth it. I’d rather 200 people walk away from a show thinking it was fine than 199 people walk away from a show ecstatic and one person wonder why their trauma was a joke. Of course, the boundaries of appropriateness aren’t always so obvious, and enacting a clean-up isn’t always so simple.

Last year, I was playing *Whirled News Tonight*, the long-running iO show that gets its suggestions from audience members' clipped out newspaper articles. We got a story that mentioned a political figure embezzling money. Then, in almost a throwaway line, the article mentioned this guy was also a pedophile. So John Patrick Cohen came out as a pompous dude who would talk about finances and occasionally also toss in "Iwannafuckaboy." Honestly, it was a brilliant characterization of the article, but I was on high alert to pedophilia that week. A friend of mine had just opened up about being molested by a neighbor during his middle school years. The audience was rolling, but to me, the scene was not funny. I decided to tag in as the manager of the store and say JPC's character had been caught saying "Iwannafuckaboy" on the intercom, and we called the police. I don't remember exactly how, but in a semi-satirical move the other employees defended him. The scene was funny, and truly so outlandish I know it was no one's intention to protect a fictional pedophile. But I walked away praying no one with an abuse history was in the crowd. Maybe I should have yelled over everyone. Maybe I should have taken out handcuffs myself. I was only a sit-in, but maybe I should have wrecked that scene.

On the other hand I've seen some of the best navigation of difficult issues ever in *Whirled News* since, dang, audiences can offer up some difficult articles as a prompts. This summer I began literally sweating reading an article the audience had left me. The piece was about how trans people get catcalled and murdered so often. I had no idea how anyone on cast was going to deal with the content. Then Brooke Breit came out and announced she would no longer be "*Trans*"—a member of the Trans Siberian Orchestra, and you bet someone was right there to catcall her about her

clarinet. It was perfection. Last week we got an article about high schoolers with cancer getting to use medical marijuana. I was weighing whether or not it would be ethical to play a high schooler with cancer when Brett Lyons stormed on stage with, “Principal Smith, we’ve got a problem. There are twenty-five students claiming to have cancer in my office.” Masterful!

Walking the appropriateness line is always going to be a challenge of improv. We’re making up entire complex worlds and people second to second. We’re gonna say things that offend people. However, if they’re offensive viewpoints we don’t believe or mean, I hope we start leaning more into supporting the hypothetical audience that might be affected instead of the scene work. Perhaps some may say, “But what about supporting our partners?” To that I would say, if I did something offensive, my partner supporting that is not supporting me. My partner holding me to a higher standard is. And over time, it will feel less contradictory and more welcomed—if we all agree to such benchmarks.

There are multitudes of other related problematic scenarios we can consider in the same vein. Let’s consider “wrecking the scene” when you’re not in it. It seems rude (and honestly just so extra) to heckle an improv team, but if you’re in the audience, and someone is up there being an insensitive ding dong, I think you should interrupt! Booing is a lost art form. If you don’t interact honestly with the performance, what the heck is the point of seeing live theatre? Furthermore, if you’re uneasy, chances are, some other less boisterous person in the crowd is probably feeling the same way. Probably someone onstage is feeling just as queasy as you are. If I were in a show and a cast member crossed a line, I’d be relieved if, during notes, my team had a

jumping off point to address the problem. It's difficult to prove, "Hey, teammate, the audience didn't like your racial slur joke," if they laughed. If audience offered stony silence and an audible, "Oh, hell no," my teammate might be more receptive to future sensitivity. And what if the hecklers themselves are the problem? Well, then, break the scene and address it head on, too.

In a perfect world, it's not that improv would never address offensive content, it's that it would be couched in complexity, as part of a dialogue about complicated ideas, or as clear-cut satire. But in our non-perfect world we seem to have two acceptable options: avoid offensive content or confront it with the utmost care. Period.

I'll close with an anecdote about my 5B class at iO. A woman was in a montage scene where she just didn't know what was happening. You know those scenes. Someone has established you're on the moon, and someone else didn't hear and thinks everyone is a waiter at Buca di Beppo. Someone else has announced they're blind. This woman just yelled, "And SCENE," and ran out of the mess. Honestly, it was a relief. The show goes on.



KARL BRADLEY

# Now You're Improvising With Portals

In every improv show, there is a moment where a portal appears, a gateway that defies the laws of physics and spacetime. This gateway can appear at any time, but often occurs just after getting a suggestion, a sweep edit, or even after the game slot of a Harold. This is my favorite part of improv because through that portal exists infinite possibilities. Step through the portal, like Alice Through the Looking Glass, and discover a world; maybe it resembles the world we walk through everyday, and maybe it is entirely different. I'm cheering for a different world, one where we are free of the fear and insecurities that suffocate us every day.

I don't remember the first time I improvised. Before the classes in windowless basements, the quest for a perfect "Harold," or the Second City general auditions, there was only "play." Yes, the thing we did as children where someone would say, "Let's play Aliens," and a skinny black kid says, "Yes, and I'll be Ripley," and another child says, "Yes, and I'll be the guy who is a robot," and a third child says, "Yes, and I'll be the Alien coming to kill everyone," and the group of children break off with their interpretation of their roles and

a world to discover. Maybe after a few minutes someone will yell, “you can’t do that!” Well, why the hell not? “Ripley wouldn’t do that!” Yes, even then we were committed to the truth of the characters.

Growing up, my mother was in the Army and I moved around a lot. As an only child, I was alone as the perpetual new kid in a new place every year. With each new school, I had to learn who and what was cool. I had to discover the rules of the playground, the rules of the lunchroom, and the politics of the bus route. Every year, I was essentially forced through a portal and found myself in a new world discovering what the rules were. The more times I found myself in a new city, the more I noticed how each place had its own hierarchies, it’s own arbitrary quirks, how each place seemed to have a unique structure.

For about a year, the last half of second grade and the first half of third grade, I lived with another family. My mom was training on a base and for that period of time I had the equivalent of a brother and a sister: Benjamin, who was 4 years older than me, and Kendalyn, who was two years older than me. I remember playing N64 with them; I remember getting knocked off a bed during a pillow fight and busting my head open on a chair so badly that I needed stitches right above my eye; and I also remember playing things like school, or office, or whatever place we could think of. These games mainly involved us pretending we were in college and going to class or pretending we were working at a company and having business meetings for things we knew nothing about. We would become a character and interact, no set rules, no goals, just spontaneous discovery until we exhausted the limits of our characters and a long lull occurred. Then one of us, almost exclusively Ben, would dramatically say, “Guys, I

don't want to play anymore." Yes, even then we knew how to edit.

Looking back, one of the funniest things to me is how real we would play situations. Once, we were commuters on a train going to work and we mostly stood in silence holding onto the handles until we got to our destination, that classic bit of object work ingrained in our bodies even then. That was the game. No one told us to play it real and we never discussed it. Subconsciously, we knew that once we crossed over into that new world, the only thing that could keep us there was to play it like we really were there. Even now, I get a thrill completely becoming a character, no matter how boring their day-to-day is.

Improv to me is a bit like Calvin Ball, the legendary game in the Calvin and Hobbes comics where, "the only permanent rule is you can't play it the same way twice." When I step through that portal on stage, I have no idea what I'm going to find, and that potential for discovery excites me. I want to surprise and be surprised in every single improv show. For me, every scene is potentially a new world waiting to be discovered. The portal is akin to a stargate, you step through and find yourself in a new world that has a past, which occurred before you arrived, and a future, which will occur once you leave and your experience is brief and limited and "never to be seen again."

We often make a promise at the top of the show that we are making things up on the spot. This intention is what I love. As opposed to sketch or any other scripted theatre, a good improv show is surprising. An improv teacher of mine once told me, "we don't forgo scripts, props, and costumes because we are lazy; we leave them behind for the possibility that anything can happen." This "anything" is thrilling to me.

My favorite thing to hear after a show is “you looked like you were having so much fun up there.” For me, improv feels like being a kid again.

The unknown can be scary. Stepping through the portal is a leap of faith. Whenever I get in my head about what to do next, I remember what another improv teacher once told the class: “I have good news and bad news. The bad news is you just jumped out of an airplane without a parachute. The good news is there is no ground.” There is no ground because no matter how far you fall, there is always further to fall. No matter the scene, no matter the story, there is always more, there is always an after. What happens after the characters fall in love? What happens after the employee quits their job? What happens after the “everyone get into my office” meeting? I don’t think about fear when I realize that, no matter what happens, there is more to discover. There is always another portal, another world waiting to be explored. The final Calvin and Hobbes comic ends with the line, “It’s a magical world, Hobbes ol’ buddy... let’s go exploring.” In the spirit of this expedition, I prepare to jump through the portal again, enthusiastic and giddy.

STEVE HAN

# The Importance of Representation

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 rambling 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.



## JET EVELETH (FEAT. SCOTT ADSIT)

# Jet & Scott

*Before iO West closed last month, I was lucky enough to have some stage time with one of my favorite people during the show Adsit and Eveleth. Scott Adsit is doing something right because he is a marvel on stage and off. As the evening closed Scott and I broke down our show. The thoughts he had really stuck with me and it contained some fantastic lessons, the kind of stuff I crave in pursuing this work. So I thought I'd continue the conversation with him and share it with all of you.*

**Jet Eveleth:** I learned a lot from our last show.

**Scott Adsit:** Like what?

**JE:** Like first of all, don't do three shows in a night. (Laugh) But really, if someone is playing from a place of having a want or desire in the scene it takes an incredible amount of energy and focus, and I think a lot that energy and focus was used in my first two shows. To want something from the other character means that you need to not only identify it BUT then you have to actively pursue it. For me it takes much more energy to use real emotions and drives, than say just... using my wit.

**SA:** For me, my wit comes through the corridor of emotion. The way I have come to play there is no wit without emotion. I

played over the years in many different styles and now my comfort zone is just trying to find a real emotional response to something, and seeing if there is something funny in that, and not trying to make it artificial or just serving the joke.

**JE:** Watching work come from a human or emotional place continues to surprise me, but when humor emerges from a more cerebral or formulaic place, as jokes tend to, I feel like I am rarely surprised.

**SA:** Yeah, I'm very aware of when I'm being witty and it distracts me. It's like, *oh this will be funny, or here is a joke waving at me from down the block and I can just run towards that*. And that takes me out of being in a place of responding. Then my pursuit isn't from something from my partner, it's from the joke itself. I want something from the joke. It's a response to my cleverness. So I pursue the joke instead of pursuing my want from my partner and sometimes that works really well but it also distracts me. Suddenly I'm Scott Adsit getting a clever laugh from an appreciative audience instead of Johnny getting kicked by Jane or whatever I want from my partner.

**JE:** It's why I only play with certain people. If someone is going to play for the joke, it often plays outside or against the want, because it pulls the rug out from the reality. The want of a character thrives in reality.

**SA:** People respond to honesty. Different scenes require different ways to play it but I think it's only an honest response that gets a satisfying or memorable laugh.

**JE:** Yeah. And there is type of laugh that I don't want. There is a distinct quality to every kind of laugh and there is one that if I hear it, it feels cheap to me, like I'm doing something wrong.

**SA:** Because you are educating the audience with how you play, teaching them what to respond to. If you feed them junk food that's all their going to want, like the film *Super Size Me*. That guy ate nothing but McDonalds for a month so his body craved nothing but McDonalds. It's the same in comedy. If you just feed the audience dick jokes or easy puns, then that is what they are going to consume and expect and that is what they will be looking for so the subtle humor about the human condition will pass them by because they are looking for the easy, sugary, greasy joke.

**JE:** When I go for the simple joke, I want to take that moment back and play the truth instead. But the longer I do this work, the more I catch myself before I throw that parade candy out to the audience. It takes focus to avoid going for the easy joke, in order to tap into something deeper. And you have to be able to go awhile without a laugh. That's hard.

**SA:** If you treat everything honestly, you can go a long time without getting a laugh and then when that laugh does come, it's meaningful. If you are playing well, from an honest place and the relationship is important then the audience is paying attention and they are invested emotionally, so when the laugh comes it's much bigger and much more satisfying for them and us. Instead of just being tickled, they have an emotional stake in what they are watching.

**JE:** I find that I'm sensitive to that cheap joke in real life as well.

**SA:** Take note, readers.

**JE:** Life supplies the humor... in the form of challenges or absurdity so I wonder why we work so hard to layer on crappy pun jokes. It really feels like junk food, like once you give it up it you're like, "Cheetos, who bought those?"

**SA:** It's the difference between serving the game or serving the scene. You reach a point where the game is not as fun as, you know... acting.

**JE:** I like the feeling of getting lost in something bigger than me, so that I am surprised too. I get to go on the journey as well. In something more game driven, I'm not going for the ride, I'm driving and crafting it. I prefer to abandoned some control because I get to have as much fun as the audience. I don't know what the f&\*# is going to happen next EITHER.

**SA:** Yeah. Yeah. It's fun to play with you because your character knows exactly where she is and what's happening but there is also an element I can see in you that you are walking the tight rope and you know you can fall at any moment and... you are just going to start dancing.

**JE:** (laughing) Oh, no...

**SA:** Yeah. And I'm standing on the same tight rope and when you start dancing, I'm like, "Oh no... She is going to knock me off. I'm going to fall hard." But generally it doesn't happen because you're so skillful.

**JE:** (laughing) It's funny, in the moment it doesn't feel like a risk. But it makes sense because I like raw, genuine commitment in the comedy I watch. I think it's what we both love about *The Ding Dong Show* (The Comedy Store, Los Angeles). It has that out of control element that I crave in long-form. A fellow comedian once said, "You know why you and Scott love *The Ding Dong Show* so much? Because you have dove so deep into comedy that only absurdity surprises you two."

**SA:** (laugh) That is very true. Very, very true.

**JE:** BUT even when all formulas are removed, when it's nothing but raw absurdity, there are still patterns. They are just way

more unpredictable. The other path is to use the set formulas and selection of funny words which will entertain people who prefer to feel more safe.

**SA:** Yeah, like in the play *The Sunshine Boys*, the older comedian tells the younger comedian to use words with the letter K, like chicken is funny, pickle is funny... the K sound is funny.

**JE:** To me the only way that is funny is to explore that character who thinks that.

**SA:** And that is exactly what Neil Simon was saying about the two generations, one generation that saying that is true and another generation that says, "Look at that man who thinks that's how comedy works."

**JE:** In comedy, I need to go down the path of the unknown.

**SA:** You definitely are someone who wants to, on stage, walk around the red light district and see what's down this alley.

**JA:** Yeah, I do... (laughing)

**SA:** And you might get killed. But it would be worth it because you might see something as you are dying.

**JE:** Yeah, that's a really good way of putting it. I feel that way in life. I like thinking about death... just enough to make me really live. And that's why I am particular about how I approach improv, I always want to go deeper. So I really sat on how, in our last show, I felt that I was still somehow floating on the surface. I went to some old habits, played it safe without realizing it... maybe because I was tired from the previous two shows. I felt I was able to do the elementary things like stay in character, stay connected and listen, but many of my characters lacked a drive or want. Like, "why here, why today, why with this person?" Finding, feeling, and discovering those wants takes an incredible amount of focus

because you have to use the reality that is in front you. You have to dream above and below that reality.

**SA:** And that works really well if you can stay out of your head and not get in there and start writing.

**JE:** Yes.

**SA:** It's about making a snap decision and getting under that and then exploring down that alley to see if there is anything else you can adjust. Wants are happening at every moment of your life. And it's just a matter of recognizing it from the filter of what you have created so far.

**JE:** And this way of playing speaks to me because I like to feel the pull of life through the experience of someone else. And in our last show I wasn't locking into the wants as gracefully as I would have like to have. It was helpful after the show to talk about it. Which is one of my favorite things about you, you like to talk about the show. That's pretty uncommon for veteran performers. During the show I felt a bit stuck and you were able to speak to some of the underlying causes.

**SA:** I think when I'm tired or not mentally prepared for a show my laziness comes out in just responding in relation to what will get a laugh instead of what my character is responding to. So instead of shopping for a line, like I do when I'm lazy, I need to be in that "4th wall" room and really know that what my partner is saying is really having an effect on me. INSTEAD of using the gift that my partner gave me to get myself a laugh. That is what I do when I am lazy, I use what you just said to get a laugh.

**JE:** I get that. Seeing it as a brick to build the scene OR a brick to exchange for a laugh. When we go for the joke we cut the



brick in half, or crumble it and it loses its integrity. This brick was meant to build a collaborative dream.

**SA:** You want them invested.

**JE:** And you are right, shopping for a line is exactly what it feels like when you are going for the joke. But when you are trying to build a scene you are acting more like an architect.

**SA:** Right, they both involve the risk of getting into your head. Shopping for a line for the obvious reasons but also considering and stepping back and putting your finger on your chin and saying, “What do I want here?”

**JE:** (laughing) True.

**SA:** That’s why there is golden cradle of being in the right mindset to just respond honestly, where you’re embodying your character and not steering the ship too much. Letting the character be ahead of you.

**JE:** When I get lazy I can get lost in my environment, quietly exploring without offering enough of that often-needed forward momentum. In the last show I had the intention on starting the scene with more forward energy and not getting too lost in the more subtle element. But what ended up happening is I went in with this forward energy and I created a momentum without wants, just plowing through like a train. I had elements moving forward like a voice or a feeling but it was ahead of me so when I tried to tap into what I wanted I couldn’t seem to find it.

**SA:** And also when you do that, you are sort of isolating yourself from your partner. Because you are not presenting them with the pursuit you have. Say you are playing with your hair and you’re fascinated by your hair, well as your partner, well... everything is a gift BUT it’s all on me. It’s not so much a gift

because you're not including me in how fascinating your hair is. And so that exploration is valid but it's putting a burden on me. But if you invite me to explore your hair with you than that's something else, that helps me a lot. That is something I can receive as a gift instead of invent as a gift.

**JE:** I hear that. And for any new improvisors who may be reading this, to be clear, that "invitation" we speak of is of course not literal but a nonverbal invitation of want. It's not like, "Hey what do you think of my hair?" but more like I'm twirling my hair to get you to flirt with me because I want to steal you away from my sister. That action is connected to the want if I invite you energetically into my world. But if I'm cut off and fascinated by own hair, how does one enter that?

**SA:** Unless I invent a way to do that, which I am not saying is completely wrong. We are both creative people and you made a decision, "I'll do this and see what he does." But sometimes, depending on how focused you are on your hair, it again leaves me out.

**JE:** True. Well... all good things to ponder. I have a lot to sleep on before our next show.

Adsit and Eveleth perform at festivals and theaters all over the US. To find out more, visit our website<sup>20</sup> or send an email to [somniafilmsla@gmail.com](mailto:somniafilmsla@gmail.com)

ARNE PARROTT

# Directionless

We're at the start of the opening game slot for my 6th Harold of the day and I'm a total hack who has no idea what he's doing. I look down at the keys in front of me and try to re-center on the suggestion.

"Cabbage Patch."

I sigh. Unsurprisingly, this doesn't inspire any music, so I look up and watch as my fellow improvisers create a blooming cabbage patch with their bodies. I play a few chords with their movements, avoiding any notes that point to a major or a minor key as I don't want to inflict any emotional tone onto this particular blooming cabbage patch. The improvisers begin weaving metaphor.

"This humble cabbage grew from a single seed!" I cautiously move into a major key. "This humble cabbage will feed a family!" I move more confidently into positive emotions, trying to support and reinforce. "...a RUSSIAN family!" I start to oom-chuck slowly with my left hand, while my right hand feels out the melody to the old Russian folk song that the theme from Tetris was based on. I struggle internally with this choice, because there's always the worry that a direct reference like that will pull the audience focus

away from the scene that's happening and into the "Hey, I know this song!" mindset.

One improviser catches what I'm playing, and becomes a second cabbage of a different shape that starts to slowly drop towards the first cabbage. That is a very satisfying thing to see. If the performers use what I play, it legitimizes my choice and it also lets me know that they're paying attention to what I'm doing, leading me to make even bolder choices as the show continues.

"One cabbage of many! All stacking up in the barn for a haaaaaard winter."

Many more cabbages/Tetris pieces form. Those that aren't cabbages do a cautious Cossack dance on the backline to the beat. I speed up.

"A winter so hard, they'll need EVERY CABBAGE THEY CAN FIND!"

Everyone is a piece of Tetris cabbage now, all falling and bobbing with the beat. I speed up again, trying to push towards desperation but the improvisers are way ahead of me.

"...for this is the winter fated to last TEN THOUSAND YEARS!"

General bellows from the cast. Some improvisers break off and become frantic family members moving the cabbages from the field to the barn. I push the tempo to breakneck paces as more and more bodies begin piling up in the center as everyone scrambles to form a pantry. As the energy peaks, one improviser steps off to the side and raises her finger in the air. I stop the song and hold a high octave as she yells

"BUT!"

Her pile of teammates stop writhing and look at her. Silence fills the room.

“As soon as the cabbages are stacked perfectly... they DISAPPEAR!”

I glissando down into the Tetris theme again as the cabbages scream “NOOOOO” and are pulled offstage to the backline. Two remain, and the first beat begins.

It goes by with relatively little music. I have a hard time knowing when to play in the first beat because good grounded scenes don’t usually featuring a lot of banging on the keys. I find that music is best used to heighten and impose style, so unless someone comes out swinging with a crazy choice, I’m adding music that exists only for itself and that’s hardly supportive. I take my hands off the keys and try to listen. Scene one is a father telling his son he plays too many video games. I play some “game over” music when the son throws his controller out the window. I immediately regret it for its hackishness and I barely finish the riff. Scene two is a high school boy telling two friends that he’s an adult now because his parents are taking him to see Dave Matthews. No music, but I try to remember how “Ants Marching” goes in case it comes back. Scene three is an Old Witch cursing a village to a ten thousand year winter. This is a strong stylistic choice, and I feel pulled to help. I exhausted my single rolodex entry of Russian songs already, so I play witchy notes under her speech and no music when the mayor is responding. The witch recognizes the game I’m playing and we start a little back and forth. The effect is nice and I like feeling heard, and as the scene is swept I get that rare feeling of knowing for certain that it was a good move.

I play some Guaraldi-esque jazz out of the first beat and we move into game slot two. The performers wistfully float around the stage as wise old snowflakes who are worried about the harm they’re going to inflict on this village, and I

switch to a jazz waltz version of Pachelbel's "Canon" to avoid any accidental Christmas music because it's January and we're all over that. It's nice, but low energy. I try to find an opportunity to ramp it up, but I never really commit to anything, so nothing changes and it feels like my fault. It's still nice.

The next scene starts in a fancy enough restaurant to have an in-house piano player, and that's one of the few roles I know I have to take. Should I play "Misty?" No, I think I played that in a similar scene earlier tonight. I settle on "Stormy Weather," as it seems thematic. As the scene progresses, we learn this is the same kid who went to see Dave Matthews and is embracing his life as a 15 year old mature adult by taking his teacher out to a fancy restaurant. Perfect. I slip into a lounge version of "Ants Marching" to let him know I'm on board, but I just keep looping the two-chord verse because I can't remember the chorus. Thankfully, he calls over. "Hey Piano Man, do you know "The Space Between?" and we start a sleazy duet that gets a full two lines in before it is swept.

The second scene of the second beat begins and I can tell the improvisers are a little lost. They're both very good and even though their scene is treading water, neither of them panics. I hesitate above the keys--sometimes, piano can clarify, but other times, it further muddies the water. The audience will always notice the first piece of scoring in a mostly silent scene, so I wait, hoping to punctuate a moment of importance. One of them makes a remark that they haven't seen their sister in ages. The other says that they haven't seen their brother in ages. They do a slow turn to look at each other and I take my chance; A little "ding" on the piano as their eyes meet, a triumphant indicator that a direction has

been found. It plays out with them catching up after 20 years apart. I play bouncy music that doesn't sit in any particular rhythm which gives me the freedom to accentuate their moments of joy with more bell tones. It has the same chord changes as "The Way You Make Me Feel." which I always default to and I don't know why. As I'm wondering about it, the scene ends and I kick myself for tuning out.

Scene three returns to Russia, where the family that invented Tetris is overtaxing the peasants who work for them. I reluctantly return to an oppressive and grouchy version of the Tetris theme, making a mental note to learn one other song from Russia. It ends with a little dance that smoothly transitions into the third game slot at a country wedding. We make a game out of serious toasts with serious music leading into raunchy punchlines and a bunch of dancing and I score it with a song I started writing earlier in the week. It's not a bad way to workshop.

The third beat brings back the kid who played too many video games lecturing his son about not playing *enough* video games. I manage to land a good "game over" riff that nearly (but not quite) justifies my choice from earlier. The tags and sweeps start coming with ferocity and I find myself playing along less with the hastily established emotional tone and more with the rhythm of the speech. The long lost siblings have a falling out and a more sinister version of the "ding" returns as they swear to never see each other again. Sweep. The Witch crashes the country wedding promising to end the winter if she can marry the bride. I try to return to the talking/music game from earlier, but there's just too much happening on stage and it doesn't work. Sweep. The grownup teenager is at his senior prom but is treating it like his 10-year high school reunion. Prom should obviously have music, but

I hesitate. What would play at a prom in 2019? My creaky 30 year old brain finally settled on Ed Sheeran's "Perfect" which I heard in a commercial once, but I quickly change to "Graduation" by Vitamin C because it's timeless and has that same chord changes as Pachelbel's "Canon," which that makes it a super opaque call back that only I will enjoy. As we push through this weave of scenes and sounds towards our conclusion, one person jumps to the center as a snowflake that's falling gleefully towards the ground. A second person joins them as a differently shaped snowflake and I am forced to grudgingly acknowledge that the whole Tetris thing worked out well, and return to the theme for the third time tonight. Soon, everyone is a giggling snowpile on the ground until one steps forward and says, "BUT as soon as the snowflakes are stacked..." I hit the high octave again and everyone in unison says "THEY DISAPPEAR."

The lights fade. "Juice" by Lizzo blares over the speakers as the audience claps and cheers. The team points to me and I do a dumb little riff and walk off stage. I get a pat on the back from the witch and some kind words from Dave Matthews kid. They get notes from the coach. I do not. On my walk to the train, I try to think about what worked and what didn't, but the details of this last show are already lost in the swirl of the five others I played. I know that I helped and I know that I did good work, but every show I play just leads to new questions that I can never seem to answer. Did I miss any chances to escalate? Did I run over someone else's great choice? Did I play too much or too little? Ah well. As the doors close on the Red Line, I put on my headphones, pull up Spotify, and stream the first Russian folk album I can find.



On  
The History



JOANNA BUESE, LINDSEY  
HARRINGTON & LORI MCCLAIN

## Sirens

*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*, *Improvvised 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 classical 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.





LOUIS SAUNDERS

## Private Press Improv

It's a grey Monday night on the edge of Logan Square, a casually hip neighborhood in Chicago that exudes a confident and effortless cool. It's a place that is welcoming but I still feel completely out of place. But then again, I feel out of place almost everywhere.

The bar Quenchers on the corner of Western and Fullerton is closing soon and with it goes the Monday night *Spitballin'*, an impressively long running variety and improv show that runs out of a performance space adjacent to the bar. Tonight the regulars are rowdy and mostly focused on an NBA playoff game. After ordering a craft beer (I have a job), I go through the curtain into the back. I scope the crowd In the awkward way I do; it is a mix of friends and strangers, some of whom are there to perform and some just to watch.

It's been so long since I took the time to go see an Improv show on one of my few nights off from performing, coaching or rehearsing which feels selfish. Although there are plenty of great shows going on at all the major theaters 24/7, I wanted to see something different, independent and intimate.

Back when I started taking classes and performing in Chicago in 2005, there was bar-prov everywhere. It seemed as

if almost every current and former student had started up an improv night at every bar in the city. There were bars such as Mullen's, The Spot, Ginger's Ale House, The Green Door, Horseshoe, The Underground Lounge, Red Ivy, The Atlantic and the list goes on. In fact, it was pretty common to randomly go to a bar on a Monday through Thursday night and find yourself accidentally an audience member of an Improv Showcase. And with all due respect to the performers and producers of those nights, it was mostly really bad. I feel I have permission to say that, because when I performed in them I was a major contributor to some pretty lousy improv.

Case in point, my friend Anthony and I thought it would be a good idea to do a two person show at the Spot that involved us asking for a new suggestion after every scene. The premise was that the scene would go off the rails and we would blame the audience claiming it was the fault of the suggestion. Pretty terrible, right? After doing this a few times to an annoyed, unresponsive audience I asked for another suggestion and someone yelled, "Grounded scene work!" It was a sick burn on us that was very well deserved.

However, almost every night, in the midst of mediocrity there was always one set of pure inspiration. There was often an otherworldliness and intensity to those shows that would make them stand out. That type of passion and inspiration was the best. It's the kind of thing I look forward to when I am at a show like *Spitballin'*.

As the night at Quenchers starts, there are some minor sound troubles but it doesn't stop the show from being great from act one. The night bounces between solo material, improv, music, sketch and even a book reading. The energy and style varies from piece to piece but overall the show feels cohesive and well curated.

*Spitballin'* has been built with love from the ground up. Through the great work by the team Sand, this went from a back room secret to a popular Monday night destination. It has rightfully gained a reputation as a haven for extremely talented weirdos. The kind of place where you will get to see something great, an event, that feels both secret and popular at the same time. It's a shame the space is going to be reclaimed as a doctors office in the coming months. To those who have watched and performed there it feels like the end of an era.

To me, Quenchers feels like an evolution out of the chaos of the bar-prov era. Like if Mullen's from 2005 had survived the Wrigleyville makeover and decided to insert some variety and quality control. It feels like the best of what bar-prov had to offer.

The best bar-prov show I ever witnessed was a 10-minute two person improv set at 'The Spot' from a team called 'Perspectives'. The whole world of the show consisted of soldiers on a battleship and indigenous people on an iceberg debating whether or not to destroy one another. It was a feverish back and forth between the two locations with very little being said besides, "Should we fire on that iceberg?" and, "Should we fire on that battleship?" There was also briefly a seagull, but that move was immediately shut down. To this day I don't believe I have ever seen an improv set that has made me laugh as hard. By the improv technical manual, this show should have been a disaster, but It was inspired, fun and purely stream of consciousness.

Bar-prov was the optimal opportunity to try and fail. At the risk of sounding like a nostalgic old decaying relic, I do miss it. It was a bunch of oddballs just trying to figure out who we were and what we were doing. And in the midst of

that struggle, the strangest among us would find something truly special. Today there may not be as many venues, but that spirit still exists in the nooks and crannies of the city.

It's 8:00pm on another Monday night and I am going to see an indie improv and variety show called *DroShow*. Walking down Lincoln avenue approaching the bar Gideon Welles I see a gaggle of improvisers warming up with reckless abandon on the sidewalk. I imagine what this must look like to the eyes of non-improvisers, and I love that.

The show is set to take place in a tight corner of the bar. It's over-lit and the regulars are mostly focused on yet another NBA playoff game in the adjacent room which is so loud I wonder how anyone will be heard at all.

The show is a combination of poetry, monologues, stand-up, sketches and improv. The show's tone weaves between sincere and dramatic, goofy and grounded, truth and fiction. The improv of the DroDay Improv team is fast and raucous, consisting mostly of high energy tag runs set within a tight world. It's quick, funny and inspired.

Despite the distractions of the bar and the TVs, the passion of everyone on stage is loud and clear. For me, that's the sweet stuff. The passion of performing and the inspiration of creation trumps all the technical nuisances.

This interest has spanned into other passions of mine as well. Over the past couple of years I have been obsessed with collecting Private Press records. In the late 60s to early 80s, getting a record made was cheap enough that thousands of musicians and artists from all over the US could make their own. Complete with album cover art and a recording studio session, you could easily get hundreds of records pressed for next to nothing. This made a sub-market for indie records

that often were a little less polished, usually innovative and sometimes very strange.

One of the most famous Private Press bands was the Shaggs. A homemade rock band of un-trained young siblings whose songs were written by their parents and performed in a barn. The songs include such controversial topics as Halloween, obeying your parents, and their pet dog. The offbeat tempo and shout-sing style was cited by Joan Jett and the Ramones as a contributing inspiration in the emerging punk scene of the time.

This type of fringe art feels analogous to what is always happening in Improv, especially with these independent shows. Back in the days of the bar-prov boom, you had countless improv freaks constantly building their own night driven only by the need to play. Often that drive came from the rejection by one or more of the major improv institutions. Fresh out of the 5b level at Improv Olympic, I did not make a Harold team and personally felt that sense of rejection. I was happy for my friends that did make the team (Revolver), but I couldn't help but feel diminished.

However our entire 5b Group, the Chicago Sashay Company, decided to stay together as a team and continued to play together for years at bars and independent venues. We even had our own professional dance squad. Through those shows and my other indie teams like Pudding-Thank-You, I realized that I had been focusing on the wrong stuff. I had always been holding myself to the values of the theaters, but it was playing and creating with my friends that I truly loved. And it was those smokey, divey, messy stages that gave me the opportunity to do that.

Today DroShow, Quenchers, HouseProv, the Crowd and other independent venues for Improv feel like the next

evolution of that. They are bringing improv out of the barn and into the punk scene. The shows are far more consistently entertaining and sharp than in 2005. Yet the self-made nature of it remains and with it, the innate passion. It's because of the mix of passion, lack of artistic restriction, and damn hard work that the chance of witnessing true surprises and ingenuity is more likely now than ever before.

There are so many venues and opportunities to perform at in this city that the market for independent nights has diminished. If you don't make a team at iO or Second City, there is always Annoyance, Bughouse, CIC, Playground and many others which are all doing great work. Yet they are still venues that have a central artistic oversight and require theater approval. This may be an overgeneralization, but it feels like many performers value their worth based on the acceptance of these institutions. I know I did.

However, the largest institutions in the improv and comedy communities grew from back rooms and bars. Every major theater and venue in Chicago has a similarly humble story to Quenchers or DroShow. They started from a simple need to create and morphed into the complex, profitable thing they are now. That's just innovation and commerce.

My ideal future for this artform and community would be to see more and more seepage from all the theaters and improv breeding grounds leak out into the edges of our city. Into the bars, stores, clubs and alleys. Into areas and communities of this city where it would have never even considered before. In this decaying relic's opinion, the next revolution is going to come from the barn, not the stadium.

MEAGHAN STRICKLAND (WITH STEVE  
NELSON)

# No Rules

## AN INTERVIEW WITH MEAGHAN STRICKLAND

*Meaghan Strickland is a standup, improviser, writer, and a recent NYC transplant. She is one of the most compelling performers I have ever seen and one of the most generous and inspiring collaborators with whom I've ever worked. Mildly averse to creative reflections or analysis, I sat down with her before she left Chicago to see if I could find out why she was drawn to comedy.*

**Note:** *Meaghan also expressed affection and appreciation for Holy Fuck Comedy Hour, Saturday 8 Night, and the Upstairs Gallery.*

**Nelson:** How'd you get into performing? When did you get the bug?

**Strickland:** Well, I do remember, bug-wise, when I was in 6th grade they had *Muse Machine*, this group from the high school, come in and do a workshop with the 6th graders. It must have been just a theater group but we did improv, specifically

the game where you were the other person's hands. I remember it just being so funny and fun. That was a big memory. In 5th grade, we would play characters for projects. One of them was Miss Talk-A-Lot and I dressed in this insane outfit and I was hosting a show. But I was always kind of interested in theater because my dad was an actor, had always wanted to be an actor, so I knew that and I liked it.

**N:** And you kind of just dabbled in it in high school.

**S:** Yeah, we didn't have plays at my high school, just musicals, so I'd have bit parts in, like, *Into The Woods* and *Little Shop Of Horrors*, stuff like that. I couldn't sing at all, can't sing at all, so I'd get the one character who didn't sing and just had lines. Barely any lines. Just to clarify.

**N:** And did you perform at all in college?

**S:** I thought I was going to be a theater major in college. Went there, but after auditioning for stuff and just being so bad, I had a really dynamic and cool political science teacher, and then felt like, "OK, I'll make this my major." I continued to audition, but never got anything. I remember auditioning for this play in the City of Charleston—I went to school in Charleston, South Carolina—and just having this, god, humiliating audition. And walking around afterward, it was kind of cold, thinking, "What the heck am I doing?" But eventually, there's one professional improv theater in Charleston called Theater 99. I would go see shows there constantly; I was obsessed with it. And my senior year, I signed up for classes there and just had a blast doing that. So I took all their classes and was so into it and decided to move to Chicago because it was like, "This is what I want to do."

**N:** When you moved to Chicago, did you start taking classes at iO right away?



**S:** Well, at that point, I was moving to do stand-up and improv—I didn't separate them. I was moving to do comedy. Because I had also tried stand-up in college; I lived in DC for a semester and started doing stand-up at this sushi restaurant. I really liked it. So, I was going to move to Chicago to do this stand-up thing that I had done five times, and to do improv. It took me a month or so to sign up for classes at iO, and I did some open mics... it was a little bit scary and hard and...

**N:** Intimidating?

**S:** No. Not intimidating, I mean, maybe, but more like actually scary. I was younger and it was the first time I confronted misogyny in the flesh. You are so protected, I think, in college from that, you don't realize it exists. I was pretty scared of these guys and they were young, like me, but they were saying some stuff that... just stuff I'd never heard. Whereas in improv class, there were also girls, people were friendly, there was an authority figure keeping it, for the most part, above board. So I just got kind of sucked into improv.

**N:** So, for iO classes, what was your general experience?

**S:** I loved it.

**N:** Yeah? Who was your favorite teacher?

**S:** I think I liked Noah [Gregoropoulos] the best. I just thought he was cool, I liked less words or something. I liked teachers that let you just kind of do it.

**N:** Any big notes or take aways from the whole experience?

**S:** This is so weird that this isn't a conversation, I'm just spilling information on you.

**N:** I can give you examples from my experience if that helps. For example. Craig was my favorite teacher, I took him three times. One of the things Craig said to me, there was this group scene and I came on from the side to be a 911 operator or something and I used my hand as a phone and

Craig threw his notebook down and screamed “Your fucking IMPROV phone, STEVE!” And it seemed as if he genuinely expected better of me, he was genuinely disappointed, and that gave me confidence that I could be better and also gave me drive to be better. To work harder, to focus more, however you get better at improv. That really stuck with me.

**S:** That is cool. The teachers I remember specifically liking, not that I felt that they liked me, I at least felt they had a neutral opinion or didn’t even register my presence. Like Bill [Arnett] and Noah, were just so good at not knowing who we were or not caring, so it’s like we didn’t have to deal with trying to impress them. We could just be in the room and do it, which was nice.

**N:** Any negative experiences about iO? I’d say for me, there were moments where I felt, like, ashamed. One time Susan Messing screamed at me for doing dudaloot-dudaloot from Wayne’s World.

**S:** Interesting. I’m sure I did. I think I had an interesting relationship with authority when I moved here; I just thought all teachers and coaches were perfect. And I definitely wanted to please authority. And so I probably took any note pretty hard. But then, I think as I’ve gotten older, I have a bad attitude when it comes to authority. I’m, like, “don’t tell me anything.” That’s not true when it comes to people I respect and those I believe have my best interests at heart then it’s like, “Thank you so much.” But I think I was a bit too open initially.

**N:** Sure. You got on a team after classes, Dream Cannon (2010-2011). That had to feel good?

**S:** Oh, it was so exciting, to get on a Harold team obviously at that time, it’s like, the dream. I remember running around my apartment, “Yes, yes this is so cool!” And everyone on the

team was so fun, we were all friends. And then, it was just kind of a rough experience. It was just hard, and I was sad a lot, like probably crying after rehearsals most of the time, which sounds insane. Like, just quit the team. I remember my parents being, like, “Why don’t you quit?” They were flabbergasted. I tried to explain that it’s really important to be on a Harold team. But I was unhappy. I think largely the unhappiness stemmed from, a lot of things, one of which was someone trying to teach you how they do improv and me thinking I have to learn to do improv that way as opposed to learning to do it my own way. And other, like, inappropriate behavior from an authority figure.

**N:** Did you like the shows, or was it kind of wrapped up in this feedback loop?

**S:** I blocked a lot of it out. I just remember thinking I’m not doing improv well. And that’s cool to talk about, something that you realize, that I was going to have lots of coaches and teachers who were going to teach me how they do improv, and to try and take that with a grain of salt. That’s OK, it’s their process, but it might not necessarily be mine. I was trying to fit this square peg in a round hole for so long. I was frustrated as an improviser. Like, I need to be thinking of my opening line on the side. Maybe that’s not how I do it.

**N:** It’s interesting. It took me a while to figure out, I think in general this is how you should coach a team. It’s not about what the coach is placing on the group. What it should be about is the coach observes the group and then tries to clarify what the group is already doing. But I don’t think that’s the typical outlook of teachers and coaches. It seems like it’s typically, like, “This is what improv is.”

**S:** Yeah. I wonder if it’s even that conscious. I feel like people are coaching and they’re not aware that they’re doing that. I

think the first couple times you try to teach someone, the first thing you go to is what I would have done there or something. Which is so unhelpful but not necessarily malicious.

**N:** What do you remember about *The Night Shift* (2010-2015), our Playground team?

**S:** We just had fun, I don't know.

**N:** We were on that team around the same time as *Dream Cannon* was going, anything about how your improv was progressing around this time period?

**S:** No. Just that *The Night Shift* was fun and I didn't have fun trying to do a Harold.

**N:** Well, I wanted to ask you, there was a stretch of a couple months maybe around 2011 or 2012 where you were driving me crazy. You were constantly doing call-outs and walk-ons; it was super hard to do a scene with you.

**S:** That is so funny, Steve! I can't remember ever being annoyed with people I was onstage with, so what's up with you?

**N:** I just wondered if you had any kind of awareness that that was happening. During this period, too, I bossed everyone around in scenes. I'd say, like, a paragraph as an initiation, which dictated the terms of every scene that we did. We had fun, but I probably did that almost every show for a stretch of a couple months.

**S:** Maybe I was, like, drunk on not having to do anything, so I just did whatever the hell I wanted.

**N:** It would make sense to me, given what we're talking about, if that was a reaction to the whole *iO* thing. A lot of us had some growing pains on that team and we were all (mostly) OK with it.

**S:** Yeah, that's funny. That makes me sad that I'm so not self aware, that I had no idea.

- N:** I don't think it's a bad thing. Like, sometimes I can analyze too much and not be in the moment and there is something good about, like, I can see your growth and it happens regardless if you're analyzing it or not.
- S:** Yeah, and maybe because I'm not.
- N:** Exactly! So did you start getting back into standup around this time? What started you doing it again?
- S:** It was later. 2013. I always wanted to do it. I remember having a conversation with Jen [Spyra; Dream Cannon teammate], where I was just like, I have to do it, I think about it, I write it, I have to do it. And just the frustration, I'm not doing a lot of comedy, I want to be doing more comedy, I'm not necessarily performing at the places I want to be performing so let's do it.
- N:** And then, how hard did you hit it initially? Was it immediately gratifying?
- S:** Pretty hard. Almost every night, probably five nights a week. Yes. Also a big period of frustration. Where I was doing it, doing it so much, when am I going to just do a showcase, I was just open mic-open mic-open mic come on! Can someone ask me to do a showcase please I'm grinding, it's hard. You're going around to these open mics all the time. That was frustrating, but then I started to get asked to do showcases. Actually, it probably happens earlier for a woman in stand-up, just because there are less women, just to be... fair. I'll say that. Probably about a year in I would occasionally get asked to do standup shows, which was great.
- N:** What about it particularly... you liked it because you were writing your own material?
- S:** It wasn't just me writing my own material, I wasn't desperate to not be on a team, or something like that. It was more, if anything... I felt self-conscious about my ideas, so it's just me

going up there and failing. I'm not bringing anyone down with me. That's more freeing.

**N:** I succeed or fail based solely on myself.

**S:** Yeah, and not that I don't want other people, I don't want to hurt other people. In an improv show, I can let my teammates down and that's hard. But in stand-up, I can just say this idea and I'm not going to be implicating anyone else if it's bad. That was maybe part of it. I also liked the little-bit-everyday, it helped me to work, I had a due date every day essentially. And that due date was stage time that night so I couldn't procrastinate. To this day I find it hard to write unless I have a show that night, your brain thinks differently under that pressure, it's like adrenaline. You might think a lot of ideas are good... I think it goes like this: If you know you have a show, you are really critical about your ideas, you know they have to be good, until about five seconds before a show—then you think everything is a good idea to say, then you just have to actively not say that and say what you worked on saying. That's what I liked about stand-up. And just doing comedy. Regardless of someone saying you can do comedy at our theater or you can't. I think there was certainly a time where I felt rejected by the comedy scene here in Chicago. And eventually, I just figured, that's silly, you know, come on just do it yourself.

**N:** What can you tell me about Smokin' Hot Dad [iO Harold team]?

**S:** Jo [Scott; Smokin' Hot Dad teammate] asked me to be on it, everything I've done in Chicago I've done cause Jo asked me to. Smokin' Hot Dad is so great.

**N:** How'd it feel to come back to iO?

**S:** It was so fun. Also because I didn't care. I think I cared so much before, I thought it was so cool and so important. And

I realized it didn't matter, so when I came back, it was just pure fun. It wasn't so precious to me. That's not right. You don't have to do it the right way, there's no right way, no rules. I like that. "No rules..." What is that?

**N:** "No rules, just right." *Outback Steakhouse*. What about our Annoyance team, Sight Unseen?

**S:** Same answer. Everyone is so great, I'm so lucky.

**N:** How do you play differently on those two teams?

**S:** God. I think maybe our Sight Unseen shows are more intimate because of the space. Maybe.

**N:** I think the difference, for me, between playing on Deep Schwa (iO Harold Team) and Sight Unseen is that Schwa can be a little bit more mainstream.

**S:** That's probably true of Smokin' Hot Dad. More accessible maybe.

**N:** Yeah. And I think that's a function of the theaters, it's not good or bad. I think our Sight Unseen shows are a bit more focused on character and emotion whereas, Schwa can be a bit more playful, focused on the laugh. They're both an equal amount of fun.

**S:** Yeah. I'm just trying to think about this for the first time.

**N:** Can you articulate your improv process? When we went into that scene together last week, I kind of had this look on my face and I didn't say anything and you said, "You seem disappointed." What was going through your head at the beginning of that scene?

**S:** Literally nothing. Here's the thing: sometimes I'll have something, like that's the funny part of what this person has been saying. I either want to make a joke or I think of a location. Maybe how I do improv, maybe, is I just really try to listen and hope it comes out subconsciously.

**N:** What do you mean?

- S:** Like really try to listen to the show and the suggestion, particularly in the case of *Sight Unseen* where the suggestion is, like, a paragraph, and trust that it will come out. Just taking it into your body and trusting that it will come out.
- N:** So would you say there's little intention in how you improvise, that it's almost all intuitive?
- S:** Um. Maybe I'll have just a slight thing. But different times, different things. Walk-ons are definitely intentional.
- N:** How do you create characters?
- S:** If I'm playing a character, it's probably emotion-based.
- N:** Where does that come from?
- S:** Now I feel like I'm really talking about myself.
- N:** I'm asking because I'm genuinely interested and I think it's kind of an unexplainable thing to a certain point. And I think, especially with people that are incredibly talented and I respect, I'm curious what their *thing* is like. Sometimes I'll go in with an initiation or an emotion, or sometimes I'll go in with nothing. But, like you, I try to soak in everything and see what comes out. Like that scene that we did, I'm assuming you said, "You seem disappointed," because you were—
- S:** —looking at you.
- N:** And that's how I looked. And how you said that, I thought of, like, travel, that was part of the suggestion. Then in my personal life, Nicole and I had just booked tickets to Portland for vacation, so I thought, "What can I be disappointed with, looping those two ideas together?"
- S:** This is an example of you doing all the work and me getting to exist in the scene that you built.
- N:** Here's the thing, you gave me the line—
- S:** That's the thing: anything is a gift. Things can be so inspiring. Someone says one little thing and you're like, "Oh my god, that is everything," but really, it's just giving your mind



permission to think of stuff, too. You have to be kind of inspired by the mundane.

**N:** What about your writing process? Or—and maybe you’ll feel like this is self indulgent, but I think it’s interesting—where do ideas come from?

**S:** Caffeine. Seriously, though. A little bit. You think of ideas when you’re well caffeinated and alone. Then you’re like, “OK cool, something’s going on.”

**N:** Can you give a specific example?

**S:** I think sometimes you’ll haven’t come up with anything in awhile, I haven’t felt inspired, what’s going on. Then you realize, “I haven’t had a moment to myself, I haven’t been alone not doing something in a long time.” Then, you have an afternoon to yourself, you walk around or something, clear your mind and ideas start to come to you. Or, you see some comedy and something comes to you. And you have to write it down when it comes to you. In terms of process, going back to those ideas and figuring out how can this be a better joke, how can this be a joke. That’s more of the work of it.

**N:** And what’s that, like writing out various punchlines, various versions of a joke?

**S:** Yeah. I would say at first, it was like that, but more and more, that process has been transferred to stage. So I have an idea and I’m just going to go say it, the adrenaline helps. People are watching you, the pressure helps you come up with something funny, I’m here, I’m talking in front of you, it’s a good editor, it makes you find stuff that maybe you wouldn’t find by yourself. So maybe that’s what I do, jotting down loose ideas, then finding them that way.

**N:** What about, you’re walking around by yourself, you’re clearing your head, and the ideas come to you. What does that look like for you?

- S:** I don't know. Oh. Ok. One day I saw a young couple fighting on the street, and there's someone sitting on the stairs crying and yelling, the other person's standing up totally exasperated, it's a total scene. And then I saw an older couple fighting on the street and it's very controlled. They've learned how to do it. You know. Controlled. It's so subtle. They don't quite stand next to each other at the crosswalk, their bodies are so rigid. Like that, like maybe there's something there. *Older couples fight different than younger couples in public.* So that's the idea and I might try to make something out of that. And I think in general it comes back to, *for some reason or for whatever reason I have to say this*, there's some urgency to this, I feel like I just have to say this, and maybe I have to say this because it's really funny or it's, like, about expression, I need to say this. Because it might be obnoxious to say to friends.
- N:** So we're getting towards the end here, what are your big take aways, if any, from your time in Chicago? One thing that you've referenced, and I feel this way also, is putting it up in front of an audience, regardless of the medium, you learn exponentially more than working on it behind closed doors.
- S:** Yes. And it's kind of what Chicago is all about, so it's kind of weird it took me awhile to get to that thesis or whatever. Put stuff up, do it all the time, I think that's so important. Also, I'm going to do it; I don't care what other people think. You're the boss. I don't like having other people tell you what you're good at or what you can do or what you should do. I like how all the stuff I'm doing now we are in charge of it, it's our thing. What else did I learn in Chicago...? I don't know... that I like comedy, I guess.

KATIE KLEIN (WITH AMY DO)

# It Was All Very Silly: An Interview with Katie Klein

**Amy Do:** How are you doing? How is everything? How is the baby?

**Katie Klein:** I'm great. He's with [his father] in the other room. He's a great baby. We don't sleep, but it's fine.

**AD:** Yeah, how have the last couple months, weeks, been for you?

**KK:** He's ten weeks. It's been insane. It's really, really hard and also really, really fun and great. We're figuring it out everyday.

**AD:** Any recent breakthroughs?

**KK:** Not really, but he's definitely smiling and he looks at us and knows who we are in a way that's new and very, very rewarding. He feels more like a little person. It's real cute.

**AD:** Thank you so much for taking the time to do this in the midst of this craziness that I can't even begin to comprehend.. When thinking of people to include as exclusives for last published compendium of essays, we thought an interview with you would an interesting way to add texture.

**KK:** Oh cool! Texture, yeah.

**AD:** Could you please introduce yourself?

**KK:** Hi, I'm Katie Klein. I'm a performer in Chicago. I perform, teach, direct, write- all the good stuff. Based off what I feel like doing and what is offered me and I just had a baby two months ago, so I've had minimal performing, but actually a few more projects than I thought I would do. Because when it's offered you take it. So that's my life right now.

**AD:** Yeah, how does that feel? Are you surprised? Obviously your priorities have shifted but is there still that pressure to take take take?

**KK:** Yeah, unfortunately there is. Financially and just my nature is to say yes. I have been freelance creatively working for about four years now. So i think I'm just wired to say yes to any opportunity. So I said yes to something three weeks after he was born. Luckily it was from home. I just had to call in for meetings but it was really hard. I was mentally and emotionally really struggling with that... it was also awesome because I like a challenge.

I like to push myself—say, “yes” and keep using my brain. I haven't done a ton, but I did a stage gig out of town, which was probably the hardest, weirdest moment of my life. I like those moments and I hope to get back to regularly performing. I'm also really enjoying having a different schedule than I have had for a really long time.

**AD:** Have you always just been that kind of person?

**KK:** I don't think so- I have moments of pure laziness and underachievement. I also have a lot of fear of missing out, and fear of opportunities passing me by. In this community, and a lot of theaters that I work for have instilled this fear that, “If you don't say yes, someone else will.” So I think living in Chicago and being a performer here has definitely

upped my personality of, “You better say yes and do it even if you’re tired. Cause if you don’t someone else will.”

**AD:** Talk to me a little bit about what your childhood was like? Where did you grow up? How did get into performing from where you were?

**KK:** Oh. I grew up in Shaker Heights, Ohio, which is a lovely east side suburb of the city of Cleveland. I didn’t really do much in terms of performing. I did some stuff as a kid; I did some Children’s theater. I did not do any performing in high school. That was not a part of my life. I had a lot of creative outlets with my friends. We made a lot of movies, a lot of weird home movies.

**AD:** Please tell me you still have those.

**KK:** [laughing] Unfortunately I do. They are horrifying and some of my friends and I still remember the words. We were filming a scene with one of my friends where she was in the shower wearing a beige towel. We had just discovered the mosaic feature on the camera that blurred her out. We really thought that we were just nailing it! She looked naked and everyone was impressed. It was a huge win for us, but not a ton of performing as a kid. Just a lovely, happy childhood that I’m very grateful for.

**AD:** And how did you find performing from there?

**KK:** So, I went to Indiana University and got my degree in film studies, which is pretty useless, but it was a lot of fun. I had a great time there. Did not do any performing in college, either, but studied film. And then after college, I moved to Washington, D.C., and I got a job at a law firm just kind of on a whim—like somebody knew somebody who hooked me up with a stupid law firm job, and I remember thinking, like,

“What do adults do after work? Like, what do you do at 5 o’clock?” I don’t know what you’re supposed to do as an adult, other than drink, which is great, and in D.C., happy hour is a big part of the culture, and it’s a blast. But then I started browsing and I found an improv class, and I was like, “I know what improv is.” I remember seeing some improv shows in Cleveland when I was a kid and in high school. There was, there still is, a theatre called Cabaret Daba, and it’s a theater in Cleveland, so I decided to just sign up on a whim for an improv class, and I took a class and just absolutely fell in love with it. I was like, “this is the most fun I’ve ever had,” and Day One, I’m already kind of good at it. Well, better than the weird random old people in my class, and I just loved it. And that was kind of the beginning of all of it.

**AD:** And from there, how did you decide that that was what you wanted to do, like from being at a law firm job to now being a freelancer for 4 years?

**KK:** I honestly never decided that I wanted it. I have very low expectations for my own success, so I never really assumed or hoped I would be able to do this for a living. I just knew I really really liked doing it for fun. So I just kept doing it in D.C. I ended up leaving the law firm and I got a job at a non-profit, and then doing improv nights and weekends and just having a blast. And that was very fulfilling for me.

I was not looking for that much more, honestly. And then, my best friend and roommate got into Northwestern for graduate school, and she said, “I’m going to move to Chicago.” And I knew that Chicago was kind of the heart of improv, based on what I had heard and looked up, and I thought, “What if I moved to Chicago, too, and kept pursuing this thing that’s so fun?”

I performed at the Del Close Marathon that summer, and all of the teams I thought were the funniest and best were from Chicago. Everybody from Chicago just had such a different vibe in the whole marathon. They all seemed like they were best friends, and they loved each other, in contrast to some of the other teams that I saw from New York or other cities. And I was like, “That is so much better! What a great vibe!” And I loved the people I performed with in D.C.; I was really grateful. But to continue it, I was like, “Man, it does seem like there is something magical about Chicago.”

So, on a whim, I just up and moved to Chicago with my roommate and started taking classes from scratch here, still not really assuming or hoping I would ever be able to get paid for it; I just loved it. So turning it into a career really happened accidentally and slowly, not with a north star.

**AD:** I think that mindset is really interesting, because people do say that if you do what you love, then you’ll never work a day in your life. But clearly, it is work. Has the way that you view improv changed at all? How do you keep fostering that joy?

**KK:** I think I just have really different slots in my brain for what I’m doing. So, like, when I’m performing with my friends in Superhuman, in Virgin Daiquiri, or Late ‘90s, or Ed and Kath with my husband, those shows are all a specific slot in my head as pure joy. There are no stakes. This is where I get to have my most pure joy from improv. And then when I’m doing corporate comedy, I kind of turn a dial in my head and I’m like, “I’m getting paid to do this.” It feels very different, and I’m going to go in with the same skills I have with a different expectation. But they all stem from the same place. I still really like doing those shows even though they are sometimes ridiculous or stupid. Sometimes you’re performing

in front of people at a cocktail party who aren't even looking at you. I still find the joy in it because it is so ridiculous and it's still improv.

**AD:** What is it like to perform with your partner? What are the advantages and what are the challenges of doing that?

**KK:** It's the best. It's so funny because well, I feel intimately connected to everyone I've been performing with over the years, but obviously performing with your partner is a completely different level of connection. I laugh the hardest and I'm pretty bad at breaking on stage, but performing with him I laugh the hardest. I think because I know him so well so if he says something that surprises me, it just tickles me in a way that nothing else compares to. It's really fun to get to do that show.

**AD:** I'm looking at our list of questions and one of them is: will you teach your kid improv? Haha

**KK:** Well, we're actually performing as a family on Saturday night. The three of us are doing a show. We really are. It's real. We are doing the show while holding the baby. I don't know what's going to happen. I don't know if he's going to cry the whole time, but Dina asked us to do it for the Chicago Improv Den where we both teach and we said we would do it. We're going to hold the baby and do a show. And no, I don't think I will personally teach him improv. I think he'll just know it because he's just going to be in this house and he's just going to be a perfect improvising human who may or may not want to do improv on stage, but I think he's going to be real fun and yes-and-y. I hope.

**AD:** Do you have a favorite move in an improv show?



**KK:** That is a really funny question. God, I'm really bad at object work and my go to favorite move is to open a bottle of wine or make myself a cocktail. I really like holding a cocktail glass and stirring it with a tiny straw. I can really picture it and I really like doing that. I really like being a waitress. I think I'm an unnecessary waitress walk on in 80% of shows that I do. That's probably one of my favorite moves.

**AD:** How has it been to start playing with Improvised Shakespeare?

**KK:** Oh, the best! It's really fun! I got asked to do Improvised Shakespeare when I was pregnant. I was like, "well, this will be something!" because mentally and physically you're already going through something that makes everything a little bit harder and doing that show is already really hard and doing that pregnant was really really hard. It was really fun though. Everybody was welcoming and warm. It was a cool and new challenge for me because I had been doing the same kind of improv for years, performing with the same people, getting into a real comfort zone so to challenge myself to do the show was really exciting. It was hard and I was nervous for the first time in a very long time. Like very nervous. It was really fun to feel that way. The cast is so incredible and every one was so helpful. I am horrible at the actual shakespeare. I barely use any of the language. I get by on big characters and insane voices. Which is all I could do at the time or still, I blamed it on being pregnant, but I got to say it's just probably my brain. The show's a blast. The audience could not be more excited. I'm thrilled to be a part of the cast.

**AD:** How do you deal with nerves?

**KK:** I don't really. I'm just a complete wreck. The whole drive over for the first show, I was talking to myself in shakespearean and doing warm up games by myself.

**AD:** What does that even sound like?

**KK:** Haha, like setting up and paying off rhyming couplets by myself. Doing scenes by myself like a complete crazy person. I ate a bunch of Pepto-Bismol. Which then I got nervous because you're not supposed to eat it when your pregnant, but I was like, "I'm going to poop on stage." There's a lot happening when I get really nervous! Once adrenaline kicks in, then it's gone for me. Adrenaline for me is very powerful. As soon as I step out on stage, whatever I'm feeling nervous about, if I have a cold, or if something happened before the show that was upsetting, I'm able to put it all on the back burner and go do the show. Somehow, we survived that first one then after that it was like ripping off a bandaid. The first one's done and now we can enjoy this a little more.

**AD:** In the time that you have been doing improv, have you noticed any kind of changes in the general scene when you move from place to place?

**KK:** Yeah, I mean, from when I was a student to now, it's definitely very different. When I started, I was at the old iO which, as we all know, had less performing opportunities, less stages. It was still at a time when there were, like, maybe two women on a Harold team, and the rest were men. Nowadays, so many of my students are already performing when they're in classes, they're already on 12 independent teams that perform around the city. There's a lot more opportunities, for better or for worse, there is a little more expectation from my students about what they feel they deserve or what they think they should have at a certain point versus when I was coming

up. I think people were a little bit more okay just watching, just watching shows and having heroes and having idols that they just watched every week. My friends and I would watch so much improv, and I think that has shifted a little bit because there are so many more opportunities to perform, so I think younger improvisers are performing more than they are watching. I think that's probably the biggest difference I've noticed as a teacher. Which is good and bad. I think it's great that people are performing. But it does bum me out when I talk about a veteran ensemble and my students don't know what it is, because I think they're just generally watching less improv.

**AD:** Why does that make you sad? What do you think is lost in that, in that cultural shift?

**KK:** I think learning is lost. I think people are missing a huge opportunity to learn from watching older veterans. I for sure would give a lot of my skill credit to watching older veteran performers. As a student, I was at shows probably two or three nights a week. I would watch a huge three-show chunk and study these people. I think that's why I was able to make moves myself because I was watching them before I started actually performing. There's also just kind of a shift in, like, entitlement, I guess? I don't like to use that word, but I think it's appropriate. Some of the younger improvisers just kind of feel entitled to get cast in things really quickly, or make a team or whatever it is, and I think that attitude shift is kind of a bummer. Rather than just being really hungry to want something for a while and then finally get it, I think people are ready to just get it right away and haven't, like, "put in their time." I also think there is just a little bit of the loss of the community feeling of watching and, like, having those

mentors or idols that you would see across the bar at iO and have, like, an improv crush on. It's still there, and there are certainly tons of students who do that, but there's also tons of students who, like, send me a Facebook invite to their show in the back of a bar, and I'm like, "I kind of wish you were using that time to watch somebody rather than already perform in front of no one, because I don't know how much better it's going to make you at this craft."

**AD:** Yeah, I agree with you. Has teaching improv affected the way you perform onstage?

**KK:** Yes. I think especially when I perform with Superhuman, I notice a lot of my students there, which is awesome, and when I'm teaching them, and then they come watch me perform, I'm like really wanting to do the things that I teach, I really want to set a good example and what I meant in class that day. Sometimes, it fucks with me because I'm like, "This week, we talked about this, and I really want to show them what I meant." And it's a good thing, because it keeps me doing really good improv, because I'm trying to do what I teach, and Superhuman is so good; I think we're doing all those things naturally. But, I do feel very aware of if my students are watching, I really want to show them good improv and not lazy-old-lady-veteran-resting-on-my-laurels improv. So, I do think it changes how I perform. I'll come out and get the suggestion and notice a little group of four that are in my class, and I'll be like, "Oh my god, they're here. OK, Katie, pay attention! You have to do good improv!" So, I do and I think it's a good thing, because I definitely feel more obligated to, like, pay attention and do good stuff, which I like. I like that feeling of wanting to show students good improv.

**AD:** It's like that little touch of nerves...

**KK:** Yeah! And then I'm like, OK. And then there's that awkward moment in class when I ask what shows you saw, and that I have to hear someone talk about my show, which is very uncomfortable for me. I get hot and red in class if they compliment me, or if they're like, "That show was crazy." So, there's definitely a wave of nerves when I notice my students in the audience. But it's definitely a good thing.

**AD:** To close out, why do you think improv is special, or why do you like improv so much?

**KK:** Oh boy. I think improv is just a really, really fun way to do all of the things that we should all and are doing, like using our silliness and creativity and building off of other people's ideas. I think improv is just a perfect way to do all of that. I think I'm so lucky to have made the closest friends and to have met my partner through this community. I think it really is a community that has some of the greatest, most empathetic, fun people. I feel so lucky to be a part of that and to have met all the people that I've met. And when I teach, you know, weird corporate workshops for people that have a little bit more of a predictable schedule, and they have this day where they are laughing so hard with their co-workers who they've never really felt that way towards, I think there is actually something very rewarding about that. Or when you do a show and someone comes up to you and really did have a terrible day and they came and got to laugh, there is something actually very, very rewarding about that. So to get to laugh as much as I do on a daily basis is really lucky. That sounded insincere, but it was meant to be sincere!

**AD:** No, I took it as sincere. People always need to laugh!

**KK:** They do! I sometimes take for granted how often I laugh, and then I'll teach a workshop to some, you know, sad IT professionals, and they're laughing, and I'm like, "Man, this was like a really special day for you guys, and this is my every day!" That's something.

BILL ARNETT

# I Know It's Only Rock & Roll

Improv Q&A panel discussions. I've been on quite a few and generally enjoy doing them. I have one pet peeve, though, which is the topic of this essay. Usually, toward the end of the discussion, a panelist will give this answer: "In the end, we're all just yes-anding." What question elicits that reply? Well, any question can. "Classes at Theater A say to do this, while at Theater B we were told..." In the end, we're all just yes-anding. "There's a guy on my team that is hard to play with..." In the end, we're all just yes-anding. "Sometimes in scenes, I start to drop my character choices..." In the end, we're all just yes-anding. When this answer comes up, everyone at the Q&A typically nods in approval, but it also ends the conversation; would anyone ever say, "No, it isn't all yes-anding"? It isn't false to say it's all yes-anding, but it also reduces all the rich and varied work that improv has produced and says it doesn't matter. In support of my claim, I'd like to present a hastily researched historical snapshot of rock and roll music from 1955 to 1971.

I chose 1971 for a very important reason, which I'll explain later. So, why 1955? It's the year rock and roll took

off as a genre when a New Orleans pianist, Fats Domino, crossed into the pop music mainstream (i.e., white teenagers) with his song, “Ain’t That A Shame.” Later that year, his album *Rock and Rollin’* with Fats Domino would help make him the genre’s first million-selling artist. Also in ‘55, Chuck Berry released his guitar-heavy “Maybellene,” making the genre instantly more portable. I said that Domino “crossed into pop music.” Crossed over from what? Well, rhythm and blues, as anyone will tell you, and that parentage is loud and clear in his music. A simple formula emerged: take an R&B standard of the time, add a heavy snare drum backbeat, downplay the “racial elements,” and you’ve got a rock and roll hit. That pop music formula, however, would slowly be torn to pieces.

Fast forward 26 years and this child of R&B had changed drastically. By 1971:

- Elvis had released all 18 of his #1 hits.
- Motown, Doo-wop, and the psychedelic hippies had peaked and declined.
- James Brown had come right out and said it loud, “I’m Black and I’m Proud.” (Contrast this with Chuck Berry’s coded message in ‘56, “Brown-Eyed Handsome Man”)
- Our satanic brothers Black Sabbath had released 3(!) albums.
- Isaac Hayes released the theme from *Shaft*.
- The Beatles had recorded everything they would ever record.

The Beatles are, in fact, a wonderful example of one way this music changed. Their first album was half original songs and half R&B covers. Even an early original song like “All my



Lovin” sounds like something Fats Domino would have sung. In just eight years, however, John Lennon is saying, “Number nine,” over and over and over again. Is that still R&B?

In 26 years, this genre experienced a tremendous amount of sonic and lyrical growth, forever intertwined with seismic shifts in America's cultural landscape. While its R&B parentage is not in question, rock and roll could no longer fit into the R&B box. To try and reduce it down to fit into the R&B box means you don't have to tease out and acknowledge any of the sub-genres, artistic explorations, or musical divergences and assign them value.

So why did I choose 1971? It marks a passage of time, 26 years, which is the same amount of time that I've been involved with improv. Has improv changed as radically as rock and roll music has in that same span of time? No, not even close. But we mustn't take our present broad landscape of improv possibility for granted. Everything we see and enjoy playing at one point didn't exist.

To break down how improv has changed in the last 26 years I'd like to consider 4 trends in longform improv:

- Form: from strict towards montage
- Scene style: from serving the form toward serving the moment
- Ideology: from selfless toward selfish
- Culture: from exclusive toward inclusive

I'm going to break each one of these down but know that they are highly interrelated. As an example consider that a simple montage lifts the form burden from the scenes fostering a looser style of play. Conversely, wishing to play more loosely would make strict forms more difficult, pushing

players towards montage. And to really succeed in a different style of scene a new ideological approach is required.

## **Form:**

When I first saw long-form improv in the middle 90's, it consisted exclusively of groups of six to eight players. Shows were by-the-book Harold or another form with similar structural rigidity (scene B follows scene A and takes one character from scene A and shows us their backstory. Scene C is what happened before scene A to the other character... etc...). When you met someone new at an improv party, the question, "What's your form?" was common and followed by a five minute explanation. Along with the complex forms were complex moves like nested time dashes, performance art movement segments, off-stage interjections, and multiple kinds of tag edits, all of which were integral to the form. The purpose of all of this formic rigidity was to create, hopefully, a cohesive whole with a pointed message. Shows were precise and specific.

Things really loosened up in 1998 with the show *Trio* at iO. As the name suggests it was a 3-player show and its form, aside from a simple set opening, was... actually it wasn't. They just followed the scenes to whatever worlds were suggested by them. It was the first small cast montage show that really worked and it immediately birthed imitators. Now if a player in Chicago isn't on a theater-produced Harold team they're probably on a three to five person indie group doing a montage. Whole festivals exist for duo and solo performers, many of whom play one scene for 25 minutes.

## Scene Style:

With a complex form you get scenes that are played to service the themes and plot points. In this environment scene ideas could very well be right or wrong (remember, scene B has to include a character from Scene A and explain something about their history!). Players weren't living through their choices but trying to serve the piece and their partner while making the present scene "meaningful."

Along with the change in form (three players performing longer, truthful scenes vs. eight players fulfilling a strict form) Trio also brought a change in play style. Out went pointed social commentary, in came the resonance of human experience. Scenes in Trio looked like real life; real people in real situations letting their unique, quirky behaviors drive the action. This is achieved by thinking less about the world around the characters and more about the characters themselves, what we would today call playing the relationship. As a teacher I'd say that 90% of my notes are just specialized ways of saying play the relationship. This new style of play requires characters to ask questions, say no, argue and generally commit every foul in the yes-and world. It required a new way to think about our responsibilities as a player. Good thing this new approach had already been discovered.

## Ideology:

Back in 1993, scenes existed as a blunt application of yes-and. What we now call the improv basics (like don't-say-no or ask-questions) weren't basic in '93 because that's all there was. With this narrow set of rules, all improv "sounded" the same, just like how Chuck Berry's "School Days" sounds the same as "No Particular Place to Go" (which sounds very similar to every other Chuck Berry song). Yes-and loomed over

everything as an all powerful trump card that could be thrown into the face of any player bold enough to ever say no. Since that's all we had, to not yes-and was to not improvise. It worked for complex forms, too, because of its partner-first, team-first nature. Other classic rules like don't say no or ask questions, essentially do what your partner says without being burdensome, reinforce this selfless ideology. With eight people working together to build this comprehensive whole this approach was perfect.

The first thing I heard that sounded different was at an improv festival in 1996. I was exposed to Mick Napier and The Annoyance Theatre's notion of taking care of yourself first in an improv scene. In a world where scenes were played to the service of a complex form, having the players think about themselves first (gasp!) would ruin the form. Many respected players thought this approach was complete garbage. What even the detractors couldn't deny was that Annoyance shows succeeded and did so with a very different sound. Raw, irreverent, alive. What was happening wasn't nearly as interesting as who was happening. And, no surprise, the shows were essentially formless.

(The nearest analogy I can make to seeing my first Annoyance show is this: The hardest rock song I had ever heard by 1996 was Van Halen's "Panama." Then at summer camp, via a mixtape mailed to us by my buddy's older brother at reform school, I heard Metallica's "Master of Puppets." My honest reaction was that it must be illegal. If Godzilla had a 10,000 Volt electric hoody, Metallica is the sound the zipper would make. I feared it. I loved it.)

(Another alternative approach is what we'd now call game of the scene, UCB game play, or just game. This approach also affects scene style and form. Most game of the scene

disciples left Chicago before its unique “sound” ever had a chance to really take root.)

## Culture:

It’s important to know that as improvisers back then, we considered ourselves and our art to be just as inclusive and open minded as improvisers feel it is today. Yet only in the last ten years have the Me Too, Black Lives Matter, and LGBTQ rights social movements begun to change the greater improv culture. For me, hearing, “it’s all yes-and” brings me back to that 90’s sound, which included things like gender imbalance, homophobic humor, and racial stereotypes; the worst offenders got eye rolls, but no one was ever fired. It was the era of, “girls aren’t funny,” and if a woman was funny it was because she played like a guy.

Is yes-and to blame? Did it have some critical flaw that allowed a negative culture to flourish? No; for me it’s a case of guilt by proximity. Besides, you can’t blame yes-and for greater society’s social norms. If I had to speculate about something being amiss with yes-and, I’d guess it’s that taking yes-and literally forces one to accept the choices of others, however cruel they may be, while the notion of taking care of yourself requires that you advocate for who you are.

All these changes have given us the most diverse and dynamic improv landscape ever to exist. So much more is legal, so much more is celebrated. For me, the era of 90’s yes-and is dead, both artistically and culturally. Good. To a modern player, the concept of yes-and has more nuance, asterisks, qualifiers and exceptions than content. It has changed from the base technique of improv to its motto. We can’t deny yes-and’s power as a concept or its place in the development of improv. But, to reduce all of the artistic

progress I have lived through to yes-and feels at best lazy and at worst disrespectful.

STEVE NELSON

# An Incomplete History of *Holy Fuck Comedy Hour*

## Preface

In the summer of 2012, after a couple years of struggle with alcohol and false starts at sobriety, I got into rehab. For various reasons, both explainable and inexplicable, it finally clicked, and with a lot of people's help, I was on the path to recovery.

One of the first things they tell you when you get sober is that you're going to have a lot of time to fill. Another thing they warn you about is revisiting places and old habits that may be volatile or triggering. So as a newly sober person living in Uptown, I had some problems to solve, and a big one was what I was going to do on the weekend. As it happened, my best bud, Andrew Tisher, who was very kind throughout my addiction and after, was doing this midnight show at The Annoyance every Friday called *Holy Fuck*.

At the time, The Annoyance was still at its Broadway location, up the street from where I lived. Fresh out of rehab, my Friday schedule became a movie and then heading up to see Tisher and this show, which was (and still is) free. I was

comfortable at The Annoyance; I had a friend and a number of acquaintances I knew would be there. I could socialize a bit, see a show, and then head home having felt like I'd done something with my evening.

At first, I found the show mostly frustrating. It almost always started late and ended after 2am. Many of the scenes were so elongated that the ideas were beaten to the point of disinterest. There was, at times, an air of condescension about it. The content seemed deliberately base, stupid, and/or incoherent to the point that it was almost a reprimand to the audience for attending. There was a gruff, punk quality to the show. It had a repulsive, irreverent type of magnetism, because amidst all the confusion and pantomimed dog fucking, asshole smoothies, and cum pizza, there would be the occasional moment of real shocking glory.

A couple weeks in, after I started going regularly, I saw a bit by Conner O'Malley, the creator and first host, that really opened up the show, and more broadly comedy, for me. My recollection of it isn't totally clear--forgive me, as it was 5+ years ago--but it was a solo scene with Conner at a desk essentially narrating his search of *YouPorn*. He came across an advertisement for *Fuckbook* and was taken in by the promise of real world hookups. He firmly believed it was genuine. What was so compelling about it was Conner's deep and unshakable commitment to the character. The utter sincerity and heartbreakingly pathetic nature of this character so honestly and wholly taken in by this so clearly false and transparent ad on this porn site was so funny, but also so bizarrely dignified it totally bowled me over. He elevated this seemingly sophomoric premise to the heights of universal compelling commonality, not through the words or situation but through unwavering, seismic emotional integrity. In that



moment, I realized the potential for the show, that yes, it was more often than not very funny, that it was a good showcase for comedians to write and workshop, but more importantly that it could (despite or maybe because of the silly costumes and frequently obscene content) pointedly and directly get at things grotesquely, beautifully, and absurdly human.

I have been going to the show regularly ever since and it remains my favorite show in Chicago.

*Author's Note:*

*Any chronological errors are mine. For the sake of clarity and an attempt at something resembling history, I've drawn these generational distinctions (part time, part style), which, in reality, happened much more gradually and organically. One cast bleeding into and influencing the next. At the end of this, there is a comprehensive list of past and present cast members. My apologies for those talented individuals not directly referred to—the opinions within are mine, the scenes I relate subject to my mercurial and flawed memory.*

*Part of the show's formula features a spot or two for guests each week. As over the years there have been numerous guests, I have not attempted to feature this aspect of the show.*

## 1st Generation 2011–2012

*The Holy Fuck Comedy Hour* was started by Conner O'Malley at The Annoyance Theatre in 2011 to foster, cultivate, and promote solo sketch. Part reimagining and part homage to *Grabass*, a previous show that showcased wild, gross, off-the-wall solo sketch. Conner's intention was:

- to create a show that would help Chicago improv comedians create material for writing packets and industry showcases.

- to provide a show that would force the cast to generate and test material on a weekly basis.
- to use premises and pitches to put up pieces in front of an audience and have the performers use their improv skills to flesh out character.
- to create a show to feature deliberately over-the-top, moronic, abhorrent characters.
- to have a free show at The Annoyance that highlighted the voice of the theater.
- to have the cast evolve over time and eventually become self-perpetuating.

He was (and continues to be) successful on all counts.

The first cast was populated by Chicago veterans like Emily & Brian Wilson, Seth Dodson, Andrew Peyton, Barry Hite along with Conner himself and co-host Kellen Alexander, among others. The first iteration experienced quick cast turnover (many almost immediately hired by Second City) and formatting changes (i.e., limited run to an open run) coming relatively quickly in its first year. The first cast, unquestionably talented, struggled with busy schedules and the late time slot and seemed to not necessarily find fusion. I only saw the show in its initial stage two or three times, and although the material was good and the cast very talented, it felt more like a conventional industry showcase with the seeds of the bizarre, experimental content which would become what the show is known for. The show, in its first iteration, didn't necessarily have the time or momentum to form an identity.

## 2nd Generation 2012-2014

Perhaps realizing that more seasoned performers didn't have the time or endurance for the show, the original cast was

gradually replaced by younger, hungrier, more vicious performers until the cast was almost entirely made up of a particular up-and-coming generation with a relatively united vision. In the aftermath of this almost complete cast turnover was when *Holy Fuck* was really born in all its bloody, mangled opulence. Individual voices began to distinguish themselves—Gary Richardson, John Reynolds, Andrew Tisher, Steph Cook, and Jo Scott, to name a few, all molded and honed their comedic perspectives. Idiosyncrasies began to emerge—Gary ending his scenes with, “Wow, fantastic!” Conner ending his with, “I wish I was dead.” Hans Holson continually and almost compulsively did bits heavily reliant on audience participation. The most common idiosyncrasy, though, becoming a simple point toward the light booth with an accompanying, “Lights!” The content was typified by its raunchiness, its aggression, and its fearlessness. The original solo-sketch-only model began to be diluted with more scenes and group bits as the cast became inspired by, and to write for, one another.

The audience at this time was small and the show periodically cancelled due to lack of attendance. With little traction and low stakes, the cast was given the opportunity to delve deep into whatever facet of fringe comedy they were particularly called to, and to explore ideas and premises as stupid, offensive, and/or gross as they could imagine. Over time, this honed each cast member’s perspective and brought forth their voice. What emerged were various singular perspectives. Other performers began to guest and become full-fledged cast members—Brian McGovern, Devin Bockrath, Joey Dundale, Drennen Quinn, Annie Donley, Matt Barats, and Carmen Christopher, among others.

This iteration is when I started watching the show regularly and there were some bits and some performers who, at first, rubbed me the wrong way. Part of the reason for this was that there was certainly a streak of anti-comedy running through the cast at this point, a very deliberate and palpable intention of stupidity. And this could sometimes translate as contempt. I remember sitting through a painful 10+ minute bit with Brian McGovern ordering a pizza and giving directions to his home. The hook of which was that all the street names, which he just kept repeating over and over again, were obscene: Buttfuck Boulevard, Assface Street, Creampie Court. I hated it. It made me uncomfortable and kind of feel like I was going crazy; perhaps that was the intention. Over time, though, my taste broadened, the cast sharpened, and the show became consistently more entertaining with those periodic moments of true genius. Deep dives into inane absurdity would tap into some magnificent, hilarious, crescendos of emotion. Sexual perversion, meta material, and frustrated impotent rage were common themes.

During this time, the show also evolved. Originally, members were given 5 minutes, which they could split up into two or more bits. There has almost never been a *Holy Fuck* bit under 5 minutes and so it would, in essence, double the run time of the show. This option was eliminated, and the one cast member/one bit format, which has endured to the present, was put into practice.

The show was finding and honing its identity. The sparse audience started to grow through word-of-mouth. The insanity on display was singular in the city at the time and there were a handful of folks, like myself, that became regulars. As the show was gaining momentum, Conner

moved to New York in the Fall of 2012 and passed hosting and producing duties to Jo Scott. There was obvious regret about his moving, but out of the shadow of the indomitable Conner O'Malley, there was more room to carve out unique identities, and the cast, already evolving, flourished. The Young Troll Prince of Chicago comedy had set up his litter for success. His comedic influence can still be seen in the city today.

There was some trepidation, at least on my part, to see what Jo would do with the show. How would she fill the shoes of the hometown comedy garbageman? The answer was with frenzy and authority. One of the most striking and memorable moments of live theater in my life was watching Jo, very pregnant with her twins, open the show with a protracted dance that had the same mad fervor as Rosie Perez's famous sequence in *Do The Right Thing*. It was shocking, the energy and courage on display; it inspired.

Over the next year, under Jo's dutiful and organized management, the show became sharper, more streamlined, and the audience grew. Jo was more militant about the show's run time, which significantly increased its enjoyment as an audience member. The cast, having done the show for some time, were more comfortable and fluid with their own comedic ability, and the show they had helped create and hone had a clearer format and a clearer style, which was in turn easier to creatively exploit.

As time has passed, my recollection of specific bits has faded, but the cast was fond of recurring characters and honing particular bits over time. Matt's inside-baseball *Bit Bug* and Tisher's *Monsanto* bit I remember seeing in various iterations. Joey had an incredible piece I can only vaguely recollect where he was a pastor of some kind going through

the audience and inciting rapturous testimonies. Devin, a supremely captivating performer, had an almost primal and colossal comedic energy that would dominate the stage and most any scene she was in.

What was most compelling and most common through all the cast was their tenacious confidence and manic fury with a tendency towards the surreal and ironic, which seemed like a response to the continued extolling of “grounded scene work” in the community at the time. There was a sense of danger and volatility about the show that made each week a distinct and not-to-be-missed event. Because even when it failed, when the bits didn’t necessarily work, there was a sense of utter uniqueness and immediacy.

## Broadway to Belmont

Summer of 2013, The Annoyance closed their Broadway location in preparation for their move to a bigger, newer space. The show went on a temporary hiatus and lost another member; Gary moved in December of that year. The moving bug had struck, and when the new location opened on Belmont in April of 2014, Tisher left the day after the first *Holy Fuck* show at the new location.

Prior to the trickling departures, the cast took full advantage of the gorgeous new theater, re-establishing and building their already faithful audience and delivering consistently hilarious, high-impact shows. The first months in the new space was a pseudo-swan song for the cast and they delivered in spades, cementing the reputation, consistency, and off-beat, inane, shocking, and sporadically brilliant brand of the show.

McGovern, who I initially didn’t care for, became one of my favorite people to watch. He’d have such a single-minded

magnetic commitment about his characters, who tended to be flustered, righteous, and incorrect in equal measure. I particularly remember a scene he did with Devin, his frequent scene partner, that was this maniacal self-help style businessman who was disgustingly selling an incoherent product while simultaneously going insane.

Annie, who is to this day one of the most incredible performers I have ever seen in the flesh, was outstanding on a weekly basis. She is brave and utterly captivating in a way few performers can ever achieve. She could pivot effortlessly from heartfelt and sincere to malicious and deranged. Some work was done in those last months that went beyond the obscene content to tap into some ethereal ecstatic joy. Out of all the numerous and talented cast members I've seen over the years, Annie has stood out. Inspiring in her fearlessness, impressive in her charisma, and fascinating in her imagination.

## Chicago to New York

After Gary and Tisher left, the floodgates seemed to open, and in the Fall of 2014, a large exodus of Chicago comedians to New York and LA began. John, Devin, Annie, Joey, Anthony, Matt and Carmen moved to New York. McGovern and Lee moved to LA. With all the Chicago transplants in New York, The Annoyance in New York, which previously only operated a training center there, opened a theater. *Holy Fuck* was the theater's flagship show, free on Thursday nights with hosting duties taken up by Tisher, and was reviewed positively by the *New York Times*. The show ran with full-to-capacity crowds until the theater's closure in early 2017.

### 3rd Generation 2014-2016

The mass departures posed the first creative and operational threat to *Holy Fuck*. The cast needed a massive influx of bodies and talent in order to sustain itself. Sarah Ashley, Nick Mestad, Meaghan Strickland, Tim Lamphier, Scott Nelson, Thomas Kelly, Jeff Murdoch, Danny Catlow, Nate Varrone, and Max Lipchitz were added (a little later, Morgan Lord and Mike Brunlieb, as well), and they ushered in a new era of the show. These new cast members were approximately all of the same comedic generation, but had a mostly different (and varied) comedic sensibility than the previous cast.

As the old guard moved on the new cast found its footing. The tone of the show gradually began to change. It was still irreverent, still occasionally obscene to the point of consternation and/or nausea, but what started to emerge was a more experimental cast, a more avant-garde and emotional sensibility. The cast began to incorporate stand up and the occasional video/audio sections utilized with more complexity. Some bits were more artistic than comedic, more attempts to connect than entertain. There were more pieces that featured dance, movement, personal stories, emotional relationships, high conceit adventures. Bits predicated on going into the audience and screaming at them began to decline (although not disappear) and the cast, because of their more sensitive and alternative nature, wasn't as adept at handling the occasional disruptive drunk.

Where the 2nd generation was defined largely by their high wattage personalities, aggression, and no-fucks attitude, the 3rd generation was defined by its playfulness and absurdity. The audacity of the cast was still there, but it translated from a fearless brashness into the ideas and concepts of the scenes themselves.



An overt confidence, even swagger, was replaced with a biting pathos. Scenes about uncontrollable and bizarre masturbation were replaced with scenes about deliciously corrupt, even psychotic, family units. Long, lewd arguments about sandwich meats were replaced with thoughtful personal explorations. Lengthy absurd diatribes about pizza were replaced with lengthy absurd diatribes sending up modern youth culture. Irony, at least partially, gave way to a warped sincerity.

The cast gelled and remained the same for almost a solid two years with nearly the full roster showing up every week. The cast also gravitated more to scenework, cast bits, with significantly less solo material. And because the show was established, because the audience reached a level of consistency, and because much of the cast already knew their comedic stylings, those moments of transcendence increased. The cast was able, with at least one sketch a week, to get at something truly special. The beauty of the show, even in its failure, is that it is experimental, that the material is untested and original. The result is unknown but the effort, the attempt is clear. And the defeats were often just as admirable as the successes because there was a palpable sense of growth, of effort, of progress.

Some familiar set-ups emerged—familial discord, talk shows, game shows, restaurants, retail, dance clubs, support groups—all used as a canvas to investigate strange characters and situations. But along with the more conventional settings and set-ups, there would always be more outlandish premises.

There was a period for a couple months where Tim would give himself a particular character or theme for each month. One month he created a sketch each week that would somehow resolve with the famous *Cool Hand Luke* line,

“Sometimes nothing can be a real cool hand.” Danny, in the tradition of Gary and Conner before him, ended his sketches with what became a kind of pseudo-catch phrase, “Well, that’s Chicago for ya!”

Scott, an inherently watchable, surprisingly emotional, and stunningly chameleonic performer, cultivated a style of unusual inversion of straight theater. With scenes with perverse, decrepit, sometimes sincere twists on the classic works of writers like David Mamet, Tennessee Williams, Arthur Miller, and pieces like *Our Town* and *Casey at the Bat*. A sending-up and a wry celebration of mainstream stage productions. Meaghan was the first cast member to really do stand up in the show and relied on it initially. Over time, she became an offbeat stand out with odd characters that relied on repetition and an unshakeable confidence in things that were blatantly incorrect. She did a supremely memorable scene where this ‘Type-A’ character was organizing a friend’s birthday party and she berated the other partygoers (the audience) about not taking it seriously and not hiding. Doing scenes predicated on the audience as de facto scene partners or participants, similar to previous member Hans, was something she did frequently.

Thomas was the first member to really delve into the avant-garde. He did a bit where he came out in his underwear and said, “This is my body” and discussed his comforts and discomforts with it with the audience. Another notable piece was when he simply read the children’s book *Goodnight Moon*. Nick, of a more writerly bent, would consistently deliver fully formed dimensional characters and premises. He played a hyper, upbeat high school physics teacher, the hook of which was just sheer wonder and enjoyment of the discipline.

Another notable character was an over-serious and committed doll house architect.

As far as force and stage presence, Nate always commanded the stage. With a style more reminiscent of the 2nd Generation as far as power and aggression, he was the most proficient with shutting down hecklers and winning over unruly crowds. Over time, he began to script almost all of his bits, usually in the lens of a talk show, YouTube personality, or some other simple set up which would allow him to deliver a clear, biting character and make as many jokes as possible. He would continually send up internet and youth culture; plugged in to whatever song, phrase, or TV show was popular he would skewer it. He developed an unavoidable magnetism and was always an audience favorite.

Danny and Max, frequent collaborators, would periodically do characters where the name was the bit. Max played Dan Fuck of Fuck Moving Company. Danny played Doug Gym where all the gym equipment was friends name Doug. They, along with Nate, were the two most clearly straddling the two generations in terms of style. Along with the scenes more overtly silly, like the ones mentioned, their scenes were more diverse in terms of concept over time. Danny would frequently utilize lighting and pseudo-serious voice over to play on the presentational or melodramatic. Max delved further into characters like the guy who took out *Infinite Jest* in order to delve deeper on a first date.

Jo also came into her own during this period. An indelible performer with astounding range, she is one of those great facilitators. She can make floundering scenes work. She is tenaciously game; her presence is able to elevate whatever she's in. She makes sometimes small, sometimes large choices that clarify scenes that are muddled and reveal what the scene

or character is about. She also has a clear and enduring joy that is contagious. When she is on stage or in the show, you feel comfortable and included. Whether she is playing a naïve teen, a psychopathic masseuse, or a mom attempting to convince herself her son isn't a serial killer, she delivers.

The show has the sense that anything is possible, that nothing is out of bounds, and that there is no area or discipline that one of the cast wouldn't, at some point or another, attempt or approximate. That, on any given Friday at midnight, you could see anything. Above all, there is a palpable sense of rich and fertile creativity. Talented minds running fast and hot spitting out ideas that they quickly and inexpertly translate to the stage. This cast also more strictly adhered to the "new every week idea" and I've seen no bits whole cloth repeated, although there have been a few callbacks to scenes and characters. As a result of this, scenes were more prone to reference, comment on, and incorporate ongoing pop culture. A memorable scene of the time was a pregnant Jo giving birth as her husband Tim insisted on watching the *Game of Thrones* finale and all the hospital staff gathering around to watch as she loudly and roughly gave birth.

In the Fall of 2016, Meaghan and Tim headed to New York and the attendance of the bad boys of Sand (Brunlieb, Thomas, Scott) began to fade significantly due to various conflicts. This signaled another change.

## 4th Generation 2016-Present

During this time, Jack Bensinger, Eric Rahill, and Bill Stern joined the cast and later in 2017, after Jeff Murdoch and Nate Varrone were promoted at Second City, Jordan Lee Cohen, Sarah Sherman, Jenelle Cheyne, and Robel Arega joined. This

shift was not as definitive, as the cast maintains a number of long-standing members and draws from a deeper bench; this results in a more eclectic lineup week-to-week. The comedic mindset is relatively consistent with the application diverging significantly; by this I mean this current and evolving cast of *Holy Fuck* is doing more disparate kinds of scenes. There is even more use of music and video, more stand up, less group scenes and more solo sketch, and more bizarre performance-art-esque pieces. The range, not necessarily of the cast (they have always, throughout, had incredible range), but of what a “sketch” is, especially within *Holy Fuck*, has expanded.

Along with the scenes revolving around harassing waitstaff and adults playing teens-talking-big-game-about-losing-their-virginity-but-never-following-through, there’s been more material that could be viewed as political, more connection to the zeitgeist and the cultural moment. Not in the sometimes fun but mostly flat and simple SNL-type way, but in a more raw, less measured, and more intimate way. Bits that turn into a kind of celebratory opposition to the current political acidity or a kind of commiseration that creates a fellowship, however briefly, within the theater.

The number of solo scenes increased, the pendulum swinging back with an average more align with the 2nd Generation, a result, I believe, of taste and time constraint, along with having a larger and more varied cast. More presentational or direct address scenes became prevalent: self-help speakers, school assemblies, faux talent shows. The content remained perverse, but in a less base, more cerebral way. There hasn’t been a pantomimed sex act in quite a while; however the reference to or threat of gun violence, in school or otherwise, has increased.

Bill fit effortlessly into the cast. A confident, disciplined performer, he consistently delivers engaging characters (frequently with surprisingly well-done accents), periodically writes songs, and is one of those versatile *Holy Fuck* members that can do anything. Bill, along with Nick, did one of my favorite sketches of recent years, *Human White Noise Machine*, which simply featured Nick verbalizing various whooshes and clicks as Bill attempted to sleep. Jack brings a streak of meta-absurdity and anti-comedy to the cast, periodically breaking the fourth wall and giving his characters elaborately constructed, almost abstract, costumes, frequently taping props to his face and body.

Jenelle has a wide range of characters, as well as a sensitive, emotional comedic style punctuated by astounding physical ability and timing. One of the best sketches I have ever seen was during this period-idea by and narrated by Danny but acted out by Jenelle, which was called *Automated Dining Experience*, set in a disturbing more “convenient” future where the restaurant was fully robotized. Eric, a frequent guest previously perhaps influenced by Nate, has been on a streak of well written, funny, but also wry and poignant solo pieces featuring pathetic yet determined (mostly middle-aged) frustrated man-children.

Morgan provides an interesting and different artistic style, with eccentric characters and scenes that had an unquestionable, if sometimes distorted, morality and empathy. A memorable Morgan scene was the women of the cast pantomiming walking home alone at night with Morgan narrating, heightened for humor but addressing a common and often ignored reality. Sarah Sherman brings a maniacal, periodically incoherent vulgarity, reminiscent of the 2nd Generation but wrapped in this seemingly positive and playful

package with pieces that could be described more accurately as performance art rather than sketch.

Jordan, a comedic dynamo, has a fearlessness energy and edge I haven't seen since Annie Donley. She is utterly courageous with her body and material. She is a stunning performer on a trajectory to really soar. Robel is another great addition; he has a wry charm with a sneaking, simmering bite. Recently, on the night news broke of DJ Avicii's death, he did a very simple piece featuring one of his songs where he danced and sang and got the audience to sing along. It started off as kind of a tongue-and-cheek reference and snowballed, transcending the initial ironic posturing into this very real, wonderful mournful celebration, not of Avicii but of mortality itself, the piece forcing us all to acknowledge, however briefly, that great leveler death. And it wasn't sad: it was rapturous, all of us clapping and singing together, connected.

Another batch of folks are most likely set to move over the next year. I'm sad to see talented performers and friends leave, but excited for the continued evolution of my favorite show, *The Holy Fuck Comedy Hour*.

## Afterward

Almost six years sober, my life looks a lot different now. I'm more assured, more comfortable in my own skin, kinder (at least I'd like to think so). My life is relatively full with varied interests I can engage in without fear or risk, and I don't need a schedule as structured as I use to. I'm more free. I love *Holy Fuck* not only for all the creative and dynamic reasons outlined above, but also because it provided me a safe place to go when I was still licking the wounds of my addiction. If I needed company, it was there. If I needed to disappear, I

was ignored. If I needed to laugh, I always did. The inspiration on the stage and the sometimes implicit, sometimes explicit acceptance and friendship of the cast helped build me up during a period where I had to redetermine my identity. There came a time I didn't need to go to the show, but I kept going because not only did I appreciate the artistry on display, I also found community. I realize that that was due to a very particular confluence of events, but I think it speaks to the unique nature of the show, the experimental fertile creative mindset spilling out from the stage. Sometimes comedy is more than just comedy. Sometimes it's a second chance.

I've attempted to convey how truly wonderful, inspiring, and unique this show is and I hope I've succeeded. It's part sketch, part improv, part variety and at the same time none of those things. A celebration of expression and individuality. A sanctuary for risk and imagination where some of the best performers in Chicago come together to put out some of the most innovative compelling work produced in the city. It's a place, on any given Friday, you could see anything. If you haven't seen it I suggest you do, if you have I suggest you see it again. After all, it's free.

## A Note On Costumes

A feature of the show I haven't discussed is its use of wigs and costumes. Ostensibly one of its deliberately dumb or ludicrous elements, the wigs and costumes has come to have a more talismanic quality. Freeing the performers from judgement or self-consciousness to be able to soar to greater cathartic heights. They function to disarm the audience, to convey an immediate playfulness, and serve the performers like Greek masks or Kabuki face paint to isolate and separate



the self so the character is more fully embodied, fully explored. At first, perhaps intentionally, they were silly but over time have changed to one of the show's calling cards and major differentiating aspects. They are certainly goofy but at the same time provide a path to thematic transcendence.

## A Note On The Audience

Because it is a late night free show the audience for the show has always been odd and shifting. At first there wasn't much of one, then it became one of the shows to see within the Chicago comedy community, most recently it has become the bastion for hipster college students. But throughout, drunkenness or confusion has semi-frequently met incredible scenes with mild to no reaction. Some of the best comedic work I have ever seen has been done for a group of ten drunk dudes on a business trip who had no idea what they were actually watching. Point being the response to particular shows or scenes aren't necessarily proportional to their quality or inventiveness. I've talked to cast members after various shows who read the audience's non-reaction and thought the show didn't go well when in reality the content was titanic. I think this element of the show, this never-sure-how-it's-received aspect, only serves to fuel the cast to delve deeper into their imagination and ingenuity.

## Cast List

### *1st Generation:*

Kellen Alexander, Amanda Blake Davis, Chelsea Devantez, Seth Dodson, Barry Hite, Hans Holsen, Conner O'Malley, Timmy Mayse, George McAuliffe, Tim Paul, Andrew Peyton, Adam Rubin, Rebecca Sohn, Brian Wilson, Emily Wilson, Chris Witaske

*2nd Generation:*

Emily Anderson, Lee Barats, Matt Barats, Devin Bockrath, Carmen Christopher, Steph Cook, Annie Donley, Joey Dundale, Brain McGovern, Claire Mulaney, Anthony Oberbeck, Drennen Quinn, John Reynolds, Gary Richardson, Jo Scott, Andrew Tisher

*3rd Generation:*

Sarah Ashley, Michael Brunlieb, Danny Catlow, Thomas Kelly, Tim Lamphier, Max Lipchitz, Morgan Lord, Phil Meister, Nick Mestad, Jeff Murdoch, Scott Nelson, Wes Perry, Meaghan Strickland, Nate Varrone

*4th Generation:*

Robel Arega, Jack Bensinger, Jenelle Cheyne, Jordan Lee Cohen, Eric Rahill, Sarah Sherman, Bill Stern

# On The Business



ETHAN GOLDMAN

# How to Make (& Keep) an Independent Improv Team

As improv as an art-form increases in popularity, we see more and more improv teams popping up. In a major city you may find anywhere from a few dozen to upwards of thousands of improv teams. Many of the more recognizable teams are affiliated with theaters and always have a home to play at. If you are new to improv, aren't a "networking person," or already have friends that you want to play with, you may be interested in forming your own independent team. As anyone who has been on one of these teams knows, the most difficult part of having an independent improv team is keeping it going. A theater provides accountability, regular show opportunities and sometimes coaching. If you are the managers of your own team, you run the risk of it being deprioritized. Life can get in the way. If you or your teammates lose focus your team will go the way of the dinosaurs: Awesome for a while, then extinct.

I have been doing improv on independent teams for over 10 years and each has been successful in its own right. For the past 5 years I have performed regularly with 9 other people who are hands down my best friends. Our group is called The MoonSharks. In 2012 myself and some very talented people with whom I attended Illinois State University decided we missed being on our college team, the Improv Mafia. We reached out to a few other friends interested in improv and began rehearsing every Thursday as The MoonSharks. Since then we have performed at almost every theater in Chicago, done hundreds of short form games, at least 20 experimental long forms, played at the Chicago Improv Festival every year since our inception, led workshops, played at kids' birthday parties, and are currently in rigorous rehearsals for a full-length improvised play we plan on putting up in the Fall of 2017. It has been an amazing time with ups and downs, great shows and terrible ones. Over the years we have watched a number of our peer "indie teams" come and go. The real secret to having a long lasting improv team is to play with people you like. You can always learn to be a better improviser, it's much harder to learn to be less of a douche bag.

I myself have never taken a formal improv class, but I have found a way to play and not completely suck (so I am told) for the past 10 years. I am not knocking improv classes by any means. They serve the important roles of employing many improv teachers, helping pay the bills for all of the cool theaters we know and love, and providing a students with a network of peers. If you are new to your city, or want to learn (or relearn) the basic principles of improv go for it. Class it up. My gym teacher Mr. Rodriguez once said, "Be an empty tea cup. If you're full, there is no room for more tea."

If you think of tea as knowledge, he was totally onto something. If you don't wanna use your hard earned cash on classes, but wanna play shows and still learn stuff, here is whatcha can do.

## Step 1: Assemble the Improvisers

I don't recommend doing a one-person show to start with. Improv at its core is about collaborating. So go get some peeps. Pick people you WANT to work with. Don't pick people based on talent. Just like a real relationship, you could pick someone hot who is awesome at sex, but that person will probably not treat you as great as you deserve to be treated. Pick people who you like hanging out with that are willing to make a real commitment.

## Step 2: Set Group Goals

Make some group goals. Have a frank discussion with your team and talk about what you like about improv, and what you don't like. Which style fits you all the best. Do you want to form a team that only does improvised *Home Improvement* episodes and is called "Home Improv-ment?" Great! Just make sure everyone else is down for that. If you don't, you'll end up with a team that lasts six months, until someone finally reveals they never watched *Home Improvement* growing up, and they think you and Tim Allen are both hacks!

Do you want a run of shows? Do you want to make video content? Do you want to be short form, long form it something in between? Answer these questions first, then come up with the dumb name for your team (Home Improv-ment is my idea, but you can totally have it).

## Step 3: Learn

The more you know, the more your characters can know. We are all always students. If you are interested in any topic I recommend researching it to the fullest extend of your intellectual curiosity. If you are smart, you can play smarter. When it comes to specific improv education I have found that often reading/watching non-improv related works can inspire me greatly.

However if you are looking for effective long form improv exercises and forms read some good improv books. A few include:

- *Truth in Comedy* by Del Close & Charna Halpern
- *Improvise* by Mick Napier
- *Improvisation at the Speed of Life: The TJ and Dave Book*
- *The Hambook* (wow, that was fast! You're reading it right now!)
- [improvincyclopedia.org](http://improvincyclopedia.org) is a great free online resource for exercises and short form games!

There are hundreds of books and websites not on this list that may be more helpful, or better align with your specific philosophies. Read anything and everything you find. You may not agree with all of it, but you can take exercises straight out of these books and try them at your rehearsals.

## Step 4: Rehearse

Pick a day of the week to DEDICATE to your group. Thursdays are always our special MoonSharks day. Even if we are all tired and sick and don't want to practice. At least some of us will make the effort to still hangout. Many improvisers will claim you can be on upwards of 3 teams at a time. You sure can, but none of them will be as awesome as a single



team where everyone is giving it 100% of their commitment. If your team wants to rehearse less than once a week, you will likely be unprepared for shows and have inconsistency within your rehearsals. Feel free to do more, but a 2-3 hour rehearsal once a week should be considered a minimum for a serious team.

Deciding on what kind of team you want to be will determine how to best use your rehearsal time. Coaches/teachers serve an invaluable purpose for teams. They provide an outside eye for scenes and can identify weak decisions made in forms. Plus they will always come to rehearsal with an effective plan for how to spend the time. If you feel like you need the structure of a coach, it is a ton cheaper to have everyone on the team to chip in a little money and pay an improviser you really look up to to come to your apartment for a couple hours every week, than it is to sign up for 8 weeks of classes. You can also have a new person from outside the group lead a different workshop every week. With this method you can find out who's philosophy aligns with your group goals the best. If you find a coach you love, stick with them. If they're not for you, you aren't beholden to them.

That being said, you can also fill the role of "coach" by sharing the load. Take turns leading exercises, and have those sitting and watching provide feedback and analysis. You can also learn to self-analyze. This means after you finish your scene or exercise, critique yourself. What worked and what didn't. Often hearing what your scene partner was thinking will help inform you of how to better play with them in the future. After a long form sit in a circle and discuss each scene. Breakdown what you liked, and what can be done to improve your groups choices for next time.

Try a coach, guest led workshops and self-analysis and see what works best for your group. To do this, you must be able to leave your ego at the door and accept criticism from your peers as a compliment. It means they think you are a badass, and are much smarter than the choice you just made. Try not to be petty.

If we are working on something new and challenging, we will often assign two people within the group to act as “the coaches” for the week. They meet a half-hour before practice, research and choose the games that will stretch the muscles we need for the task at hand. Having two people rather than one gives them a lighter load of work, and allows both people to participate in the games and exercises they laid out while trading off hosting responsibility. Later at rehearsal everyone follows their game plan. Switch up the coaches every week, and you will always have a planned and effective rehearsal where no one is the boss of you.

## Step 5: Do Shows

No matter what master improviser you bring in to lead rehearsal, or whatever insight you may glean from doing a certain existential improv exercise, I promise that every show performed is 10 times as educational as every rehearsal. Even a bad show. ESPECIALLY a bad show. If you have seen a show you liked at a theater, talk to someone who works there and see if you can get your team a slot opening or playing at that space.

Don't get so bogged down with rehearsals you forget why you wanted to do improv in the first place. No show is perfect or lasting. As such you should do as many as time will allow. Agree to every opportunity, turn your nose up at nothing. Do bar-prov. Do birthday-party-prov. If it exists, do

funeral-prov. Having an actual audience is the proving ground for all that you practice for. If your brand new form that you're testing can work, it must work in front of an audience. Remember that laughter is not always the indicator of a good show. If no one laughs during your scene, then it's not funny. If they clap when it's over, it was art.

## Step 6: Think About the Back End

There is plenty more to having a successful improv group than just being good at improv. Here are some tips I learned along the way.

Make a bank account for your group. If you are committed to your group existing for more than a year You will need a bank account, and someone to act as treasurer for it. You want to pay monthly dues so you have money saved up to afford a real rehearsal space? Bank account. You finally book a paying gig and they need to make the check out to someone? Bank account. You find a business that wants to sponsor you so you have cool uniforms that say "*Kenny the Kleener*" on the back? Bank account. Go to the bank where you keep your money, speak with a banker about forming an "Unincorporated Entity." This means you can make and spend money on a small scale (I believe the limit is \$8,000) without being a licensed business. It is the same tax classification as a little league baseball team and it costs no money to set up a checking account under this classification. Plus nothing says professional like checks with little poodles on them, that also have your improv teams name on it.

Have a way to communicate online. We use a private Facebook group separate from our public Facebook page to coordinate between rehearsals. If you have notes from practice, ideas for new forms, dates for potential runs, or gifs

of cats wearing sunglasses you should have a place to share them with your team. It is important to regularly check this online space for updates as it may pertain to upcoming shows and practices.

Marketing your own shows is hard, not impossible. As an indie team you will not have the support of a theater when it comes to marketing. This means delegating the jobs of marketing to anyone on your team willing and able to take them. Use what skills you have at your disposal to make marketing as easy as possible for your team. If someone knows how to use Photoshop, have them design a poster. One of you works in an office with a copy machine? Get those posters printed on the cheap. A team member has a nice video camera? Film a short promo for your show. One of your friends loves Instagram? Blast social media with your info. You sing and play ukulele? Get a street performing license and spread the word about your upcoming show through song at the park.

### Step 7: Have Fun

Having fun is the point. If you're not having fun doing improv, something is wrong. Often I see phenomenally talented improvisers become bitter and jaded about the industry. All I can say is, don't let that be you. Find friends you can play pretend with and don't look back.

*I dedicate this essay to my improv group (and best friends), The MoonSharks. I love you Lizzie, Ricky, Mitch, Jason, Billy, Klahsio, Annie, Matty, and Blandy. Sharks on the Moon. MoonSharks.*

GLO CHITWOOD

# Improvisation for the Laymen

*Hello, I am calling to ask who Harold is. I am seeing his show tonight.*

*Hello, where is the Glenn Close Theater?*

*Hello, I am here for... \*squints at tickets\* "Improv Show."*

I am incredibly fortunate to work in the box office of **THEATRE NAME UNDISCLOSED**, where I get to interact with hundreds of improvisers and their confused parents every day. I moved to Chicago for comedy but am inherently shy, so to sit on a stool and force improvisers to come up to my window and introduce themselves to me has turned out to be a wonderful opportunity to meet the community.

By design, improvisation is accessible, kind, and uncomplicated, putting the performers and the audience on one level playing field. It is not elitist stuff. It is the working class of the theater world. The *Roseanne* of the theater world. Old *Roseanne*, I mean. Not racist *Roseanne*. In a perfect show, a group of improvisers and audience members become best friends for an hour or so while they try to figure out what the

heck they're all doing there. Then the lights turn off, and everyone goes home. The end.

But, here's the thing. I often answer the phone at **THEATER NAME UNDISCLOSED**, and if **THEATER NAME UNDISCLOSED** got a dollar every time someone called and asked who Harold is and why he owns all the teams, then **THEATER NAME UNDISCLOSED WEST** wouldn't have had to shut down.

Alright, the jig is up. It's iO. I can't keep this up. We all knew it, anyway. But that is exactly my point; we all knew it was iO because we, as Chicago improvisers, are a part of this exclusive club where all I had to say was **THEATER NAME UNDISCLOSED WEST** or Del Close or Harold, and we all winked at each other, locking everyone who is not a Chicago Improviser out of this essay. And I don't think I like that very much. I want people to get it. I want our confused parents to get it.

How can we make longform more accessible to the non-improviser? How can we make it more clear that we start with a bare skeleton and spend 25 minutes trying to build the muscles and organs?

Look at the name of nearly any house show at iO, and try to remove yourself from the improv world for a moment. Most of us have a hard time doing so because we moved to Chicago and within the week began classes, so the jargon became clear almost immediately.

*The Harold Team Pasta Chinos and the Harold Team Butt Math.*

The fact that non-improvisers with no affiliation to the theater whatsoever will purchase tickets and trust this show based on the title alone is truly the kindest leap of faith I can

imagine. On top of that, the fact that people will come up to the box office and say,

“Is the Butt Math show going to be about Butt Math?”

And I say,

“No, the name of the team has nothing to do with the show.”

And they STILL say,

“Okay. I’ll take two tickets.”

...is unbelievable to me. I want them to walk in knowing what they’re going to get, at least a little bit. I want them to see that we’re on the same team, nobody knows what’s going to happen in the show, and the name of the show isn’t an elitist wink to an art form they could simply never understand. Audiences feel safe when they understand the rules of a game. We see it work wonders in longform all the time, if we can make the rules clear to the audience and ourselves. So, if they walk into a musical knowing that the basic idea of a musical is that the characters will burst into song, or they walk into a short form show knowing that the basic idea of a short form show is that the actors are going to play short form games, then surely we can name and market a show so that audience members don’t enter the theater wondering why it’s called Butt Math. It may just take a little more description in the pre-show details.

*Hey, This Is An Improv Show Where People Make Up Scenes That All Connect To Each Other In Some Way. You’ll See. It’s About 12 Scenes. Some Of Them Won’t Make Much Sense. It’s Called “Organic” When That Happens,* might provide just enough description to be the name of a Harold show. Or maybe,

*Improv Show: It's All Scenes, Just Like TV.* A show at iO called *Improv Show* would sell out immediately, because right now, these poor patrons approach the box office and ask for a ticket to Improv Show and I have to say,

“Which one? Butt Math and Pasta Chinos? Or Slug Dads and Raunchy Sarah? Or Hunky Baby and Godzilla Is My Husband?”

The confusion doesn't necessarily clear itself up when the show begins, either. Sitting in the theater, the audience is given a quick, vague description of what's about to ensue, and while it can be fun to watch, enjoying longform as a non-improviser is often not as easy as enjoying the clear-cut rules of short form. There are so many more gaps to fill in as an audience member. A sport can only become watchable and enjoyable when everyone understands the rules.

Imagine going to a basketball game (let's say Denver Nuggets vs. Chicago Bulls), and at the beginning of the game the referee says,

“Can I get a suggestion of a line of dialogue you heard this week?”

Someone in the crowd screams,

“Pineapple!”

And then the Denver Nuggets do an organic opening that ends in stomping and slowly dissolves into two Nuggets sitting in chairs pretending to chop an unreal amount of lettuce. Then, after 25 minutes, the Chicago Bulls come onto the court and do the exact same thing. Then the Nuggets and the Bulls play Freeze. That's definitely not basketball at all and definitely is a Harold show.



Point is, we, as audience members, would be confused. Because we would quickly realize that maybe we don't know the rules of basketball—like, at all—but there are basketball students sitting in the audience laughing and applauding and writing things down in their notebooks like, “Nuggets had good second beat tonight,” so we would keep quiet and go home thinking maybe basketball is not for the non-basketball players.

I am not implying that improvisers and students are intentionally shutting people out. I am also not implying that longform audiences are stupid. What I am implying is that to be on the inside is so much fun and feels all-inclusive and not masturbatory at all. But how can we shape our titles, introductions, and forms so that our parents and strangers understand what's going on when they come to see the thing we pour our hearts into? So that they really get it the way we do?

I don't want longform to appear to be some lofty club because, like me, many people who are inside the club joined the club because they were not elite enough for any of the other clubs. It is a refuge for people like us- people who would have a massive anxiety attack if our friends tried to take us to the PRYSM Nightclub directly next door to ~~THEATER NAME UNDISCLOSED~~ iO.

If we can make small changes so that our shows are more approachable, we give our audience permission to enjoy themselves and trust that they do not need expertise to do so. Because really, when the restrictions of the form and the Butt Math and the Harold and the painting of Del Close on the wall and the opening and the third beat and the zipzapzop and the verbiage fall away, the audience can live moment by

moment alongside the performers. And that's when it becomes dumb, stupid, fun.

JEFF QUINTANA

## Business vs. Pleasure

My name is Jeff Anthony Quintana. I was born and raised in Miami, FL. Since 2003, I have spent a lot of time in the business of the performing arts with a focus on improvisation and sketch. I have been a major player in the formation of many groups, owned three theater companies, and worked at major improv theaters. In that time, I have had amazing relationships form, I've had relationships fall apart, I've had them come back together again, and I've had others never come back together again. Girlfriends, friends, business partners, and family: I have been through both amazing and terribly hard times with them all in my time doing this business. Art of any kind brings forth passionate people whose biggest want is to be heard and share through their unique point of view. Many times artists neglect to do the "boring" or difficult things that will drive us forward because of our need to look good, to be right, to be in control, or to be comfortable or safe.

Many don't realize it, but once you form that improv group that does sweet DragonProv, you are actually starting a tiny business. Everything about it is the beginning of an organization, whether it be two performers or 300. The same principles and organization elements come into play, but we

usually skip the organizational elements to jump right into the joy of creating together. There are not many people chomping at the bit to be the person that keeps track of everyone paying their fees for coaching, booking the performance space, booking the rehearsal space, scheduling, festivals, and all manner of things that come up when running your new group. The truth is, if you organize well in the offstage moments, your onstage moments benefit greatly. Throughout this article, I will share what I have faced being a performer, employee, and finally business owner in this community. I have broken down this piece into sections of helpful and hurtful beliefs to keep in mind when organizing your business. The pleasure is more pleasurable when the business is more organized.

## Luck

There are so many moments where we think talent will just magnetize us to success. I used to think this way. I used to think I would be “noticed” and “rewarded” for my hard work. The truth is, I know thousands of talented people. I see them every day. Some of them aren’t even performers, but they have the spark just in conversation. We see someone make it and we say, “Wow, they are so lucky. Just right place right time. Wow, if I would have been there, I would have gotten it, too. Man, everyone has so much luck except for me.”

*LUCK. IS. A. LIE.* Sorry, my friends, but luck is created by two things: preparation and opportunity. It is when preparation and opportunity intersect that LUCK appears. There are the people who are so crazy talented that you can just notice them and maybe they get “noticed” and

“rewarded,” but I promise that every single time, there is more to it. Your talent needs to be backed up by drive.

Drive beats talent every single time. Am I saying that someone who has way less talent than everyone else will beat out the most talented person you know? You bet your ass I am. A driven person can break through barriers within themselves and grow their talent in a way that will push them way farther than anyone who sits on their laurels. I know many great performers that just got in their own way and never rose to prominence because they just stopped working hard. They thought it should come to them. They don’t make any money or achieve success doing their art because they are “purists” or don’t want to be annoying inviting people to their shows or any other number of excuses. What is lying at the bottom is the NEEDS. If you fall into the trap of the NEEDS, you will find only failure, sadness, and depression.

## The Needs

I mentioned them above, but now will break them down.

### *Need To Look Good*

I suffer from this one hard. I want to be everyone’s friend. I want to be liked. I don’t want to piss anyone off. I want to make sure I look good and I am liked. I was doing myself a disservice in this thinking because it made me miss out on so many opportunities. I wouldn’t share my shows or tell people about them because I was afraid the show would be bad. I was afraid of looking bad. I wouldn’t tell people about them because I somehow would read their minds to say, “*Ugh, that guy keeps inviting me to shit—I am not going to go to your stupid show, dude,*” and then not invite anyone.

Here is the thing about this one: what if I would have thought more positively every time? What if I said, “*I am so*

*great; friends and strangers deserve to have a night watching someone put on a great performance for them!"* That mentality alone not only changes how I market myself, but it also changes the show. I am so confident in what I do that I come in knowing it will be great and, by proxy, I have more joy when doing it. When I bring joy, even the worst shows can become watchable. If I defeat myself with my need to look good, I won't have anyone at my show and I won't have a good show anyway. I defeated myself before I even started because of my need to look good.

### *Need To Be Right*

All of these will connect in some way because they all come from this same place of negativity. Is it more important to you to be right or be effective? I would have many arguments with myself and others because I needed to be right about something. I have to be right that getting on *Saturday Night Live* is impossible for me because I am too old, too young, too inexperienced, too fat, too stupid, too disorganized or too [INSERT BULLSHIT HERE]. We also stop from moving forward with other peoples' ideas because we have a need to be right. We become closed off because we have already decided what is the best option before the conversation has even been had. We stop ourselves before we even start with this thinking. It stops the group or company from moving forward too because we will shoot down things that are good for us just to be right about stuff. It's stupid and I have done it too many times over the years and seen plenty of others do it too. Don't worry about being right. Worry about being right now/ in the moment and from there, the greatness will flow in abundance.

### *Need To Be In Control*

How many groups and businesses have died because people needed to be in control? They could not collaborate for the greater good. We can't trust others enough to let anyone else do anything. We do this both onstage and off. Improv and performance usually heighten our flaws but also our strengths. Our problems on stage always mirror our real life problems. We all have pieces of control freak in us but we have to let go in order to make the best product. The best things happen on and off stage when we let go and open up our minds to each other. We have to look at the people around us as assets and as a leader you need to do this even more. I have a lot of things that I know but there is also a huge amount of things I do not know. The beauty of the world and improvisation is that there are other people in it that enable us to be powerful all knowing collectives. We must be open to everyone bringing their piece to every project in order to create the best work. There are times to lead and times to follow, don't let a need to be in control block you from being the best performer and leader you can be. There is an old Viola Spolin exercise called "Follow the Follower" but it is also a good way to look at business and performance. We are all following and leading all the time. If you keep this mentality it will open up new possibilities in everything you do.

### *Need To Be Comfortable Or Safe*

This is the killer of art, business, and life. Risk is inherent in everything we do and pain and discomfort are necessary to transcend to the next level of anything we are doing. The only way to grow is to be uncomfortable for a bit. We all love to have the warm blanket of what we know but the true path

lies in the discomfort of not knowing. I hear the phrase “*empty your cup*” all the time, but this doesn’t mean your knowledge isn’t valid and you should throw it away. It means you need to be open and make room. The cup is your mind. You drink what is in the cup so it becomes a part of you. Then, your cup is empty and ready for more. This is the best way to constantly be growing.

Now you know all the needs that stop us from getting ahead. You will always have them, but now you can recognize them and see if they are stopping you from your ultimate goals. If so, you can overcome them to reach your next step.

## Accountability

This is one that I have had trouble with for a long time. It is easy to blame the world for all your problems on stage and off. You blame that one person on your team that “*just doesn’t get it*” or “*confuses*” you on stage. In life, we blame our bills or family or anything else. The truth is, we all make choices and the sum of those choices create our life. You can truly have the happiest life with a little bit of accountability. Accountability helps you create your life from a place of power instead of weakness. When we start to look at things from a place of accountability, you live a lot more happily and more powerfully. It is always easy to be the victim in all our situations and some situations are really messed up. You can mention a thousand situations and I would agree that you were the victim in those situations. I would agree that the situation was difficult. I would agree that you had every right to feel the way that you did. The only thing is that you can also look at things from a place of accountability. Look at the choices you made and from there you can make powerful choices for your future. Nothing will erase the past, but we



can sit there and create the future through the knowledge we gain. We must also be open to gaining more knowledge on the way.

## There Is Only Pleasure

Observation:

Being a performer should always be fun, and when it's not fun, you need to stop.

Is this observation true? Everything has a little bit of truth to it. I definitely want to enjoy what I do. Enjoying what I do is the main reason I am a performer and instructor, not a lawyer, doctor or anything else. There are plenty of people who chose to be lawyers, doctors, and other things that are very happy with their job and their life. We can learn from these other professions as performers. If you talk to doctors who really love what they do, it is a guarantee that they don't love every moment. It is a guarantee there were times they thought about quitting med school and quitting their jobs. The truth is, if your goal is to be a performer as a job, it will not always be fun. But, you can start seeing the fun in all aspects of what you do.

The things necessary to make performing your job aren't all fun at the surface. They are definitely not easy. Nothing is completely smooth and without some kind of work but that's what makes it rewarding. If you didn't have to sweat all day in the heat, the shower at the end of the day wouldn't feel any were near as good.

I will say, if your job is all work and no pleasure, you choose that. I have found that when I am doing a project I love that even the most boring things like typing up a curriculum, getting new headshots, buying/designing another

set of business cards, or responding to a complaint from a patron all become a little pleasurable in different ways. I see all of these “*side*” things outside the performance as opportunities for greatness that will lead to an even more pleasurable performance for me and the audience. We all have done shows for empty houses and honestly, there is no excuse for not having numbers at your show. It is just pure laziness and this false idea that everything about this job is directly connected to the stage product. The stage product is a facet of the overall occupation of being a performer. Start looking at those extra things as essential things. Marketing, taxes, paperwork, advertising, customer service; they are all a part of what you do.

## The Word “Business” Is Scary

A lot of what I have written is about the idea of choosing your perspective. You get to create the way you will approach and look at things. Business is just that. You must have a vision and love that vision. From that vision, you must do the things to make it a reality and they will most certainly be things you don’t know about or expect. You also should totally be okay with your vision changing. Sometimes, you don’t know what you want until you have it and realize it actually isn’t what you wanted at all. At that time, be kind to yourself and love yourself. You always have a choice about what you want your life to be. You will grow and change. You get to create your best life and it can be anything.

Your business and life are one and the same. Create a vision that makes you happy in every way and go after that with all that you have. Business is about setting specific goals and achieving goals. Notice how I didn’t say it’s about setting specific goals and achieving those specific goals. You just

need to have goals and that may be something like being on the cast of *Saturday Night Live*. That goal is totally valid, but when you sit there and get an offer to write for a TV show or perform on Broadway, it does not mean you failed to get on *SNL*. It means you achieved something else and that achievement is awesome and may even still lead you to *SNL*. In the end, having aspirations and drive is the most important thing. I hate to do this, but this Kanye West quote is so true:

Shoot for the stars so if you fall, you land on a cloud.

(“Homecoming,” *Graduation*)

Have a vision, create your business, achieve things and love all the twists and turns. There is no mountain; there is only the ever winding path and the things you get to do and experience along the way. I am happy also to talk to you, the reader, so please feel free to contact me, especially if you are in Miami, Florida. You can reach me at [quixoticquintana@gmail.com](mailto:quixoticquintana@gmail.com). Much love and light.



SAM BOWERS

# Whose Pitch Is It Anyway?

## 7 THINGS I LEARNED TRYING TO BRING IMPROV TO TELEVISION

God bless *Whose Line Is It Anyway*. It introduced everyday American and British audiences to improv, leading to more theaters, fuller classes, and fuller houses (now streaming on Netflix). While *Whose Line* may be the mainstream representation of our art form, we can all agree it doesn't adequately showcase the full range of what improvisation can be, superbly showcasing short form gameplay while hardly touching genuine scene work or any semblance of long form.

I've been working for years to bring more improvisation to television. Since 2014, I've served as the *Director of Improv Nerd with Jimmy Carrane*, a podcast that has been run through a brutal pitching circuit. I've worked as the Program Director of The iO Comedy Network, developing, packaging, and pitching a wide variety of original series on behalf of the

theater. In 2018, I produced and directed Claire McFadden's *Framed*, an improvised pilot that was an Official Selection of the New York Television Festival (NYTVF), where we took several meetings with broadcast, cable, and digital networks. I've been extremely lucky getting the chance to pitch to dozens of people while also successfully selling absolutely nothing. The following are a series of things I learned about trying to bring the improvisational art form to television.

Before I dive in, I want to clarify exactly what I mean when I say that I've been trying to "bring improv to TV." I've been involved in pitches on about half a dozen improv-based television programs. <sup>21</sup>These shows have taken many shapes, from short form, game-based shows to long form, 22-minute cable programs. While all of these shows are diverse in their structure and format, they maintain the same core principal: when the camera starts rolling, we don't know where we're going, and the actors and directors are allowed to make genuine discoveries and choices.

## So It's Like *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*

When pitching a show, be prepared to talk about *Whose Line* a lot. It's the best mainstream example of the improvisational art form and also a massive broadcast television success. The production costs of *Whose Line* are incredibly low (a season is shot in only 2 weeks in one room in Hollywood) and the series is now in syndication. It's family friendly, ripe for celebrity cameos, and unlike any other comedy show on television. It's a dream series that made people very rich. Because *Whose Line* is by far the most successful improv television series in American history, it's what executives will point to. If you plan to pitch a show about a meth dealer, be prepared to talk about *Breaking Bad*. The skill in pitching these

shows is getting the execs to understand what components are similar to *Whose Line* while also becoming excited about the new elements you're introducing.

## (Almost) Nobody Thinks Improv Can Work On TV

There's an ingrained doubt and bias in the minds of nearly anyone I've pitched an improv series to. The most special part of an improvisational performance is the ensemble and audience experiencing something magical together, specifically tethered to that place and time, never to be seen again. I've learned you have to convince these executives that your improv tv series is more than just turning a camera on in an improv theater. Explain to them the specific structure you've developed and why it's engineered to work on camera. Executives understand this. With the exception of the rare stand-up special, nothing is ever shot linearly as it was experienced for the live audience. For example, a 22-minute episode of *Whose Line* is usually edited down from 3 hours of taping. Want to know why Ryan Stiles always complains about the game "Hoedown"? He was so bad at it they forced the cast to play it over and over until they got something TV-ready. Explaining your workflow and method is necessary to get someone to bite.

I've only encountered two executives who were confident improv can work on camera before we talked. One executive started out as a performer in the improv world and eventually moved to the development space, but still plays in NYC every now and then. The other executive had worked closely with Tim Baltz and the team behind *Shrink*, a scripted series with improvised segments of therapy sessions sprinkled in. Both of these execs knew the difference between long form and

short form, as well as and merits of both and how they can translate to TV. While they currently only represent a fraction of the executives I've pitched, I expect the trend to continue in their favor as newer execs will be exposed to the world of improvisation as it continues to grow.

## How Can We Guarantee It Will Always Be Funny?

I've never understood why Hollywood thinks it's so much harder to capture quality improv than it is to capture a quality script. The majority of comedies on television *are bad*. For every dependable scripted comedy like *Seinfeld* you have 10 *Mulaney*'s. Unfortunately, the world of Hollywood is really just Wall Street for talent, and spending someone else's money means limiting risk as much as possible. When pitching an improv show to an executive, you need to prove to them it will be consistently funny, which a live stage show is usually not. I think the best way to do this is by actually shooting several episodes/sizzles of a project, otherwise known as "tape," that way you can say, "See? We did this more than once and it worked each time." When pitching a scripted series, it's easy to prove it's funny, because the proof is literally on the page. Unless you have a track record and tangible examples of your brand of improv working over and over, most executives will be far too nervous to take the plunge on shooting something that literally doesn't exist until the moment it's shot.

## Improv Is Exotic

When you've been around improv long enough, I think you forget just how much you know about an art form that truly mystifies people. We know improv isn't a magic trick, but



rather a series of learned behaviors that leads to an exciting theatrical experience. People outside of improv still think it's magic, and Hollywood executives are still excited to find the wizard who can brew the perfect potion.

During every meeting we took for *Framed* at NYTVF, we asked our hosts why they requested to meet with us. Nearly 100% of the time the executives said some form of "We've never seen improv like this on TV before." In fact, the ones who didn't say they were impressed with the improv were actually surprised to learn *Framed* was improvised. Despite gigantic improv hubs in Chicago, NYC, and LA, as well as regional theaters opening every year (ComedySportz now has over 30 international locations), improv is still considered underground and mysterious. Until we start seeing an improvised series on every TV network, pitching an improv-based show will always intrigue an executive, because they know there's hardly anything like it on TV.

It's also important to note that being unlike anything else on television can be a very bad thing. Not every executive is a visionary genius, and many are simply out to find their version of what's already working in the TV marketplace. Many executives will say "If it was good, someone would have done it already." Make sure your idea has some roots in elements of successful TV series.

## You Need Famous Friends

One harsh reality of TV pitching is just how important it is to have "attached talent." In Hollywood, names sell and audiences tune in to watch people they're familiar with. This was one of the driving forces behind the success of *Whose Line* in America: Drew Carey. Audiences didn't know what improv was, nor did they know Colin, Ryan, or Wayne, but

Carey had been on network sitcoms for years and brought audiences in. You might find more success pitching your improv show to a celebrity who once started in improv, and if they attach their name to it, you could have a solid chance to get something made.

Unfortunately, none of the shows I've pitched have had any A-list names attached. For shows that didn't have talent OR tape, the pitch died very quickly. If you have one or the other, or somehow even both, your pitch will survive much longer.

## You Might Need Representation

Agents, managers, and lawyers can be very important. At NYTVF, we were extremely excited to take a meeting with HBO. Pitching to a premium destination is always a treat because they have gigantic budgets and make their own rules, meaning no idea is too far out there. My enthusiasm was shattered within mere moments of entering the meeting when the executive learned of our representation status. We didn't have agents, managers, or lawyers backing us up. HBO and several other places have a hard rule that they do not take submission materials or pitches from talent that doesn't have representation. This is for legal purposes. If we pitch a show to HBO, for example, they pass, and then make something similar to what we pitched them, there's a chance we could find a way to sue. When your reps are involved, the legal terms of the pitches and intellectual property are more secure, alleviating HBO from liability. Fortunately, this is not the case for most distributors.

## Ground The Idea

The unfortunate nature of pitching an improvisational TV show is that it literally *doesn't exist*. You can only talk about things you *might*, or *will attempt*, to create. This makes it very difficult for an executive to feel confident enough to bring your idea to his or her boss. When an executive loves an idea, they don't just hand you a suitcase of cash; they have to take the pitch you just gave them and deliver it themselves to whomever is above them on the ladder. When your improv show is rooted in vague concepts like “deconstructing themes” or “discovering relationships,” it's hard for an executive to take that idea and run it up the flagpole. It's important to apply some layer of structure or format to your improv show so everyone above you can easily talk about it.

While we haven't struck gold yet, I honestly think we can get there. In the world of Chicago improv, *true genius* gets performed on stage every night. I think it's wrong to say that there isn't some way we can translate that brilliance to the screen. At its best, improvisational theater presents the audience with profound questions and outrageous humor delivered by performers who are following the fear and breaking the rules. I've been told many times that improv won't work on TV, and that's the next rule I'm hoping to break.



DREW FLIPPIN

# HOUSEPROV

## Interviews the Crowd

The first Houseprov was in May 2016 in what was then my backyard in Logan Square. I wanted to see what happened if you made a show outside of the normal improv theater scene, and all the pressures and barriers that can come with it. I had just completed 5B's at iO and my and all of my friends' new indie teams wanted somewhere (anywhere!) to play. One of those teams had been a "Co-op team"—this term I had been hearing more and more back then.

Seven months earlier, in October 2015, three friends were opening the doors of The Crowd Theater. They started the Co-op there, which placed performers who signed up on randomly-assigned teams, and soon it was blowing up.

I decided to see for myself what it was all about and signed up for season 3 of the Co-op that summer of 2016. On opening night, I got mixed up on the running order, so I showed up to The Crowd for the first time halfway through my team's set. At the door, they told me just to enter through the green room onto a stage of total strangers. I walked into a funeral scene. I knew this was my kind of place.

Now, two years later, we're both still at it. The Crowd has carved out its place in the Chicago improv scene. Houseprov has had fourteen more shows in various living rooms and backyards since then, with new and unique lineups of hosts, improv and sketch performers, standup comedians, musicians, and visual artists each time. Houseprov even streams our shows on The Crowd's Twitch.com channel now.

Some of the Houseprov crew—me (DF), Kristen Hallen (KH), and Becky Trombley (BT)—sat down with the people behind The Crowd—Dillon Cassidy (DC), Blair Britt (BB), and Taylor Jones (TJ)—at their theater to talk about creating something outside of Chicago's traditional improv theater scene.

## On our improv backgrounds

**Houseprov:**

Why did y'all get into improv? **DF**

**The Crowd:**

**DC** Because I need attention.

That's 50% for everybody. **DF**

**BB** I got to college and I auditioned for the improv group and most of the people who were auditioning had really no idea what improv was beyond seeing that group play before the audition. I remember being a little shit-head, like, "Oh, I already know how to improvise. I've been doing this for 2 years." Then it's funny, if you come from an improv background, moving to Chicago is like, "Oh hell yeah, I have so much college experience. All these people don't have any fucking idea what's going on." And then you get out here and you meet 100 people exactly like you. Everybody's like, "I was, like, the best person on my

college improv team,” and we’re like, “Yeah, we were all the best people on our college team!”

It’s like an NFL team. **DF**

**BB** But I think that at the same time, you just see such a diverse range of backgrounds—reasons why people are doing it, how they got into it in the first place—and it really is cool seeing people from all over the place.

I know what it’s like to think of what improv is in **DF** Chicago, not as a performer. I was like, “This city has a pretty good reputation with comedy,” and kind of knowing that and then you take a class and you’re like, “Oh, there’s a lot going on.”

**DC** It’s huge.

I started in high school. My friend and I started a **BT** group because we were like, “We really love that ‘Whose Line’ show.” It was basically every Tuesday after school we had Improv Club and it was really fun. And then at my theater in college, they had a group you could audition for and I did that.

I’m from the suburbs, so I’ve been in the area for my **KH** entire life, but I moved to the city with my cousin. He had been here for a while, so I was just crashing in his extra room. He had done stuff at Second City, and he’d always done theater and comedy, and he was like, “Just sign up for a class. Just do it; it’s gonna be fun. You’re gonna love it.” So it took me a few months to actually do it, and then it just kind of changed my world. I’ve met really great people. It’s just something

I wanted to try and I liked a lot more than I thought I was going to. [It] kind of took me by surprise.

## On Starting Our Own Thing in Chicago

**DC** I moved here with the intention of doing something kind of like this. So it was a matter of just planning and getting everything in motion. Because I helped run my thing in school, and I'm very bad at auditioning. In eight years, I've made one audition, so I just like [creating] my own space; it's a lot easier that way. And I felt like there was a need for something.

**BB** One thing that was kinda cool about coming from college improv is that Dillon and I had a lot of experience in college doing the admin work required for the improv group. A lot of my job was scheduling trips, planning out budgets, stuff like that. And even when I moved out here, I helped run the Chicago Improv Tournament for awhile. When Dillon first asked me to do this, I was like, "Why did he ask me?" And then I started thinking, "I do have a lot of experience organizing groups of people or just figuring out how to get things done."

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I lived in a house in Logan Square, and it was, like, six **DF** of us living there. We had a big living room and we would host [music] shows from time to time. I was going to [improv] classes and all my friends started starting indie teams, so the idea was in my head, "Oh, what if we just did a house show where we had improv instead of music." Because it actually makes more sense—it's easier to do an improv show in a



living room than it is a music show. You just need...  
nothing. You just need the people. So it bounced  
around my head, and then we were all moving from  
the house. Our lease ended in May, this was 2016.  
And so it was a month out: "Shit, I better do it now,  
before I lose this house."

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**DC** We were spinning our wheels and I walked around here, and there was a sign out front that said, "Call Tony," and I called Tony and he said, "I'll be right down." He came out in a bathrobe and boxers and showed me the space and I was like, "I gotta call the boys."

**TJ** Tony asked us when we were looking at the place, "So what do you guys wanna do in here?" And we were like, "We wanna start a theater." He was like, "Theater, huh? Could be good. Could be very bad." And then he was like, "Alright let's do this." He really wanted [us] to just be paying him, no signatures.

**BB** He wanted a handshake.

**DC** We were the ones who were like, "We want a paper."

**BB** He was like, "Yeah if you hand me a check, I'll go and cash it right now." It's like, alright dude, pump the brakes... I remember telling him, "We are gonna be a comedy theater. We're gonna do shows pretty late in here. There's gonna be a lot of noise." And he essentially told us he used to own a nightclub [and] used to have an apartment a similar distance from his current one to us... next to a nightclub. And he was like, "I can sleep through anything, don't worry about it."

**TJ** And we tested that, pushed it to the limits, and, goddamn!

**BB** Goddamn if he's never come in here and told us to be quiet.

Really? **DF**

**DC** Never.

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It was only ever gonna be the one-off. That was the **KH** intention.

It was [mostly] our 5B class. **BT**

But it worked and [my friend] Josh and I were both **DF** drunk [afterward], and he was like, "You should do this again. I can help you." It [had gone] well but I was also exhausted. I had gotten in way over my head—I didn't even think about who was gonna run lights and things like that. So I was like, "If we're gonna do it, we gotta get some people involved."

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**DC** This whole room used to be white. We think before us this was an adult video store. Downstairs was for sure a video store, and we think upstairs was the adult portion.

**BB** Then we built a stage.

**DC** We had to rent a saw from Lowe's, which, if you've ever rented a big saw, it's a pain, especially when you're having to transport it by Uber, because it's a whole cart thing.

**BB** There was sawdust everywhere. And we didn't have anywhere to put it. There were just holes all over the

floor, so we would just sweep sawdust into the floor because we had nowhere else to put it.

**TJ** There's still plenty in those cracks.

**DC** There's a ton of sawdust in the building now. If we ever lift the stage up, I'm sure there's a ton of sawdust.

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**BB** I remember distinctly when we were three or four months in, we were completely packed to the gills on show submissions... We had no space for anything. I remember at one point, we made a rule where we don't book more than two months in advance because there was just no way to keep up with everything without having that area to focus on. I remember for a while it felt like we had created this space that was finally open to people and people could come and do stuff and [there were] almost as many people on the waiting list as were in the Co-op. And then our show submissions were just completely full. I remember for a minute being like, "Oh, we're doing what the community wants, but don't actually have the volume to support all of these people who want to get involved." ... We had to figure out what to do when saying "no" to people, and I think something we're always trying to be very conscious of [is] trying to do that in a way that makes them feel like there's still opportunity with you to do stuff—that it's not a personal thing. We run a random number generator to do our Co-op lottery so hopefully you don't feel like we're personally deciding that you are not good enough for the Co-op.

## On Finding Our Places in the Scene

**BB** [When going into bigger theaters] it's a weird mix of "Who are all these people," and "I know everybody in this entire room." Overwhelming and then also alienating. The scene [is] getting bigger over time and theaters aren't getting big enough. That's why places [with] extra performance opportunities, like Houseprov and The Crowd Theater, open up. That's where the pressure is leading. It's very easy, in our experience, anyway. It seemed like there was always a high demand for space to perform anything.

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It's been an exercise in restoring faith in humanity for **DF** me. Every time [I think], "There's no way this is gonna come together. Who would agree to be a part of any of this in any way?" Somehow it always does, and every time I'm like, "It always works out," but I always doubt it. And then the more we did it the more we tried to create something that's outside of the power structure or weird politics or dynamics. Everything's totally free, and there's no house teams or auditions or anything. We all enjoy doing this and I just wanna create a space that people enjoy coming to.

...And want to play in, and look forward to coming **KH** to. It's usually a very warm audience. People are happy to be there. I think one of the turning points for me was when we looked out into the audience and I didn't know most of the people that were there.

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I would invite [my friends] to shows [up north] when **DF**

I first started doing shows and they were like, “I have to go where?” Especially [since] none of them are involved in the scene. So I was like, “What if I just did it in a house in Logan Square? Would you come then to a show?” And then they did. People [felt] more comfortable.

**BB** I think that’s something we’ve always marked our success by is how many people just come here who, it’s not like one of their friends is performing or anything like that. It’s truly random people showing up to watch comedy shows.

**TJ** I think creating a warm space elevates things. If you make it a fun time, if you make it a good energy, people are going to enjoy performing and it makes it more fun to watch. If you create a friendly vibe where it’s non-competitive and try to remove the power structure then it just works on stage.

You feel very accessible, I think, to the community, **KH** which is so nice and not always what you find in theaters.

**DC** That’s a big thing we discussed when we were getting this place going was not having any weird barriers.

**BB** I think, honestly, a part of that is just being super mindful—all three of us do this whenever we are in the space: if we don’t recognize [someone], making a point to go up to them, introducing ourselves. Especially to people who look like they’re here for the first time because one of their friends told them this is a place to go and watch improv. It’s very important to make those people feel comfortable. I think that’s where a lot of other theaters kinda mess up is that

they are not being proactive about making people feel comfortable the second they get in the door.

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**TJ** Most of our success has been built on having the luxury of looking back and looking at our own experiences and saying what we didn't like and what we can try to make different. Not being afraid to make a bold choice and then be, like, "That didn't work." Honestly, I don't think anything that we've tried, that was in the interest of doing the right thing, has failed spectacularly. So it's always been, "Why don't we just try it and see? We're going to try this for three months and if it doesn't work, then we'll switch back." I think there's a lot of tradition in a lot of the bigger theaters and, I think that tradition gets in the way of doing the right thing.

Yeah, doing it because "that's the way it's always been **KH** done."

But [the Crowd] seem[s] to be free of that. **DF**

**BB** But it's crazy because I think there are a lot of hallmarks or trappings of improv theaters and it's hard to figure out whether those traditions are helpful and good to go on with, or if this is the thing that we are trying to test out and not use. I think about [that] a lot. We've learned a lot from other theaters, but I think one of the things that's very nice is that we also can make mistakes and then turn around and not worry about it, because we don't have twenty years of history [to uphold]. And we have that kind of faith with the community, too, where we can try something

new and if it doesn't work we have the trust that we're going to do the right thing.

Y'all have done a good job of choosing the things to **DF**  
keep and choosing the things that don't need to be a  
part of it. I feel like we're maybe trying to do a lot of  
the same things and are just doing it different ways.

**TJ** I think it's good to have both. There [are] things that  
we can't do that you can. I think it's cool to have  
something mobile and then having a space, too. They  
can serve similar goals but in different ways.

And there's a need for both, I think. **DF**

**BB** Yeah, absolutely. I think it's interesting to look where  
performance opportunities pop up and it really is  
pretty easy to see if it's something the community  
needs. Because if they do need it, people go to it and  
it is a fun time. And if not, then that's how you can  
tell people aren't really looking for this type of  
performance opportunity.

I think of [Houseprov] as a shell of a thing. We'll give **DF**  
you a space (a stage) and then do whatever you want  
in that environment. Another part of the journey  
that's been really encouraging [is] just people being so  
willing to do what they do.

It's a lot to open your home to sometimes 90 people **KH**  
to come in and use your one bathroom. It's kind of  
insane to us. But it's always gone really well.

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What would you guys say is the biggest strength of **KH**  
the Chicago comedy scene?

**TJ** I feel like it's the focus on the actual craft. It's not super distracted by success. It's bad that there isn't that much of a community, professionally, here, but I do think that most people that aren't in it for the improv end up moving. So it keeps [the scene] a little bit more focused.

**BB** The younger community is entering the era of this weird comedy hierarchy with a very level head and trying to tear down any of the things that make people feel marginalized or infringed upon. The scene is so big and there [are] so many ways to go about doing comedy in Chicago that there really is a spot for everybody to feel a distinct community within a larger community. The fact that we get people to show up to [Town Hall meetings]—it's crazy to me, because it really does mean that you value the community enough that you're willing to make time out of your schedule to go. Most people's relationships to improv theaters is: you go there when you have a show and otherwise you're not gonna be there.

**DC** Yeah, we want people to feel ownership of this place.

Yeah, for sure. Investment and ownership. **DF**

**TJ** People come and help clean and do maintenance stuff.

What other theater would have that? **DF**

**BB** At one point we got so many requests [to volunteer] it was starting to slow us down, because we were spending too much time trying to figure out what to do with all these people.

[With] Houseprov, we tried to create that ownership **DF**



just by getting out of the way as much as possible. It's having no trappings or any associations with anything, being a totally blank slate, and then: "Do with it what you will."

**TJ** I think letting people breathe and do their own thing brings out the best and lets all the differences in people shine through. Because if you start to put this structure on, it starts to just get homogenous.

I see stuff here [at the Crowd] that you don't see **DF** anywhere else. People feel freedom in the space. If you perform at other theaters you feel like, "I should be doing this kind of show, this kind of scene."

## Surprises

**TJ** I think the thing that surprised me the most was somebody doing their first improv show here. That was pretty wild.

**BB** Our original focus in opening this space wasn't necessarily to get entry-level improvisers who are very new and looking for new opportunities. That was obviously part of what we wanted to create—we wanted to serve that group of people. But when we first set out it was like, "Let's just make a cool improv theater and not worry too much about gearing it more toward younger generations." But pretty quickly it was, "Oh, that is 100% exactly where we're at." We get so many people here who do their first show in Chicago in our space and, you know, six months later they're taking iO classes or going around to other theaters.

**BB** I guess one thing that surprised me was how often I've cried reading emails from people to the Crowd. I didn't see that coming.

**TJ** That was a pretty big trip.

## Our Advice

**BB** I guess my advice would be: find your thing. Find the thing that you wanna do and really do enjoy doing and have the skills to pull off successfully. And then find a community that wants to be a part of that.

**TJ** For me, I think it was being part of the thing. Being in the scene and active and growing in it gave me a lot of perspective about what I wanted out of us building the space. I thought it would be a lot harder to get people in the space. I think that's attributed to the fact that the people on the board were active members of the community and were amongst the people that wanted to be the performers.

**BB** Grabbing a group of people to help you run it that have very different perspectives and experience with stuff. It's very helpful to have people who can kind of think in a bunch of different directions.

**DC** Yeah, definitely. Blair and I are opposites on a lot of this stuff.

**BB** Yeah.

**TJ** Yeah.

**DC** But I think it ends up with us having the best possible end product if we find a middle ground... that's usually where Taylor is.

**TJ** Except, I don't think it would work without the different ways that we think. Dillon being the dreamer and then Blair and I bringing a little more, "Where's the realistic...?"

Sounds like a conversation that's happened many times. **DF**

**BB** Oh, absolutely.

Yeah, the "just do it" thing... Houseprov for me is **DF** strangely very personal. I thought "I wanna do a thing and I'm terrified to do it." [You're] invested in the idea of putting a thing out there and seeing what happens.

**TJ** I think putting yourself out there and saying, "I'm gonna create a thing," is very much like saying, "Here's me and this is what I think is good." Even like starting any random business, it's a reflection of self-esteem. How to respect myself enough to put this thing out there. Risk of failure—"If you never do it, you can never fail."—it's a pervasive mindset.

**BB** I remember I didn't tell most of my friends too much about The Crowd until we had it. I remember when we signed the lease it was like, "Oh, this is real and this is actually going to happen." I remember telling people after, "Oh yeah, I'm working on starting my own theater." I think it just sounded so crazy. I remember telling people and they were all like, "What the fuck are you talking about?"

**DC** My big thing is always, "Just do it." Take the leap, do the thing. It's gonna be shitty. It's gonna be bad the first time, especially if it's your first time doing

anything. But just be ready for that. Own it, eat it, fail, and then try again.

**BB** I think part of it is also taking your time, [making] sure you can do something. Obviously, I think there's something in jumping into it, but also, I think a lot of time limits, you'll realize, are self-imposed.

[There's the] dynamic you just mentioned. **DF**

**TJ** So many people have helped us. I think saying that we make theater, it's not necessarily true. People enjoy helping other people, it feels good. Getting over that idea that you have to do everything yourself is a huge obstacle. You forget how much knowledge exists in the people that you know. We have been built on the shoulders of a ton of people [with] different perspectives.

**DC** It's "crowd-sourced."

**TJ** Boo-ya! End of the interview!

We did it. **KH**

**DC** Black-out.

PATRICIA RYAN MADSON

# The Problem With the Word “Improv”

As we spiral into madness here in the 21st century, it’s a challenge not to run into a new article, podcast, book, or mention of improv as a trending topic in social media, corporate gossip, and even mainstream news. This week alone, there were articles about improv in the Wall Street Journal and the New York Times. Everyone seems to be jumping on the bandwagon, adding improv training for their organization. That’s likely a good thing. I’m happy about this, but I do have a concern.

I’m the kind of optimist who believes that the skills we teach in the improv classroom have some fixes for our stressed out, perfectionist society. Lord knows we could use a dose of “Yes mind” in our government. I taught improv for over 25 years at Stanford. Add 15 years more as a consultant and author and I’m pushing four decades calling myself a teacher of improv. I am not a performer. Some might argue that “only those who do can teach,” but I guess I’m in another camp. I believe improv is a paradigm for life.

The word improv seems inextricably linked to performance in the public mind. Sean Mulvihill, who is doing a documentary on the widespread expansion of improv, did an “on the street” interview with dozens of New Yorkers. He asked the question: “What is improv?” Over half of those asked didn’t know, or said something like, “Isn’t it winging it, doing something without any preparation?” The rest declared that it was comedy, that funny stuff. Okay. Fair enough. Of course, *Whose Line Is It Anyway* may well be the most well-known connection with the word. Improv comedy has also had some blemishes. And, I apologize in advance if the next paragraph offends.

Some years ago, improvisation as a genre took a giant step backward when NBC attempted to ratchet up their ratings on Monday nights with a star-packed comedy show based on the premise that can only be described as “The Actor’s Nightmare.” On *Thank God You’re Here*, several guest stars are thrown on stage in front of a live (and presumably paying) audience and have no idea what the script is. “Be funny” is undoubtedly the single instruction. The stage, however, has a full set in place, and the guest is given his costume to match. This setup is reported to strike terror into the most fearless and seasoned player and awe into the audience members who identify with the clueless actors. Oooooooo... improv is scary—the *Fear Factor* appeal. But it doesn’t take a PhD or uber talent to figure out what one might be doing in an archeologist suit, a beauty pageant get-up, or Superhero drag.

“What’s behind that door?” cackles the fully scripted onstage MC, taunting the guest contestants, each colorfully costumed in *Saturday Night Live* sketch wardrobe. “It takes a lot of nerve to do what these guys do!” barks the host. Nerve

indeed. I lost count of how many times the setup of the show was explained: “I mean REALLY, these actors HAVE NO IDEA WHAT THEY ARE GOING TO SAY OR DO!!!!!!”

Improv this isn’t. More like mucking about in costume. When Bryan Cranston, thrown into the costume of a punk rock star on the show, was set up with the question, “So we hear you had a terrible childhood. Tell us about it,” he replied, “It was so bad I blocked it out of my memory.” This was a non-answer. Any reply to that question would have added to the scene in some way. When his Superhero character was asked: “Can you guess why I have called you here?” Wayne Knight replied, “I could guess, but what is the point?” More blocking. This always gets a laugh, but in improv language, it fails to advance the scene. Gags get laughs but don’t make stories. And, we are longing for stories—stories of people about whom we can give a damn. The problem with the show, for my money, is that it gives improv a bad name.

Thankfully, this show never made it to a second season.

Improvisation is a classic way of approaching a problem. It is time we gave it credit as a respectable paradigm and not pigeonhole it simply as the vehicle for stand-up comedy. Today, amazing theater and music is being created with an improvisers’ mindful eye and ear. The Chicago improv scene is well known and documented. In the San Francisco Bay Area where I live, there are some astonishing long-form improvisation companies: Improv Playhouse of San Francisco, Three for All, Awkward Dinner Party, the Bechdel Test, and the BATS long form ensemble. They each produce full evenings of unscripted theater, starting only with a bare stage, good lighting, and a few chairs. These actors know how to listen to each other, pick up subtle clues, and spin stories out of what seems like thin air. They are more like Zen

masters than open-mike jokesters. And while their work is often wonderfully funny and entertaining, it is not because they are sticking a banana in each ear to get a laugh. One thing that the San Francisco improvisational actors know that the cast of *Thank God You're Here* failed to understand is that the essence of improvising is acceptance, saying yes, and building on a premise. They know better than to block (negate) or wimp (failing to define something).

Comedy is not the heart of improvisation; common sense is. Trying to “come up with a snappy line” to get a laugh is the opposite of the mind-set needed to function well and creatively in a new or unknown situation. Great improvisers (and this includes moms who juggle the ultimate improvisation of parenting, office managers who hang out to solve a customer service need, or the jazz musician who really listens to his fellow musicians) aren't making jokes; they are making sense. Making human sense out of the moment is the essence of improvising. When we improvise well, we step outside of our ego's need to be funny or impress someone. We are not responding out of fear or a desire to please. We merge with reality and do what needs to be done.

Improvisation is not a gimmick; it is a *modus-operandi* that emphasizes clear sight, careful attention, selfless cooperation, and a tolerance for mistakes and misdirection. We are all improvisers, while few of us are comedians. Don't let buffoonery pass for improvisation. Look for the real thing.



On  
Form & Theory



THOMAS KELLY

## Notes from the Lab

In October 2015, I started a process I'm calling "Improv Lab." I host sessions where I and some friends can explore ideas about improv/comedy/performance. Can improv do more? Can we function better? Are there practices that are not helping us? I wanted and want to look at the way we operate on all levels and see if those operations are the best or healthy. Are things the way they are out of time-tested work or complacency? I've completed one round in a process that I would like to take years, so I don't really have concrete answers or stalwart results to report, but I've got a lot that I'm thinking about. I have a lot of questions, and I want to multiply those questions into more questions. I want to spend years messing around with ideas/thoughts/concepts without any pressures of deadlines or performance dates to show something. I love rehearsing. I love being in a room with people asking questions, exploring ideas, playing around and finding what works, and the surprises, joys, confusion, and discomfort that can happen there. Here's a little peak into how it went:

## Process

In each session, I would start with a discussion. We would talk about ourselves a little in a get-to-know-you way, and then I would ask questions about performance or improv. Here are some examples:

What attracted you to improv?

How do you approach a scene?

Why do we have group scenes/work? Should we have them?

What improv structures or forms do you enjoy?

What does an audience want from an improv show?

What do you do when "a show goes off the rails"?

What do you need in order to take a risk on stage or to do something the audience might not want or understand?

As the conversations unfolded and evolved, there was a feeling of excitement which I did not expect, like something being expressed that hadn't been expressed in a while or maybe at all. I had two or three years when I thought about improv a lot. Anything was possible with it. I was inspired by it and what I could do in/with it. Slowly, I didn't think about it as much. I started doing it more; joining teams, rehearsing, having shows, and taking more classes. I would use my free time to think of anything other than improv and that habit stuck for a while and I slowly began to wonder again until it got so big that I needed to do something about it. I felt something similar to that in these talks that something was being unearthed. Opinions being shared for the first time in a while about the things they enjoyed or hated.

One thing that struck me about these conversations was the amount of phrasing and terminology that I remembered

from classes and books ten years ago. Hearing them again, I didn't know if they meant what I thought they did, or if they meant anything at all. Our history is built by people in the classroom refining their points of view and sometimes summing them up into short, memorable idioms. Making things up on stage is a tricky business and can seem very scary, so we welcome these tools that can help us navigate the blizzard. We can repeat these witty little catchphrases in our head as we try to improvise. It amazes me though how many of these there are floating around:

<i>Yes, And</i>	<i>Specificity Kills Ambiguity</i>
<i>Follow the Fear</i>	<i>Don't Think</i>
<i>Jump off the Cliff</i>	<i>Be More Grounded</i>
<i>Treat Each Other as if We are Geniuses</i>	
<i>Not the First But the Third Idea</i>	
<i>You Got to Know the Rules to Break Them</i>	

Is there any other art form that has so many catchy defining phrases? I don't think so, and it's because people won't pay much for an improv show but they will pay a lot for classes. Thus, classes need to be a snappy and satisfying product. Ultimately, I think these idioms can be as hurtful as they are helpful. I wonder if they turn into judgmental rocks for us to throw ourselves on, rather than signposts that might help us get from point A to point B. I also wonder that once you say, "We don't care if it works for the audience—it has to work for us," to a group of 15 people if you don't have 15 different interpretations of whatever the hell that means. So when we repeat them is it what the person who said it first meant or what the teacher meant it in class or what it means to us?

After the discussion, we would do some exercises/experiments. I would journal about the things I was thinking

about that day, and as I did that, what I wanted to explore or test would begin to take shape. Through this process, I would find questions to ask or exercises for that day, remembering or discovering improv ideas that I thought could be more used or that I didn't really know the point of. I would then come up with a process for how the time would go. Sometimes the plan would be one I had thought up days or months in advance, and sometimes I thought of it on the walk over. In session, sometimes my thesis or intention would be stated beforehand and sometimes not. We would usually end the session talking about what had happened: what worked, what was interesting, where people felt lost or confused. I really like the idea of a laboratory in regards to the other players I asked to join me. That I am not any higher than my peers but we are all scientists looking at a subject we know well and trying to find something of use. I'm sure the process will change as I begin to go deeper on ideas, but who knows.

## Philosophy: The Skateboard

What got the Improv Lab idea rolling for me came from watching a lot of skateboarding documentaries. When the skateboard first came out, it was seen as an extension of the surfboard. If spending time in the water wasn't an option that day, you could tool around on your skateboard in a similar way to how you would on the waves. Skateboard competitions were largely a place to recreate the surf tricks on flat surfaces, but then a bunch of youths came along and changed the way we think about skateboarding. A drought made it too expensive for people to fill their pools, and one day someone took a skateboard in there and a whole new world opened up. They began to exploit the virtues of the

board and different environments where it would thrive in ways no one had intended or imagined. A fruitful period followed where every aspect of the board was tested for innovation, and the two forms began to drift apart and develop their own separate personalities.

This is something I've been wondering about in relation to improv, where improv is the skateboard and traditional theater is the surfboard. My understanding of early improv was that it was more of a showcase for presenting plays without rehearsal or spontaneous satire based on the news of the day. These early developers of improv combed through theater's great history for ways this new form could work, pulling things from the world and commenting on them or recreating sitcoms, genres, plays, musicals, etc. It's not just theater that's being reproduced—you can find improvised versions of film, TV, popular sketch comedy styles, and other modern modes of entertainment—but improv is different, with different virtues and strengths than scripted work. We're trying to give the same experience as surfing (theater, film, and television) but without the waves (writing, sets, costumes, music, and scripts). I feel like we have something really great on our hands that we are undervaluing. I think this old guy can do a lot more than what it's doing now. What ways can it go? I'm not really sure yet, but here are some ways I'm wondering about.

## Abstraction

In an online discussion, someone asked is improv art? I think the answer is yes, improv is art, and it deserves the credit/laurels/acclaim/money of any of the other art form. When I think about Art, though, a myriad of images come to mind, a parade of different types of paintings, each belonging to a

different -ism. With music, there are so many different artists and styles. When I think about improv, it all seems pretty similar. I'd say I haven't seen an improv show that would not fall under the genre of "Silly Realism." Improv is an art form that can be anything, but it seems like it's mostly one thing. I don't think that is its natural state though.

What does it mean to be "art?" People often say, "oh, that's art" when they mean, "I don't immediately understand it," and it's this open ended bafflement that I wonder about. Can improv be mysterious or undefinable? Can we as performers make something that we don't understand until after or years later? What does abstraction even mean? I thought about it a lot and talked about it in the lab but I don't have a good answer. I wonder if elements, feelings, or characters could be pushed farther or opened up. Can it still be entertaining or funny?

## Malleability

One of improvisation's biggest virtues is its ability to change and bend. We can imagine anything in a moment and be taken away to any place with any person past or present. I always wonder how satisfying is it for an audience to see a long form show where in the beginning, we lift the fourth wall for an instant and engage them to provide a one word suggestion of something that they care nothing about to inspire our show. How satisfied is the lucky person who said "pineapple" the loudest? Is what was then presented drastically different based off their input? Will he or she go home happy or proud that their pineapple was acknowledged? Will he or she tell their friends or family about how they inspired a piece of performance?



Shortform is an audience's delight. They know what's going to happen, and they have many opportunities to shape the game's outcome. Longform is a performer's delight. We can follow our impulses like never before, our imagination is king, and we can play play play according to our hearts' desires. We're engaging an audience's imagination when we don't have a set or props or costumes, but can that engagement go farther? Can their imagination be invited to the table and be able to order from the menu? Is there any way to use the strengths of both shortform and longform so that audience and performers share more equally in the delight? Sometimes in Chicago, you can't get people to come to your shows, so you're just performing for a bunch of other performers. Sometimes grim, but sometimes the best shows I've had. We're going wilder on stage because there are no strangers to play to and our friends in the audience are wilder yelling and screaming at us. We are wild apes and they are apes. We are all wild apes provoking and changing each other, but then the time runs out. We have to calm down and return to the formalized roles in our next show. Tradition returns and we are either performing or watching.

What is the role of live performance in our world? There's entertainment everywhere. We have a window into an infinite source of digital entertainment in our pockets. We live so much of our life in front of screens, and we're removed from the people we interact on a regular basis with through these screens. That alone points to live performance becoming more important as our electronic lives transform. People being around people, not on a train or in a movie theater, but with each other, interacting and sharing What's your opinion? What's mine? What's ours? When we merely watch something, we are getting other people's opinions of

what we want or their opinion of how the world is. Experience shows are popular right now. Shows where you can walk around and follow what story you want, or shows where you have to solve a puzzle as a group, but the outcome is still determined for you. The only control we have is what we decide to give our attention to, and that feels a little passive to me! What is it like to really affect the course or outcome of a piece of performance? I know I feel a sense of pride when I'm a part of something that goes well. I feel gratified when I am listened to.

## Group Work?

What's the point of group games or big group scenes? I feel like group work is the bitter pill of improv, but two person scenes are great. Everyone loves two persons scenes. They are extremely satisfying. If your friends or family come see you in an improv show, and you have a good two person scene, then everyone is satisfied. You did well and you were seen doing well. Two person scenes take the least amount of learning time to get the most results. I can shine with my character or my wit, even if I'm sharing the stage with a complete idiot. Group work is more difficult. Each person has to listen more, and leadership has to be shared. We don't have as much reference for it. I wonder if there used to be more resources in other places for what this could be. What do we see on TV where more than two people do something together? Dance? Sports? Reality TV? The only one that claims to be unscripted is reality TV, but in those shows it seems they only use group work in order to make people fall apart and yell at each other. We laugh at the impossible task it is to work with other people! If we saw eight people working well together on stage, wouldn't it be so damn exciting? I think there's

something amazing and inspiring about a group of people working together and the selflessness that comes from that.

Working as a group is difficult and frustrating. It's hard to do well, but I think those are the parts of life that are the most rewarding! What shapes can these moments take? We have a lot of old models that feel really bad for us and for anyone who is watching. What are the new shapes that could make this time easier or fun or dazzling? No matter what, it will take time to work well. It will also be bad/awkward/uncomfortable during that time. It can feel bad and awkward to learn any creative skill, and even more so when those skills are as personal as the ones required for group work: selflessness, listening, giving, trusting. It can create problems, both creative and social, that a group will have to work through together. So why try it? Scenes will always be easier and more accessible, but I wonder what's on the other side of group work.

## Failure

What is the role of failure today? How willing are we to be vulnerable? It seems pretty unacceptable or vulgar, so we try to prevent it like a virus, with a vaccine; we create a weak failure, a "safe" vulnerability that can be controlled and overcome. Our demands are high, and it seems possible to do a great many things but a lot harder to do many things great. Failure (miscommunication, forgetting, fear, complacency) is inevitable in improv, but we still judge ourselves on mistakes and bad moves. There is a "right" way to make things up, and there is a "wrong" way that is bad when we choose to do it. The ideal seems to be where the mistakes are seamlessly woven into the rug so one could not tell what was intentional and what happened by accident or mistake. When we were

discussing theater versus improv, someone commented that theater often strives to seem natural, like it is actually happening spontaneously in the moment, and improvisation often strives to appear rehearsed and intentional like theater. I think that's rather silly.

Recently, I've watched a lot of student shows. These men and women have gone through a year-long training program, and these shows are their time to show what they have learned. What they show is sometimes awkward, loud, excited, quiet, funny, but the shows are so different to the ones I normally watch.

The alchemy was so strange; performers who are good, performers who will be good, performers who are drunk, young people, old people, cocky people who know they're doing it right, people who really want to get it right, performers who are so scared they don't know what to do, ones who are so scared they do everything, people who will never perform again, etc, and they're all on the same stage. The style of the city and the style of the theater are present but not clear. They are trying to use the tools they've been given the way they were intended. The way the pieces are trying to move are familiar, but are peculiar and don't go where they seem like they're headed, careening off in one or many directions. It's different. It's not yet formed. People are making "mistakes." Things are happening that are not being paid off. Two people are on stage having their own individual scenes with each other. The characters are strange. The scene work is mysterious and confusing. Rules are being stepped on and broken. If they were having fun in the chaos, it could be something really electrifying. What if all these things we think are bad are opportunities to do something different?

Shows like this won't happen after the run is over. The "right way" will become clear. People will pick other people that share their point of view or sense of humor. They will try to find the style of the city mixed with who they are as people. They will learn to listen better, and they might find something that excites/unites them. The oddballs will disappear, only to be seen on trains and buses years later. The misunderstandings will become anecdotes. I wonder, though, about this time when things aren't yet formed, or when we really have to play with someone who's not our first or second choice, and these misunderstandings we call mistakes.

How can they be a part of the experience in an intentional way? Could they be highlighted or sought after? Can we laugh with the audience at ourselves? Our limits, faults, our humanity maybe highlighted, digested and presented. We failed. We fail. We don't understand each other. Whether or not we acknowledge it, it's there. We face our internal censor and judgements every time we walk on stage. In one Improv Lab, I asked, "How do you approach a scene?" After some hesitation, one performer said, "Well, do you want to know what I wish I do, what I'm trying to do, or what I actually do?" No matter how practiced or open we are, sometimes these little gremlins hold us back. We fail and judge! We pretend it's not happening and try and snap the door shut and play it off as intentional, but is there some other way? Do we have to bridge the gap within ourselves or between our scene partners or can we keep it and celebrate it?

So,

These are some of my thoughts that I'm just beginning to turn into action. I have bunches of them. They are my starting points, a place for us to start from or push against. I

haven't talked about what happened in the lab at all really, because I don't think it's ready to talk about. My study of improv and performance has been like building a car from scratch. It took me a while to understand the mechanics of what goes where and why and for the engine to start and move me forward. Now that I have something that can take me from here to there, I want to see what this car can do! If anything speaks to you, feel free to experiment with it. If you have any thoughts about any of this, I'd like to hear about them. Improvisation is accessible to everyone. It doesn't take a lot of time to understand the fundamentals and to be able to apply them. The gap between someone doing it for a year to someone who's been doing it for twenty years is minimal and there is so much excitement around us to be discovered.

ERIN MCEVOY MASON

# Practice and Parenting and Practically Everything

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 pedaling. 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 identifying 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.



CALEB GEORGE

# A Short Journey Through Short Form

Short form was most of our introductions to improv. We saw *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, auditioned for a college short form improv troupe, or we, on a whim, took a Level A class at Second City. Short form probably broke us into the world of improv. Then we decided we wanted to try this “long form” thing. We were intrigued and challenged by the thought of no net. Can we create something out of virtually nothing with no game to save the scene or help dig us out of this terrible initiation? We tried it and we were hooked. We had tasted the cool, refreshing glass of long form and then never looked back. We realized in this improv journey that we had short form all figured out. We knew all the games and how to play all ten of them (there are literally hundreds, if not thousands, of games). Then we book a cruise despite not knowing much of how to do short form professionally. Or we struggled with the game slot in our Harolds. Or we got hired by iO... to do short form. And we hated it and powered through it and vowed never to do it again. Until we did. And then we gathered our resentment towards short form and painstakingly worked through the hired gig that we

wish was paying us to do a simple montage. At some point, short form became lesser to us or it was never something we never gave much credit to. We told ourselves, *"I'm just not good at short form,"* or, *"I think short form is too 'bit-y.'"* We dismissed it and put ourselves above it. We used short form as a stepping stone not worthy of revisiting.

But I'd like to ask, what if we never stopped refining our short form skill set? What if we took the painstaking efforts we do with long form to perfect and sharpen and deliberately practice short form? How good could short form be? And, in turn, how much would good, accessible short form raise the entire art form itself?

## The Judgement of Short Form

Let's start with the judgement. I've heard short form described as many things: hokey, bit-y, campy, stupid, hackey, childish, simple. And look, it can be all of those things. I've shown up to short form shows and players have turned to me and told me the bits they use and that if I don't have any, I can borrow some of theirs. This happens and it's unfortunate that this happens in an art form that is organic, present and theoretically "made up on the spot" but it is less frequent than you think and frankly becoming more and more frowned upon. But with that said—hokey, hackey bits happen in all of improv. All of it. How many scenes have I seen where two guys hold each other close promising a kiss and teasing themselves and the audience until ultimately passionately making out? That's hackey. You may have discovered it organically but it's still a bit that I've seen too often and I find it cheap but I laugh and the audience applauds and screams.

Or, how many times have you seen this: One improviser says “*I know what you’re thinking!*” and another says, “*You do? THEN LET’S SAY IT AT THE SAME TIME!?*” This is a game in short form. It’s called Doublespeak. You may have found the game organically but it doesn’t change the fact that you did a short form game annndddddd that perhaps this is a hokey bit done quite often. Now that I’ve pointed it out, see how often it happens.

I once sat in on a long form audition for hours and I heard the word “quinceañera” brought up AT LEAST half a dozen times. It’s a funny word, so people say it to get a laugh but rarely people know enough about the word to use it in a smart, unique way. And yes, auditions are a microcosm of the improv world and not a true reflection of the nature of the art form but there are bits out there that happen all the time. Whether in short form or long form, this community finds its bits because it worked for one person, so we copy. Evolutionarily we were built to build communities and collectively get behind a device that works so we all succeed. One person in this community does something that works, we all eventually do it. We all rely on a bit to get us through what can be an unbearable scene, show or moment but we should all be aware of our bits and retire them. We should continually push the boundaries of comedy as we know it. We can’t describe short form as bit-y because *it’s all* bit-y and sometimes we do what works because, it works.

Recently, I had a discussion with a performer who was doing a short form-based show. She had been frustrated lately by how they keep playing the same games and that short form had lost its appeal to her. I told her that short form didn’t lose its appeal, she gave up on short form. She stopped finding a way to challenge herself and the game. There is

always another way, another heightening, you have to just be smart and clever enough to find it. But that's hard. It is in these moments when we become complacent that we give up on short form. I'm asking you to care a moment more and problem-solve. If you think you've learned everything you can about short form, then there is nothing to be done. But, a true artist never stops perfecting her art. If the rules of a game don't serve you, break them and heighten or make up new ones. Discovery is what will revive short form; complacency and neglect is what is killing it.

Short form feels complete. It's packaged. The rules have been established and the players follow them until that game is complete. Then they move on to the next game and again, establish the rules and continue to completion. It can feel compartmentalized and simple but it doesn't have to be—restriction breeds invention, not limitations. The rules that are there to facilitate the game also stifle the progress we could make to reinvent it. We assume that this game has been completed in its design and function, therefore, it has been mastered and we can move on.

Long form feels open. We can perform open ended sequences, tag runs, time jumps, and patterns. I'm seeing more people do montages in the city than ever before and it's because that limitless possibility is what draws people to improv. Let's take a look at the Harold for a second as I've heard people complain that it feels too restrictive and too limited. Harolds have a specific structure but even the Harold can feel limitless, especially after having spent years performing it. I see veteran improvisers explore, expand and break the Harold. They bend the form to their will and refuse to be limited by it. Why can't the same be done for short form?



Often people have told me that short form moves too fast and without depth. Some improvisers need time to let things breathe and that short form lacks substance and value. To this I say, *short form doesn't have time*. It doesn't wait. Short form needs to be sharp and succinct. Not *fast*; quick thinking. Not *depthless*; succinct. If you are taking minutes to get the point of your scene, it's not that you need to let it breathe, it's that you're scared to commit to anything. Short form doesn't have time for you to not be committed. Establish the relationship, the environment, the characters and action immediately so that the game layer on top heightens and doesn't save the scene. Quick thinking and precision choices are necessary in most scene work unless you're dedicating an hour and half to Stanley Kubrick-level patience in a two person show. Anyone who says short forms lacks substance and moves too quickly with an unfocused assault of moves is describing bad improv, not short form.

I hate having to “defend” short form and that's not going to be my role here. My goal is show a different perspective and possibly awaken a new understanding of what I believe to be an imperative performance skill set.

## The Value of Short Form

When I ran the ComedySportz training center, I saw a sea of training centers with more popping up each day. I saw virtually the same philosophies but slightly tweaked and repackaged with a different mission statement. I took a look at what the community had to offer and wanted to find a way to offer something different. I wanted to offer a program that wasn't short form as a means to a long form or sketch end but a program that was short form as a means to critical thinking about short form.

While developing a training center, I came up with five different categories through which a performer's skill set can be judged: Musical, Game Mastery, Stage Presence, Scene Work and Show Awareness. These five areas are the basic skill sets every short form improviser would need to be successful. Now, I would argue that any performer would need to have four of these components to do ANY improv well. Putting Musical aside, Game Mastery was how well one knew the catalogue of games and how to play them. Stage Presence was about how a person presented themselves on stage. This doesn't mean that everyone needs to be loud, big and silly. I believe it's measured more by how comfortable one is in their skin. Scene Work is how good one is at the basic tenants of scenes. And lastly, Show Awareness; in my opinion, the most important and hardest skill set to master. Show Awareness is about mastering the piece. Knowing the audience you're playing to, playing the games that heighten, picking up the pace of a particular section, selecting games that play to you and your teammates strength. Show Awareness comes with reps, reps, and more reps. I believe strongly that improvisers of any form and skill level cannot grow and be a veteran entertainer without mastering these four areas. I'm not saying long form doesn't work these areas but short form accelerates these basic skills at a rapid pace.

The most forgotten and necessary skill, and simultaneously, the most important is Show Awareness. I've heard too often performers say, "Well, our audience didn't get us." Nine times out of ten, that's on you. A team came out with a game plan and it failed. It didn't connect and none of the performers had the Show Awareness to understand what they were doing wasn't working. So, they blamed the paying customer. At the end of the day, what we are here to do is

entertain and what is “entertainment” is subjective but what is good is universal. I really have a problem with performers saying, “Screw the audience,” and to that I’d say, *but you’re nothing without them*. What makes this art is that someone is viewing it. If no one is watching, then it’s masturbatory garbage. So, if you paint a tree in the forest and nobody sees it, is it art?

Short form is unique improv in that it constantly engages with the audience. It’s a near constant check in and in short form based shows, the audience is acting as another member of your team. They feed you. They’re giving you gifts and if you deny them those gifts, you’re a subpar improviser. More long form improvisers would be wise to do short form to understand the element of playing to audience as well as your team. And I’m not saying sell out your partner, I’m saying that EVERYONE performing signs a social contract. You are performing for an audience and they paid money for services, if they don’t receive their services of enjoyment, that’s on you. Short form will not let you ignore that. In long form, you get one suggestion and *go*, but in short form you may get nearly two or three dozen suggestions, inspirations or curve balls. The audience holds you accountable. I think there is huge value in learning how to play to an audience and short form can teach you that. It’s a skill I can see a lot of improvisers lack in order to take that next step as a next level performer.

Let’s take another category: Game Mastery. Game Mastery was the understanding of the overall catalog, classification and blue print structure of all games. I’ve often loved the game slots of a Harold. They come natural to me and even in my everyday play, I love finding patterns and

exploiting them. This ability comes from my extensive short form background.

If you don't handle the game slot well or you don't know how to heighten or establish patterns, then do short form. The repetitions you get from game based improv will work the muscles it takes to get good at that game slot or to better heighten a moment within a scene when you stumble into a tag run. Game Mastery gives you blueprints for which you can then map over numerous moments within shows. When you play games, you are looking at 3-4 minute focused, deliberate practice reps that gets that formula in your mental synopsis.

If long form feeds your soul, short form sharpens your brain.

## The Future of Short Form

There have been so many analogies to compare short form and long form. I've often used the race analogy of short form is the 100 meter dash and long form is the marathon. They each require a different training, skill set and approach. But I've often thought of short form as magic. Yes, it can be awful and cheesy and it seems like only mid 40's white guys with beards do it in midwest comedy clubs. But there are magicians who transcend the art form. Magicians who don't settle for the same tricks everyone has already seen.

And yes, people are who less refined in magic viewing may be impressed with a simple parlor trick but what about those who destroy the concept of magic as we know it. Who are the Penn & Teller's of the short form world, who break down the basic concepts of short form and reimagine it as something better? Or maybe a better analogy, who are the TJ & Dave of short form? I'd love to see a short form show

with a veteran group of immensely talented performers struggling to reinvent and reimagine the world of short form games while walking the line between spectacle and art. Short form can be like a Marvel film. It can be commercially viable, wildly accessible to all ages and incredibly good. I swear it can.

I think short form needs a group of our best and brightest on it. I think there's a niche is this community for HIGHLY intelligent, smart short form that is so impressively complicated and complex, that it feels like a magic trick. It feels IMPOSSIBLE what the performers are doing. But it starts with improvisers not leaving short form behind. It's another skill. It's another viable arsenal in your bag of performer tricks. Game based improv, like long form, is far from being perfected. In fact, I would argue that short form has been so neglected that we have to work harder to catch it up. And it starts with all the performers who left it behind to find the value in it and build it back up again. After all, the first thing that most of us were exposed to was short form and by reinvesting and raising the bar of game based improv that is short form, we can expose a younger generation to a better introductory and exceptional awareness of the art form as a whole. But it needs you. Give it a second look and seek to find the ways it can be reinvented, re-envisioned and re-mastered and before judging it or moving on from it, take a moment to value its merits and improve its reputation.

Short form should be as exciting and wondrous as the first time you saw it performed on *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* or performed it at your college short form team audition or used it as an exercise in your Level A Second City class. Don't give up on it. Instead, give it the love it needs, as it was probably your first improv love.



LEE BENZAQUIN

# The Smartform

## GOOD LONGFORM IMPROV RULES

It's been said that an improviser who is thinking about anything besides what is happening in the moment is an improviser who is not improvising. Variations of this maxim have been written in just about every improv book, blog, green room, light booth and toilet stall I've encountered. There seems to be unanimous agreement that, as soon as you stop yourself from thinking, the best possible improvisation will surface. And the opposite—the “*getting in your head*,” the preoccupation with deciding what scene to initiate next, when to walk on, how to connect previous scenes—is said to be a dam to the free flow of pure, perfect improvisation.

I don't disagree with this belief, not one bit, in fact I agree with it specifically because of its proven success rate in my own practice; it took a few years, but when I could finally focus only on the present, I started to improvise in a way that was uniquely *me*. I absolutely support teaching new improvisers to stop thinking, but unfortunately most institutions that preach the “don't think” mantra also give their students *lots* to think about during performance. They insist that you must give names, remember locations, invent

relationships, avoid arguments, uncover game... and all of these things pull a performer out of the present moment and place them into a stressful control room of buttons and switches to be pressed and flipped at precisely the right times, while also stocking and referring back to a filing-cabinetsworth of information collected throughout the show. It's no wonder most new improvisers look robotic; they're stuck inside bulky mech suits they barely know how to control, hitting buttons frantically and shouting names and locations before the system overheats; "But Mom! You *said* I could go to Kelly's party! I *hate*—Wait... I mean, *nevermind*, you're my *smart* Mom who's always *right*...?"

The truth is, there's a lot that improvisers should be thinking about besides what's going on in front of them. Names, locations, relationships and the ilk all add texture and depth to scenes, and the faster they're all established, the more time performers can spend focusing on that "present moment" stuff. Learning to get it all out of the way quickly is just a habit that can be developed like any other. Naming characters, stating relationships clearly, all this becomes second-nature the more it's done, and once it's second nature, it can happen in milliseconds without active thought ever getting involved. That's the most compelling reason for consistent performance practice; just like you can build a morning routine by training yourself to switch off your alarm clock and immediately do breakfast and a shower, you can train your brain to respond to first lines with names, explicitly state relationships, etc. After a short while, it becomes habit and will occur without work at all. Your instincts will take over and do it for you, and you can observe your own actions and react accordingly (and now we're back to focusing purely on what's in front of you).



All of these things are skills specific to the individual performer, and can be built on one's own. Go to classes, attend improv jams, and just be mindful enough to work on it during every opportunity available.<sup>22</sup>

There's one skill that cannot be practiced on your own. There's one thing that's bound to pull improvisers out of their "paying attention" brain and put them into a brain full of overthinking, and it's something that has to be worked out within a team, *and* it's a skill that resets to square one every time a new team is formed. Even worse, it's a skill that most individuals and teams don't have time to develop. Furthermore, this skill is the only one that, when developed and applied properly, will set improv teams apart from one another, establish artistry, and build a fanbase. The skill I'm referring to is the ability to operate *within* a long form.

## The Hard Part

Making "moves" is the hardest part of longform improv. Deciding where the show will go next means a move must be generated on the sides, conveyed deftly with performance, and understood and carried immediately by a teammate. The infinite landscape of possibilities puts most improvisers "in their heads" and it guarantees that performers within a team are generating vastly different ideas for what the next scene should be. In order for a performer to fully devote oneself to the *performance* of improvisation and to save oneself from focusing on "move" decisions, we rely on forms that predetermine moves.

You see, for a long time it was in vogue to use long, heavily structured forms that demanded memorization of preselected scene "types" in a very specific order, the Harold being our most famous example, which includes *at least twelve*

*scenes*. You reading that? Twelve scenes at least, and in a very specific order decided by some folks in the 1960s, forms the *most popular form* for beginning improvisers. Other fully-structured forms include The Deconstruction, La Ronde, and Close Quarters, but these are rarely seen anymore, at least in Chicago. And it's completely understandable; it takes a heck of a lot of work for a team to achieve mastery of a fully-structured form. It takes memorization, frequent rehearsal, and consistent performance; three things that most of today's improvisers in Chicago lack the time for.

Anyone can improvise a scene. Most of them will look exactly the same. Two people talking to each other will *always* be fun to watch, provided that the people involved have a sense of humor and timing. That's why talk shows exist; heck, that's why friendship exists. But it's not high art, and there's no compelling reason to come back and see it again. That's why structure exists in storytelling; a good story is a collection of scenes, and the collection gives those small scenes a greater context. And in improv, structure can define a team; it's the only constant, so it's the only thing a team can guarantee (for better or worse).

So, when lacking the abilities to tackle a complex and structured form, what do we do instead? Most teams turn to one of two options; a monoscene (one unbroken scene for the duration of the show, usually with no inner structure) or a montage (an unlimited number of scenes, usually with no rules or plan). Monoscenes work best for teams with fewer performers; any more than three, and players must be able to perform on stage without taking focus or just leave a scene when they're not needed, two skills which most improvisers lack. Monoscenes also rarely explore all that the artform of improv has to offer; most will fall into the "realism" category

and mimic traditional theater (at best) or talk radio (at worst), never exploring every facet of improv's capacity for in-the-moment invention. Similarly, most montages<sup>23</sup> end up looking like a frenetic play or television show.

## The Solution

For a long time, improvisation has been used to mimic other forms of entertainment, with the assumption that the sheer fact that it's being made up on the spot is enough to give it value. But that's not as clever as we think it is, just as it is not especially clever to transcribe a movie into novel format, or serve breakfast for dinner. In order to fully explore improvisation, we must look at the aspects of the artform that it does *not* share in common with any other artform, and highlight those.

How is improvisational theater different from absolutely all other artforms? The obvious answer is "it's made up in the moment," but consider what that *actually* means. It means that it's reactive; performers respond to stimuli present in the room. *Anything* present in the room can affect an improv performance, and sometimes even things outside the room.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, "it's made up in the moment" means that audience and performer alike are experiencing the continuing discovery of the show *at the same time*. Some performers pride themselves in getting audience feedback like, "You must have planned that," or "Who wrote it?" But comments like these mean that the audience wasn't aware that they were experiencing discovery *with* the performers. They might as well have seen plain old theater, because they *thought* they did. Put another way, if a magician changed a small red ball into an entirely different but 100% identical small red ball, what does it matter to you? Your experience was that the ball

stayed the same, so why did the magician put in the effort?<sup>25</sup> If the audience is just going to think we planned it out beforehand, *then we might as well*, because it would definitely be better than anything we come up with in the moment.

So, good long-form improv needs to be reactive and the audience needs to be aware of its in-the-moment genesis. How do we do this and still produce good content? Well, the obvious answer is, “We must rehearse, as a team, for months on end. We must set and discuss goals, check in constantly, know each other well, and be critical of our own work.” This is exactly how theater groups, bands, and all organizations operate, but my experience tells me that it can’t happen in today’s improv scene. People are typically a part of two to four teams, and for obvious reasons regular and rigid rehearsal is a hard ask. Most improvisers I know have so little free time that they look at the performance of improv as their free time, and the idea of being critical during one’s free time is obviously unappealing. I don’t fault anyone for saying, “I only get to do this with these people once every other week, and I don’t want to overthink this.”

So, instead of settling on a montage or a monoscene, let’s look for something else. There must be something that takes advantage of given stimuli and keeps the audience present with the discovery, but is easy enough that it can be performed with no prior rehearsal.

I’m here to tell you that there *is* something else. I invented it for you, the busy improviser whose teams want to create unique work but just don’t have the time to commit to rehearsing a structured form. Welcome to a brand new field of improv forms; the artificially intelligent long form. I call it the SmartForm, for short.

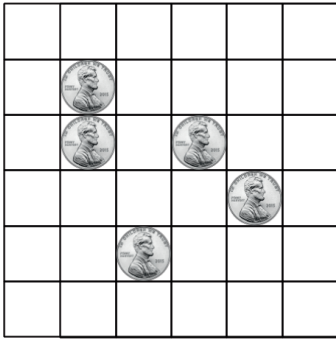
## What is it?

A smartform is one that makes moment-to-moment decisions as to where it will take its performers next. It lives on its own, lurching forward and making choices *for* us, so we only have to react.

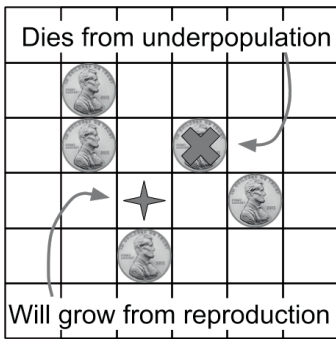
For inspiration, we look to the field of study known as artificial life, something I barely understand but am fascinated by. At its most basic, it's the study of systems that simulate life based on simple rules. I first got acquainted with artificial life when I learned about John Conway's *Game of Life*. It's a zero-player game enacted on a two-dimensional grid. Points are plotted on the grid to form a basic design, and then a few simple rules dictate how the design changes, sometimes growing and moving and sometimes shriveling and dying. No players, it just does itself.

Try it yourself, to get a better understanding. Make a six-by-six grid on a piece of paper, with the squares big enough to fit a penny. Now go grab a bunch of pennies. Place one or two pennies down, in different cells on the grid. Note that each penny's cell is touching eight other cells (four touch each side and four touch each corner). Now enact John Conway's rules:

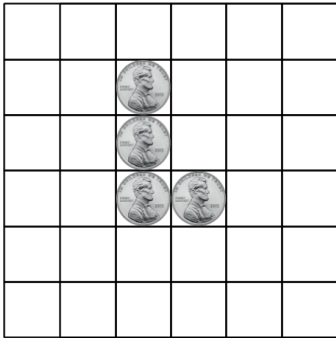
- If one penny-cell is touching one or zero penny-cells, get rid of that penny.
- If one penny-cell is touching two or three penny-cells, leave the penny alone.
- If one penny-cell is touching more than three penny-cells, get rid of that penny.
- If an empty cell is touching three or more penny-cells, put a penny in it.



Step 1



Step 1.5



Step 2

Follow all of those rules and the board will change to a new design. If you only put down one penny, not much will happen. But try putting down a bunch, in a more intricate and tight pattern, and you'll find that the new pattern after following these rules will look very different. Follow the rules again on the new pattern that has resulted, and you'll have another new pattern. We'll refer to each cycle of rule-following and morphing as one "generation." Most designs will grow, lurch around, and then empty out in under ten generations.

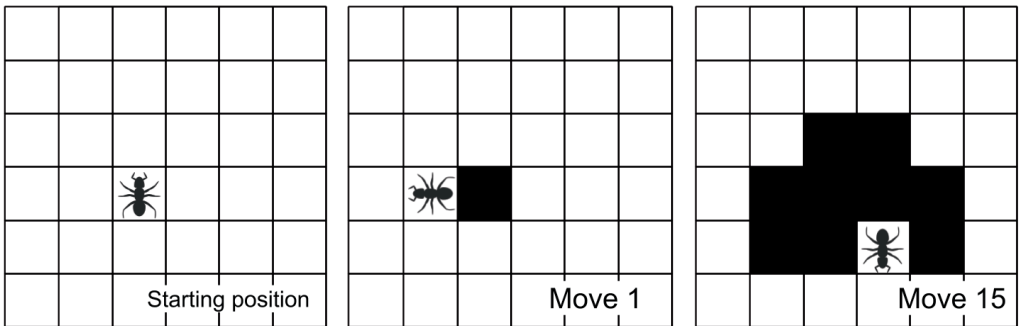
When John Conway created this game in 1970, he was trying to invent a simple game to imitate life. Take another look at the four rules; when one penny is surrounded by too few pennies, it dies out (underpopulation). When a penny is surrounded by too many, it also dies (overpopulation). A penny with *just enough* life around it survives, while an empty cell surrounded by enough pennies births a brand new penny (reproduction). So, four simple rules on one grid produces

an instance of birth, growth, movement and death. Conway's Game of Life is particularly famous in the world of maths, and it wasn't long before fellow mathematicians discovered specific shapes and patterns that would never die out, with

silly names like “the Glider” (glides towards infinity at a  $45^\circ$  angle), “the Glider Gun” (produces gliders), and “the Tub” (dunno, kinda looks like a tub).

Sixteen years later, mathematics hunk Chris Langton proposed a similar game, now referred to as Langton’s Ant. This one’s a bit more complicated, so put away your pennies and just imagine. We’ve got a massive grid, but this time every cell can either be black or white. An imaginary ant is placed on one cell, and it moves according to these rules:

- On a white cell, turn  $90^\circ$  left, change the cell to black, and move forward one.
- On a black cell, turn  $90^\circ$  right, change the cell to white, and move forward one.



Because of these rules, Langton’s ant moves in a decidedly chaotic manner, running around the board and flipping the cells back and forth. Even if you drop a pattern down before letting the ant loose, the ant makes short work of decomposing the pattern into nonsense and scattering it around the grid. The coolest thing about Langton’s ant, though, is that with just two rules we have a wild yet still predictable behavior, because for every possible layout, after about 10,000 cycles the ant will *always* find its way to a

repeating spiral pattern that extends at a 45° angle for infinity (referred to as “Langton’s highway”). So, no matter what kind of chaos you lay down on the board at the beginning, the ant will consume it and find a way to grow its design *every single time*.

There are other examples of artificial life, most of which I don’t understand, but these two very simple zero-player cellular automaton games can give us enough inspiration for an infinite number of improv discussions. Because if it’s possible to set a few simple rules for some patterns on a grid to mimic life, it’s possible to give a form a few simple rules to start thinking and making decisions *for itself*, creating something unique to the moment yet potentially predictable and definitely “smart.”

## Let’s do it.

We only need two things for a smart form; a set of rules, and a random input. Let’s start with the random input first: consider all the arbitrary and most predictably unpredictable aspects of every improv show. I mean the things that will always exist in an improv performance, but never with intention. I’ll share a couple that I can think of right now, but I want to stress that this is an *overarching idea*. The smartform is not about the specific rules I’m about to lay down; those are just *examples* of rules. The important thing to remember is that it’s the improv team’s job to come up with the rules, and the only limit to the number of rules that exist is your own creativity. With that in mind, I’m going to think of a few off the top of my head:

- Audience seating position.
- The number of audience members.
- The sides of the stage the players are standing on.



- The clothing the team is wearing (unless there's a dress code).

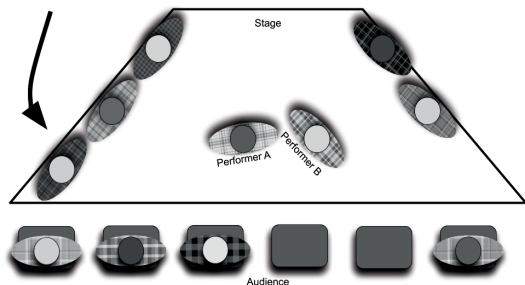
In the same way that the pre-set design in John Conway's grid is an arbitrary input with which we can play out the rules of the Game of Life, any of these unpredictable parts count as arbitrary inputs for our form's simple rules.

Let's examine number three, because that looks like a good one. In Chicago-style improv, it's typical to have teammates wait on the sides of the stage while a scene they are not actively in is occurring. Once a team splits up onto the sides of the stage, we've got an input. Perhaps it's an uneven balance of performers, which is likely to happen if you've got an odd number of players on your team. Our "rules" can look like this:

- When more performers are stage left, pull the first character who spoke into the next scene.
- When more performers are stage right, pull the second character who spoke into the next scene.
- When there's an even split, start the next scene with new characters.

Boom; already we have an absolutely unique show, but one that easily dictates where the performers must go next. Now, when watching from the sidelines, all teammates will be thinking of the same character, putting everyone in a much closer mindset than a form with more ambiguous rules. When a player gets

More performers waiting stage right means we will follow Performer B's character into the next scene.



removed from a scene (“tagged out”), their flight instincts will kick in and they will step to whatever side they’re closest to at the time, fueling the arbitrary layout of people onstage and allowing the show to go on randomly, indefinitely.

I came up with the example above as I wrote it out, but already we can see some very cool implications; let’s imagine a scene with three people on the left side and two on the right, and two people on stage. We know from our rules that the first person who spoke will have its character followed into the next scene. But what if Taylor, on the left side, wants to follow the second character who spoke? All Taylor has to do is walk on, add a quick line to the scene, and exit to the other side of the stage, changing the sideline layout, and now the rules tell us to follow the second character. Perhaps other teammates disagreed with Taylor, and it starts a game of stage-crossing walk-on interruptions. If the audience is aware of the rule, they’ll appreciate the game on an intellectual level, but if they’re not aware, it’s just a fun moment. And furthermore, any scene with three or more players will give the performers who spoke late the freedom to do and say anything without implication or investigation, because they know their characters’ storylines cannot be followed. The form creates its own “main” and “supporting” characters, by virtue of its simple rules.

Again, the “Sidelines Input” is just one of many possible inputs, and the rules regarding next scenes in just one of many possible rules. What if we look at different input sources and different rules? Let’s take audience member placement as our input and scene inspiration as our output; we run down the first row of seats from stage left to right and when there’s an empty seat, we make the next scene inspired by themes present in the previous scene, while a full

seat would tell us that the next scene will be a “world pull” from the previous one<sup>26</sup>. It shouldn’t be hard to keep track in your head which seat you’re at in the show; when you watch a scene from the sides, glance at the upcoming seat, and then you know what inspiration to draw from this scene. And because your other teammates are doing the same, it’s all the more likely that the next two performers will begin with the same thought in mind. The implications for this input/output are obvious; a packed house means you’re only investigating the world of the show the entire time, and a dead house means you’re exploring themes pretty deeply. And honestly, that’s probably for the best; a big, raucous audience will have more fun with a wild and fast-paced show exploring implication after implication of an interesting universe, while slower and more thematic shows often play best to smaller, quieter houses. But what if that smaller audience knows the team’s form? The audience can force the type of show they explicitly want to see by moving seats during scenes. Now we’ve got a unique form delivering the audience *exactly* what they want, and we have audience participation without interruption.

How about playing with space? Imagine you’re in an apartment building, and use the sidelines again to decide which room we go to next. Any plaid in the scene? The next scene will be about the folks that live upstairs. No plaid in the scene? Go downstairs. If you think you can handle it, pair that with seated audience members; an empty seat means we go to the apartment building on the left, while a full seat means the building on the right. We could travel around the whole city with these simple rules, though I’m not sure I could keep up without an actual grid onstage with a moving chess piece to mark where we’re at. This, again, gives an

opportunity to audience members in the know to affect the show; if they want to see characters return, it's a matter of moving their seats around to force the show to turn back, returning to the previous building.

What happens when inspiration strikes a performer and they act without obeying the rules? Ideally this won't happen, but if it does, the answer is simple; everyone else continues to obey the rules, and adjusts accordingly. In the original example with Sideline Inputs, if someone does a walk-on without thinking, everyone else just has to pay attention and remember that the next scene's character has switched. The important thing to remember is that the system will always work, and the more it's done, the more second-nature it will be to follow the rules. Don't believe me? Think about driving a car with a passenger in it. The stoplights have three rules you must remember and respond to in real time, and yet every driver I know is able to maintain a conversation with their passenger while subconsciously obeying the stoplight. Nobody freezes up mid-sentence to figure out what the implication of *green* is, because they've done it enough times that it has become instinct.

## Ending it

Why is it that teams work for weeks to learn how to perform together, and when it's time to finally perform, they give up the *most important responsibility* to someone who has never rehearsed with them, and perhaps never even seen them perform? Ending a show with a blackout defines a team; it says, "...and that's exactly what we call a show!" When you hand that responsibility to *anyone else*, you're handing over the definition of your team's body of work. Imagine if every time Stevie Wonder recorded a new album, they came into

the studio with stuff they had spent months writing, and then the studio technician got to just stop recording everything whenever it “seemed” like it was time to call it. Imagine if every one of Georgia O’Keeffe’s paintings just left off in the middle because the curator saw it and said, “Yep. We get the gist, let’s hang it up!” Imagine if every dinner you ever ate at a restaurant was taken off the stove when the server eyed it from across the kitchen and *figured* it was done.

The only person who can decide when a piece of art is done is the artist themselves. In our case, it’s a whole team of artists. So why in the world would you hand that responsibility over to someone who might not even improvise at all, let alone has never done it with your team and has no concept of what metric you as a team use to define a successful show<sup>27</sup>?

Again, ideally, a team would know precisely when their own show is done, and would have a way of signaling that to the audience. The current best-case scenario is that you luck out and get a competent fellow improviser in the tech booth who has seen your team several times and performs their role with intention. Those techs exist (they’re the ones that read this magazine), but they are few and far between. And in a perfect world, that tech would be the only person who ever pulls lights for the team, like a silent extra member. But that’s never going to happen.

So, when lacking the time or energy to put in the actual work, let’s turn back to the smartform. What if we folded the ending of the show into our set of rules, so that the ending is still brought about with intention, and remains uniquely “ours?” It may not come at the ideal moment, but its presence will indicate and define the nature of the form.

The ending could be defined by something hilariously simple: Perhaps when two people say the same thing, the show ends. This causes the show's ending to be either upsettingly sudden or beautifully profound. Maybe the show ends by accident within its first five minutes. Is that a problem? No, it's wonderful. Tell the audience the show is over and ask if they want to see another one. Or maybe the show ends around minute fifteen when two people say the same thing by accident. Great! Embrace it; fifteen minutes is more than enough time to have given the audience a great experience. Or maybe nobody ever says anything at the same time, so when the performers finally feel ready to end, they bring out two characters and have them say the same thing at once. What they say is up to the team, but it *could* be some beautiful line that sums up the theme of the show. Or it could be nonsense. Either way, it's a show that ends with *intention*.

The point is that once you set a small and simple rule, you'll realize the depth of the implications that come with it<sup>28</sup>. That's because we're humans with desire and free will, not mathematic ants on a grid. When we have set rules, we'll start to find ways to exploit those rules to get what we want. And it's surprising how, once you apply a constraint, you'll realize what you really want. You experience this in daily life; I bet you've never wanted a donut as much as you do when you're on a diet, and you've never wanted that barista as much as you do when you're already seeing someone. But you don't give up, and you don't cheat on your rules. Instead, you find sneaky ways to work *around* your constraints, like "treating yourself" to a donut on Friday mornings, or searching "Starbucks customer forgot wallet" on Pornhub.

Try it. Set some simple rules with your team, and play them out a couple of times. Immediately, and without even

trying, your teammates will find the implications; the exciting cracks in the code that let them get what they want by doing more creative maneuvers than they would otherwise do. Everyone will be more focused, because they *have* to focus in order to keep up. And every single show will be unique, yet they will all feel distinctly *yours*. Tell the audience what you're doing, and they will get involved in a way they never have before. They'll want to come back and participate more, as they realize the implications of their own actions. You'll get closer and closer to that improvisational ideal, where audience and performer alike are participating together to build something that has never existed and will never exist again.

And you'll do it all with just a few simple rules.





NICK DIMASO

# Why You Don't Like the Harold

- OR -

WHY I STOPPED LIKING THE HAROLD.  
BUT I CAN ONLY IMAGINE OUR  
REASONS ARE SIMILAR.

It feels like most improvisers don't like the Harold.

I think this because a lot of improvisers have told me, "I don't like the Harold." And other clues like, "fuck the Harold!" And I would say, "What a blasphemous and crazy thought! Probably just a *bit*. I love the Harold."

And then one day, as I was performing a Harold, it hit me: I also hated it. And slowly, it wasn't just the Harold anymore: my friends and I seemed to be distancing ourselves from performing and watching improv *altogether*. It all started to feel inconsequential and unfun.

I wanted to know what happened.

INT. COLLEGE CLASSROOM - NIGHT - EIGHT  
YEARS AGO

Before all of our shows, you could find my college improv team, The Queen's Tears, scattered around the perimeter of a giant classroom in covert poses. And then, like porch chimes before a storm, *slowly*, you'd hear a murmur:

"Shit damn motherfucker motherfucker damn."

Our eyes darted around the room, as if we each had an order to kill the person next to us.

"Some dumb bitch done stole my man. I'mma find another fucker better than that motherfucker; shit damn motherfucker motherfucker damn."

We carefully peeled off the walls and crept toward the center of the room, toward each other.

"Shit damn motherfucker motherfucker damn. Some dumb bitch done stole my man."

The chant would grow in volume and speed. People pantomimed smacking a bat in their hand, polishing a pistol, extending Wolverine claws<sup>29</sup>—all while glaring at each other.

I'MMA FIND ANOTHER FUCKER  
BETTER THAN THAT  
MOTHERFUCKER SHIT  
DAMN MOTHER-  
FUCKER MOTHER-  
FUCKER DAMN!

We would end nose-to-nose with a release of energy that could power a jet plane. And then we would rush into the theatre riding this fire to bring the house down.

CUT TO:

INT. ANY THEATER GREENROOM - NIGHT - PRESENT DAY

I am seated drinking a Schlitz with a few of my teammates. We're still waiting on a few friends to arrive when someone asks the fateful question:

“What do we want to do tonight?”

Responses include:

“Eh, let's just do a montage. We'll figure it out.”

“How about a Harold? LOL JK fuck that.”

“Let's just have fun. Who cares?”

“Fuck the audience.”

We never really “settle” on something—I guess we'll do a montage?—and then we perform a show that is more often than not, uninspired and uninspiring.

EXT. MY APARTMENT - NIGHT - LATER

I'm thumbing through my copy of *Truth In Comedy*<sup>30</sup> to reacquaint myself with the Harold. I'm rereading that, with a Harold, “the first rule is: there are no rules,” and that if someone believes that they *can't* do something in a Harold, they are doing a Harold *wrong*. And that's when I realized why I didn't like the Harold anymore.

There *are* rules to a Harold.

In fact, those rules feel like they make unintentional, creative choices for me and the group. More often than not, it feels like the form is in control of the show when we should be.

This frustration with form isn't singular to the Harold: because we feel less control over the show when following a

form, we probably don't feel like the show fully reflects us as artists.

For example: Imagine we're in the first beat of a Harold, and Olivia plays a character who won't admit they are wrong. I think it would be fun to see this character caught in the act of shoplifting. The form suggests that we pocket Olivia's character until the relevant slot in the second beat of the Harold. This patience can pay dividends later in the show (e.g., by later connecting seemingly disparate people and events, we impress the audience), but it can also fall flat. Or, my impulse could never happen at all: we might go with another pull for that scene or run out of time, and now that organic chance is lost.

This isn't to say that *always* acting on an impulse is the right option. Sometimes patience is the right answer, like paying off a character's want later in the show. But with a form, we don't feel comfortable enough to be able to make the choice between the two.

Strictly following an established form is antithetical to performing improv. We will sometimes "make" moves in a form out of obligation, rather than making intentional or creative decisions.

And I think that's what Del Close was trying to say, and we've<sup>31</sup> just gotten away from it.

## Form and Content

Currently, improvisation is one of the only art forms I can think of where we begin with form instead of content. We wonder first *how* we want to say something instead of *what* we want to say.

It'd be weird if an artist, instead of thinking, "I am in love and wish to write about it, so I shall write a poem,"

thought, “I shall write a poem, so as to discover what I want to write about.”

Instead, these artists, after their own experimentation, settle on something they are trying to say and work *with* a form to tell it in the most effective, thought-provoking way.

Ideally, what we want to *say*—specifically when doing improv—is discovered through our performance. On the surface, then, this might appear to be a rational argument for our current state: *form before content*.

Take The Improvised Shakespeare Company at iO: this is arguably one of the most successful improv groups in the world. And their shows are Harolds: each show *opens* with a prologue in rhyming couplets that conveys, generally, *what we are about to see*; they then establish the *protagonist*, the *antagonist*, and either the love interest, an oracle, or an eccentric(s) who will make their way into the main storyline in the first beat scenes; there’s generally a group game scene to change the pace; repeat repeat repeat, and then they cleverly end at the beginning with a closing monologue/epilogue in rhyming couplets that ends with the title of the play. A form can flourish and elevate our improv when we consciously choose them for their strengths.

The Improvised Shakespeare Company consciously chose and embraced the Harold: they know it is a killer form for narrative<sup>32</sup>, and that *directly serves what they are trying to do*. They want to create stakes and cue the audience into hidden character motivations so that the audience becomes giddy when characters finally meet at the end. Their show would not work *nearly as well* as a Deconstruction, or a BeerSharkMice, or anything else. Their show is proudly a Harold.

Now, let's consider that our improv group decides to perform a Deconstruction and in the process learn what our show is about.

What if, during the first scene of our Deconstruction, we realize that this show would work much better as a LaRonde due to the number of characters and relationships that are referenced in the opening "spine" scene? Since our group chose a form, we now need to bend what we are inspired to say and explore to fit into the mold of a Deconstruction. Otherwise, we'll feel like we did the form "wrong."

So, I think what Del was trying to say was:

"Start with a form, and then bend away as necessary to follow what your show ultimately becomes."

**So then,**

If, unlike Improvised Shakespeare Company, we plan to discover what we are trying to say in the process of saying it, then we must be able to adapt and make structural and content choices that create the best version of that show as possible.

If we can discover what we are trying to say in the process of saying it, then we can adapt and make structural and content choices that create the best version of that show as possible. We need to improvise to figure out why we're improvising that night.

We have learned (and intuitively know) what makes improv shows enjoyable: specific characters with clear wants; obstacles that get in people's way; a clear beginning-middle-and-end, varying scene lengths and energies, dynamic scene pictures; varying number of people in a given scene or game; goofy, goofy bits; and the fact that what we're doing is live and spontaneous.

Forms, for the most part, try to package and arrange these “enjoyable” elements for us. Instead, I propose that ensembles practice these elements—as well as learn and practice “moves”—to establish a group vocabulary so we can best tell our own stories. If we practice and deconstruct forms in rehearsal, we’ll start to understand what makes those forms successful. And then we can apply that understanding to any improv show, and we can borrow structural and editing elements to help us create great art. This shared “performance” vocabulary opens doors to choices. And then, together, we can make choices to create the shows we want to create and say the things we want to say in a way that feels more unique and genuine<sup>33</sup>.

Let’s imagine a scene where Martha is explaining to her sister, Joan, that she is having second thoughts about the wedding, and let’s say that we’re going to follow our impulse to see *why* she’s having second thoughts. We do a “tag run” of lost loves and people warning Martha of marriage before Joan tags back in. As an audience member, I see the moves happening and assume this is a montage of previous interactions.

Now let’s say that, instead of a “tag run,” our performers do a “revolving door” of lost loves and people warning Martha of marriage before Joan swings back into the scene. Though it’s the same content, the revolving door move creates this daydream-like feeling where Martha is literally turning side to side to interact with these memories before Joan steps back in. It’s the difference between a hard cut and a soft fade in film; it creates a depth of tone.

As a performer, I made a creative choice to introduce a revolving door because I wasn’t thinking through the lens<sup>34</sup> of a form. As a result, the show feels more like a part of me,

and the result was more specific: I heightened Martha's fears and second guessing. The move was more intentional instead of just a quick short-hand for "a run of scenes."

Practicing and creating moves and structures as a team further develops a unique group identity and point of view. How often have we felt like we are just "another improv team?" Or that we're sitting through just another show? We can feel this way sometimes with mash-up teams because we generally stick to the "basics" that everyone knows<sup>35</sup>. If we instead had our own moves, our own vocabulary, our own interpretation of how scenes and stories could thread together, then we would feel more of a relationship with the artform. We would feel empowered, because our shows reflected us as individuals and as an ensemble.

As an audience member watching the revolving door, I might wonder if those interactions were made up as a result of her neuroses or from her past. I get a heightened feeling of Martha's disorientation and second guessing. The content, though the same, was strengthened by the move.

And perhaps this leads to what we are trying to say with this show: that big decisions come with a lot of second guessing and disorientation. Or, maybe the content led us to this form utilizing revolving doors (and possibly asides to show underlying intentions, personification to bring to life fears and neuroses, repeating scenes with new choices to see how it could have been, etc.). Ideally, form and content are interdependent.



I think I know what happened (to me, at least)

INT. COLLEGE THEATRE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

The Queen's Tears rushed the stage each night to perform to over 300 friends and family<sup>36,37</sup>. On this particular Friday night, we were going to attempt a Harold.

This was our favorite form because it also felt like the “professional” form: it’s what the “adults” were doing.

But after a couple of minutes into our first beat scene, we realized something: The two performers in the scene were hitmen. And they were sent to kill one another.

On the sides, the rest of us started darting our eyes at one another<sup>38</sup>. This felt familiar<sup>39</sup>. We suddenly realized that we all had been sent to kill one another<sup>40</sup>.

We scattered around the perimeter of the packed theater and stood in covert poses. One by one, we would slowly walk to the center of the theater toward each other—brandishing weapons like a pistol, a bat, or wolverine claws<sup>41</sup>—and tell the story about who we were and why we were sent there.

We ended up staying in this one scene for the rest of the show. And that decision worked for us in the end because it heightened the stakes that anyone could make a move at any moment.

We started with a Harold and (in this case, very quickly) bent away from it to follow the story that night about hitmen who had all been sent to kill one another, but who eventually realized that they were more alike than different.

Turns out, their *bosses* were the real motherfuckers.

I hated the Harold because I didn't feel empowered when performing that form. That's because I felt like I had to play by the seemingly arbitrary rules of the Harold.

In reality, my frustration stemmed from my unwillingness to bend away from the form when it was no longer serving me, the group, or the piece. It also came from my unwillingness to lean into all the things that make a Harold (or any form) great<sup>42</sup>.

Coincidentally, just doing a "montage" doesn't feel great, either. Or making a different move "just for the hell of it." If we start to see our form and our content as interdependent—that, with improv, what we want to say is inextricably tied up in the way we're saying it—then maybe we can get back to that original *magical* feeling improv first had on us.

JEREMY SENDER

# Improv Theater, Improv Comedy, & the Importance of Knowing the Difference

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...

6. 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 misshapen 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 telltale 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.*

*Jeremy Sender*

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

*JANET approaches ARTHUR with a plastic baggie.*

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 baggie. 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

*Jeremy Sender*

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.



STEVE NELSON

# The Degenerative Nature of "Yes, And"

## THE POWER OF "NO"

*Yes, And* is the undisputed bedrock tenet of improv. Created by it doesn't matter, utilized since the beginning. Its genesis is immaterial; regardless of where it came from it is taught in some shape or form in all the training centers throughout the country (most likely the world) as the fundamental first improv step. The first rule. Although a good jumping off point to learn improv, I allege the prevalence and depth of the "*yes, and*" ideology is detrimental to the artform itself and to the interpersonal health of its practitioners.

The purpose of the "*yes, and*" dictum is to establish two improv fundamentals: acceptance and creation. Most basically, acceptance meaning the accepting of an imaginary reality or even more simply cooperation with imagination itself. Creation being the providing and furthering of ideas and information.

Accepting of improv reality is a lesson learned relatively quickly in the classroom. Someone cross-initiates (*E.g. 1*) or straight up negates (*E.g. 2*) their scene partner and the teacher calls this out and explains it.

*E.g. 1*

A: Welcome to my bakery!  
B: Welcome to my spaceship!

*E.g. 2*

A: Welcome to my bakery!  
B: This isn't a bakery, its a spaceship!

After that it rarely happens. Fundamentally, the “*and*” is what improv is; it is the creating and actualizing of ideas based on a suggestion and in response to those things that are being created in real time.

This is a very basic deconstruction of “*yes, and*” to its most rudimentary ideas. And if it were utilized in this simple way, open to interpretation, fluid and variable, then it would deserve its reverence. But “*yes, and*” is much more pervasive, much more restrictive, and lends itself, over time, to boring improv and stagnant if not destructive interpersonal relations.

In the classroom “*yes, and*” is helpful. It provides context, structure, and a guideline for an artform that could not be more nebulous. Difficult to both learn and teach. The idea of positivity and support is drilled into students as this curbs if not totally neutralizes a lot of the pitfalls of the novice improviser. Fighting is bad, disagreeing is bad, conflict is bad. These rules are implemented because the novice improviser is typically incapable of even the most basic execution of a game or a scene. A dos-and-don'ts framework is provided to bring some definition to an artform that has little to none. Which is all good. Rules and parameters are needed in order to learn. The problem comes when these rules become intricately tied to the culture of the “improv community”, when the “*yes, and*” guideline is taken almost literally and

becomes such an ingrained concept it is unthinkable to bend or break it.

The diminishing returns of the “yes, and” ideology manifests itself both onstage and off.

## Onstage

As novice improvisers become apprentice improvisers and actually get onstage and start performing the idea of accepting the improv reality, the “yes” can be perverted and what we see is performers simply being amiable. Performers acquiescing to the most bland, banal, sometimes offensive suggestions or ideas for fear of judgement, because they were drilled to “yes” their scene partners, to accept the first suggestion (whatever it might be).

I’ve seen performers pantomime sex acts or follow idiotic sexist/racist or otherwise offensive trains of thought not because they wanted to or because there was any comedic or artistic merit to it but simply because an audience member or scene partner suggested it. There’s this resigned and almost reverent quality about any idea that is spoken and how it should be actualized in a very specific literal way. I’ve seen interminably boring scenes stretch on for ages because the scene was begun with little to no inspiration and the performers were “yes, and”-ing an innocuous, empty initiation (*E.g. 3*).

The scene goes nowhere because it has nothing, no actual choice, to feed on.

*E.g. 3*

A: You're late for work.

B: I am late for work. My train was delayed.

A: Maybe so but we need you to be at work on time, you need to finish those TPS\* reports.

B: I'll get to those as soon as I get to my desk. This won't happen again, I've had stuff\*\* going on.

A: We all have stuff going on. This is your final warning.

*Dated reference\**  
*Unspecified\*\**

## The Banality of Agreement

Simple blind agreement is what “yes, and” can and does devolve into if held on to over time. In order to be good practitioners of the artform we must be discerning about how or if we engage in certain subjects. We must contribute to the content and direction of a scene, and sometimes contributing means saying you won't engage in a certain activity (pantomimed sex act) or that you disagree or find abhorrent some statement. We must make choices, preferably bold choices, which are in turn interesting choices which makes for interesting improv which makes for compelling theatre. Don't be boring, don't be crude, don't be obvious.

There is this illusion that we cannot go into a scene with an idea or inject ideas into scenes while they're going on. That “pure” improv is where you go into a scene or game with “no idea” and it comes to you by some magic. That improv is “discovering” together. And certainly there is an element of discovery, sure inspiration can strike suddenly and at times does but part of improvising is learning to constantly absorb information and manufacture inspiration; it is an active, not passive, activity. Collaboration isn't about being a blank slate or simply responding, it's about coming into a situation with a point of view and perspective, melding/clashing that with the perspective of another person or persons and together



creating something new. It is infuriating even painful to watch performers stand, totally neutral, waiting for something (outside themselves) to happen, waiting for some lightening bolt from the improv gods. Scenes with dialogue that meander with no real substance because the participants are terrified of “not supporting” so they do as little as possible.

Ultimately “yes, and” is a passive dictum because what comes before the “yes?” Someone has to begin, someone must initially make a choice, must start doing something in order for it to be “yes, and”-ed. How is this taught? What is the phrase that engenders the creative instinct? There is none. The underlying passivity of “yes, and” cultivates this kind of malaise of amiability where performers show up, get on stage, nod their heads, agree to whatever’s going on, and believe they are improvising.

This kind of tacit view of improv is apparent in the commonly taught idea of high and low “status”. That in scenes one person has “high status” another person has “low status” and that this dictates how the scene should or will play out. This is an oversimplification and another detriment to actual compelling work. The model is predictable, is described in predictable terms, and makes for predictable work (*E.g.* 4).

In reality people don’t think of themselves in terms of “high” and “low” status. Sure when you interact with your boss or family there are, perhaps, certain ways your behavior is restricted but you don’t actually think of yourself as “greater” or “less”. This idea is another comfortable trap that is easy to explain when learning improv but over time breeds complacency and acquiescence. Making for either boring scenes, compromising scenes, or both. All characters are

equal. It is more interesting and more fun when they are presented as such (*E.g.* 5).

*E.g. 4*

A: Son, you're home late.  
B: Sorry, Mom. I lost track of time.  
A: You're grounded.  
B: (pleading) But the dance!?!?  
A: I'm sorry son, you've forced my hand.

*E.g. 5*

A: Sweetheart, you're home late.  
B: Fuck off, Dad.  
A: Jesus, Mary, and Joseph, what's gotten into you!  
B: I'm 17 dad, I'm an adult, I don't need your fucking coddling and hovering anymore. That's all you've ever done, prevented me from—  
A: I've always just tried to protect you!  
B: Did I ever ask for that!? Did I!?

## The Implementation of No

“No” is a powerful tool. By saying “no” in a scene you put your character in contrast to someone or something and by definition become more clearly defined. “No” is the basis for conflict and, yes, for the novice improviser conflict can be problematic if not totally untenable (*E.g.* 6).

But for the practitioner with some experience, conflict (intrinsic to stories since their inception) is vital. Conflict with actual stakes can provide an incredible amount of information and typically builds to some kind of satisfying emotional crescendo. A break up, a firing, a betrayal to name a few are all lush opportunities for improv and comedy. Perhaps a conflict will escalate into violence. Pantomimed violence, long ruled out as dangerous for novice improvisers (with good reason) doesn't necessarily apply as performers become more competent. It is also derided as amateur, pulling out a gun being immortalized as a bad improv move in *The Office*. But the reality is that violence can be incredibly effective. When done safely, of course. It can provide much needed catharsis, and can occasionally provide justice to a

scene or situation; a corrupt cop getting comeuppance, a villain being brought low.

Sometimes saying “no” is the most effective way to actually “yes, and” but there is such a knee-jerk response people have when improvising it is rarer than it should be. Improv is about heightening and progressing, not straight-forward verbal agreement (E.g. 7).

That second scene is one that can be played, its rich with possibility. Or even more simply, let’s say someone initiates a fast food type scene, “Order 145!” and the other person picks something up and says something like, “*This isn’t what I ordered,*” that’s a scene that can go somewhere. Agreeing to the reality but NOT NECESSARILY agreeing with the perspective of your scene partner can make for fruitful improv.

“No” also provides protection against the unwanted and inappropriate. There is no need to say “yes” to everything. Some ideas are stupid and/or offensive. With this cultivated gut reaction to say “yes” exacerbated by the underlying culture of blind support there is a lot of pressure to say “yes” to whatever a scene partner puts forward (E.g. 8).

You do not need to do this. You have the option to say “no” to any scene, situation, or action that makes you uncomfortable. You have the right to be discerning about what you engage in. You do not have to pantomime a sex act, you do not have to be relegated to a degrading role, you do not have to be side lined or infantilized, you do not even have to be in a scene you don’t want to be. You fight back by explicitly or implicitly saying “no,” by tagging out or editing people when they are being jerks, by hitting them or pulling a gun (see above), or simply walking out of the scene. There is absolutely nothing wrong with these actions.

*E.g. 6*

A: You ate my cereal!  
B: Yeah, well you ate my Cheez-its!  
A: You owe me money for the cereal.  
B: Then you owe me money for my Cheez-its.  
A: You said I could have those.

*E.g. 7*

A: Put your hands up and open the register.  
B: OK.  
A: Thank you.  
B: You're welcome.  
*As opposed to:*  
A: Put your hands up and open the register.  
B: No.  
A: What'd you say?  
B: I said, "no." If you shoot me, my family will get my insurance money—double indemnity for an on-the-job accident.  
A: You got a death wish, piggly-wiggly?  
B: Naw, I got kids.

*E.g. 8*

Team: Can we get a suggestion of anything at all?  
Audience: Anal beads!  
Team: I heard anal beads!  
Team: (pantomimes shoving anal beads up each other's butts)  
*Or, more directly:*  
A: So we're starting the renovations in the bathroom then working toward the living room.  
B: Dennis, I think-  
A: Shut up. I'm doing the talking.  
B: (shuts up, starts miming)

Of course all scenes, situations, and shows are different and you shouldn't be a dick. But there's nothing wrong with conflict, nothing wrong with argument with emotion behind it, nothing wrong with calling out or not participating in something you don't like. And frequently these things make for good if not better improv.

## Offstage

The basic concepts of agreement and support cultivate a close community, which is great. There is a sense of inclusion which is real. Improv is a very cool singular artform which brings people together in a very unique and vulnerable way. There's a "we're all on the same team" feeling. But again this idea of blanket support becomes too ingrained and it can breed expectation, i.e. if we are all supporting each other why am I not a part of this project or that team? If we are all

supporting each other all the time why was I not included in or recognized for x, y, or z?

## The Unwarranted Sacrifice of Individuality

This is also seen with projects or teams. With inner workings of projects or teams, whether it's scheduling rehearsals, discussing form or artistic intent, "*yes, and*" manifests as bland acceptance. No one wants to bring up how much or how little the group should be rehearsing, no one wants to bring up deviating from expectations in regards to form or style, no one wants to ultimately proffer any kind of an opinion that might be construed as negative or counter to the prevailing viewpoint because that wouldn't be "supportive". This will typically lead to quiet (or not so quiet) resentment, passive aggression, and/or a sense of draining obligation. All out of some kind of misconstrued sense of the "group". People tend to silence their own perspectives, desires, goals for the "good of the group". There is this idea that the best improv ensemble is one that has one collective identity rather than an interesting combination of individuals. This may be true for a time, a matter of months a year tops, but eventually individuals must have direct participation in their creative endeavors or they will be unsatisfied. Dissatisfaction left for too long breeds resentment.

Sharing your personal thoughts and ideas about the artform, having those ideas heard and attempted, that is true collaboration. People think not liking this or that, wanting to try this or that, when the perceived "consensus" of a group is something different can be combative, can be negative. This couldn't be further from the truth. Discussion and argument aren't inherently negative. Especially in relation to creative output. Sometimes simply being able to freely and completely

say your piece forestalls the inevitable frustration that would develop had you not done so. Everyone's ideas about improv on any given team or group don't need to be actualized but they do need to be heard and understood. This is not combative, this is not negative, it is artistic collaboration.

Because of the “yes, and” mentality people in the improv community have the tendency to over commit. The instinctual reaction of saying “yes” applies when someone (anyone) asks you to participate in this or that project. I've had countless conversations where people will tell me about this or that thing they are working on where they feel “meh” about it, or at times even further where they feel it's a waste of time (they'll also typically be working on a project they really enjoy). This sense of supporting the group and the group being more important than the individual extends to the community at large so people say yes to everything, they find it incredibly difficult to say no.

## The Right To Be Judicious

As artists we must be discerning, especially the more experience we get, the more we refine our own voice, the more we understand what we really want to do. We must value our time and talent. Of course it is important to be open, to listen to potential projects and shows with an open mind, but it is detrimental we understand it is OK to say no. Unless we are healthy, artistically engaged individuals we can not function effectively as part of a project. When someone approaches you it's OK to ask them about the time commitment, OK to ask them to explain the concept in detail, OK to ask to read the script, OK to ask who is involved, take all that information into account and make a decision. It's important to be generous with your time but it is

more important to look after your own needs, desires, and aspirations first.

The positivity present in the improv community is a great thing but it is not utopic. It is not some categorically safe and wonderful place where there is unwavering and universal respect, a bastion for altruistic dreamers. It is still composed of humans. People can be kind, courageous, and fun but they can also be ignorant, manipulative, and suspect. Trust is an incredible and powerful thing but it has to be earned, it can not be blankety applied to the individuals of an entire subsection of performance. On stage as well as off you have the right to say no to any person or circumstance that is out of line. You have the right both on stage as well as off to call someone out for being a jerk or walk away from an uncomfortable situation. And these compromising situations may not even be deliberate but that makes it even more important to stand up and say no, literally or otherwise.

## Coda

It is implicit but I think it's worth saying directly this is all my opinion. Based on nine years observing and doing improv these are my own conclusions and conjectures. I love improv and the improv community. It's given me friends, opportunity, and artistic clarity. It's forgiven, nurtured, and guided me. But as a proud and grateful member and practitioner I recognized there are problems.

*"Yes, and"* is a great improv learning tool. Overtime it often degenerates into a passive amicability on stage and a go-along-to-get-along attitude offstage. This is detrimental to the work itself and the artistic lives of its practitioners. *"Yes, and"* is but a suggestion, not an ironclad commandment. It is OK to say *"no"* onstage, to follow conflict and emotion rather

than agreement. It is OK to say “*no*” offstage; every person has worth and value. It is good and noble to think of the “good of the group” but not at the cost of individual identity and wellbeing. Not at the cost of silence.



DAVID WARNER

# The Principle of Consistency in Chinese Improv

There is a classical painting in China called The Vinegar Tasters (嘗醋翁, chang cu weng) where three men are standing over a vat of vinegar, each touching a finger to his lips. One man wears a sour expression, another has a bitter expression and the third man has a serene, sweet expression. This symbolizes the three beliefs of China. Confucius saw life as sour, in need of rules to correct the shamelessness and immorality of people. Buddha saw life as bitter, full of pain and suffering. Lao Tzu saw life as intrinsically good and sweet, so long as it remained true to its nature. These three attitudes lead to three different types of behavior. And yes, this essay is about improv.

In 1934, Professor LaPiere of Stanford University traveled around America with a Chinese couple. They visited 251 hotels and restaurants and were turned down only once. After this, LaPiere mailed a survey to all of the businesses they visited with the question, “Will you accept members of the Chinese race in your establishment?” Of the 128

businesses that responded, 92% answered no. His conclusion was that attitudes are not always consistent with behavior.

In improv, if a performer's attitude is that realistic, believable scenes are inherently interesting to watch, that there's truth in comedy, we might expect the player to perform grounded, realistic scenes at the top of their intelligence. Their behavior should consistently follow their attitude. But as LaPiere proved, this is not always the case.

Having taught improvisation in Chinese since 2009, my experience is that behavior does not always follow attitude, particularly in Chinese improv. In fact, I believe behavior is highly influenced by socio-cultural norms. In China, this includes the norms of Taoism, Buddhism, Confucianism and Mohism. Most specifically, Confucianism.

My experience with Chinese improvisation began when I was the creative director of Shanghai's first (English) improv group. With three fellow actors, we founded 宇宙即乐团 (yuzhou ji le tuan or JLT), the first Chinese-speaking group. My goal was to teach and perform long form improv in Chinese. I had originally moved to China in 2006 because I wanted to further study Taoism. I have since found that long form improv is a superbly practical method to observe 无为 (wu wei, "The Uncarved Block"), but that is a topic for another article.

In 2009, we quickly learned that almost no members of the Chinese audience had heard of improv. When we performed a good scene, the audience had trouble believing that it wasn't memorized. We opened our shows with short form games to demonstrate to the audience that what we were doing was truly unscripted. They still believed that we must have memorized parts and put rehearsed bits together on the fly to create a feasible whole.

This was not because we were amazing actors, though I like to believe that we had good group heart (the Chinese believe the mind is located in the heart). It was more likely because the Confucian system of education, which has consistently been the learning style from the Han Dynasty (206 BC) to the present day, sees creativity as a function of applied memorization.

Confucianism is based on three ideas: 礼 (li, ritual or virtue), 仁 (ren, goodness or benevolence) and 君子 (junzi, ethical standards). Confucius believed that order would result if everyone acted for the good of the clan. Elders were to be revered and obeyed without question. The harmony of the family took precedence over rights and considerations of the individual. There are many parallels here with a good improvisational team (with the possible exception of obeying elders).

The beliefs in China—an extremely homogeneous, pragmatic and collectivistic society—give rise to a great deal of social pressure to conform to those ideals. For the last 2000 years, all imperial examinations in China involved memorizing the Confucian texts. These attitudes about what harmony means have created a system where emotional expression is limited (to protect the group), where communication is circular rather than direct (to protect the group) and where passive acceptance is preferred to proactive questioning (to protect the group).

For example, free word association is not a common concept in China. When teaching improvisation in Chinese, I start by discussing simple opposites, such as tall/short, happy/sad, rich/poor, etc. Then after a while, I ask: What is the opposite of cat? Often the reply is “dog.” This leads to a discussion of complex opposites, where it must be stressed

again and again that there is no “wrong” answer. China is a country where wrong answers cause a loss of face. The idea that there is no “wrong” answer is antithetical to the Confucian belief that it is only proper to answer when you know what is expected. Particularly to anyone in a position of authority.

As I continued to run JLT through the years and moved the group towards long form games, focusing on the Harold, I discovered an even more intriguing fact. With no history of improvisation in China and a highly-censored media, there was no sense, from the actors or audience, of what improvisation “should” look like.

Without a frame of reference, without Second City or *Saturday Night Live*, *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* or UCB, the scenes that developed were odd, veering towards tragic soap opera with comedy arising from wordplay, slapstick, vaudeville and other elements of Chinese 相声 (xiang sheng or “cross-talk,” similar to Abbot and Costello, Laurel and Hardy). Without a preconceived notion of what improvisation “should” look like, it took on its own unique cultural character.

This brings us back to the principle of consistency. The best actors in China and the best theaters are known for realistic acting. I therefore expected the people who I chose to be in the group to perform realistically. Especially when that’s what our rehearsals focused on the most.

However, even after much instruction in Viola Spolin’s techniques, the players uniformly acted in a highly-exaggerated manner. They offered little to no criticism of their fellow players. They were uncomfortable expressing emotions and, when they did, the emotions were also comically overstated. Their behavior did not reflect their

attitudes about what they felt constituted “good” theater. But it did reflect the Confucian ideals of emotional passivity, circular communication and problem acceptance. These attitudes protected the group from experiencing dangerous vulnerabilities (a word which cannot be translated in Chinese without expressing weakness).

Our attitudes help us communicate who we are; help us to assert our individual identities. This is the ego-expressive function of attitudes. However, there is also the adaptive function of attitudes, which says that when someone holds a socially acceptable attitude, other people will reward them with approval. The group could not step towards their fear and explored few twisting paths.

I am happy to say that, over the years, I have developed new techniques and strategies for improving emotional expression, direct communication, and exploring the (often humorous) ideas that arise from reasonable justifications in Chinese improvisation. There is still much ground to cover to remove some of the Confucian influences that inhibit open and free improvisation. But, we claim progress over perfection and aim to seek the Tao, transforming objects, relationships and, fundamentally, ourselves.

Since 2009, we have run numerous workshops and classes in Chinese and performed in festivals throughout China. One of the original members of JLT went on to found China’s largest short-form improv group, where I also served as creative director. JLT finally disbanded in 2017 when our key players were hired to be the first-ever improv-trained actors on television, in a facsimile of *SNL* called 金夜百乐门 (jin ye bai le men or “*The Golden Night of One Hundred Happinesses*”) which is currently one of the highest-rated shows in China. I have started a new Chinese long form group called 黄瓜南路

(huang gua nan lu, “North Cucumber Street”) using the Chinese-inspired improvisational philosophy of 素颜 (su yan, “The Unpainted Face”).

Teaching improv in China has shown that there may not be consistency between attitudes and behavior, but when people meet to accept the present moment, to support each other, to follow the follower (a highly non-Confucian mindset) and to be part of a whole, there can be lovely results. There is a beauty in the People’s Democratic Dictatorship, a joy that doesn’t require rebellion or dissent, but only mutual trust and exploration. And that has proved to be consistent.

JONALD JUDE REYES

# Your One-Person Show

## THE BRAINSTORMING SESSION

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 storytelling; 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. Being 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!





MIKE BRUNLEIB

# An Essay

## (HAVING SOMETHING TO DO WITH VIOLA SPOLIN)

Hello, Hambook readers! My name is Mike Brunlieb. I'm an improviser in Chicago, and I want to write to you a little bit about Viola Spolin and the role of intuition in our art.

Who is Viola Spolin? There's a great bio on her website.<sup>43</sup> Viola Spolin is not alive any more, she died in 1994, but while she was still alive she wrote a book called *Improvisation for the Theater*<sup>44</sup>. In that book she talks about her philosophy and approach to improvisation and theater, and maps out a lot of "theater games," which we in Chicago today would probably call "improv exercises."

Her book describes her pedagogy, her thoughts on creativity, non-hierarchical ways of working, improvisation, spontaneity, intuition and art. It's an awesome book!

It is also a challenging book. Both in terms of the density of the writing and the radical way of working that it points towards. I come back to the book every few years and re-read bits and pieces and no baloney, every time I do, some section

that I never understood before suddenly has clarified itself in the time between. It's a book that grows with you.

If you are interested in trying the games, just do them. Don't worry about understanding them first, or trying to know what the point is. Lots of the games, when read, are kinda hard to imagine what the hell they are. If you're curious about trying them, the advice I was given was just to get some people together, read the games out of the book aloud, and do them. Don't worry if you feel like you don't know what you're doing; you'll figure it out.

When I first encountered the book and its games, I really struggled understanding and getting into it until I went to a week-long intensive in Wisconsin led by a woman named Aretha Sills (Viola's granddaughter, and an awesome workshop leader) and got to play some of the games instead of just reading them. As of writing this, Aretha is leading one of these workshops in Chicago in May! The non-hierarchical way of working that Spolin advocates for is challenging, and for some people (like me), require adjusting our frame of mind. I spent the first half of my first intensive week frustrated because I didn't know if I was doing anything right, and the workshop leader wasn't telling me if I was doing a good or a bad job. At some point it clicked that I wasn't going to be getting that kind of praise or correction that I was used to getting, and realized that it was my job just to play the games, not to please the teacher. I just bring this up to say that if you get frustrated and feel adrift in this work, at least in one other person's case, that was a part of the process. OK; that's my Spolin sales pitch! Now let's get into intuition!

Right in the stinky little heart of improvisation and Spolin's book are questions about intuition. These are questions that I think are still very alive for us in Chicago

right now. Why do we care about intuition as improvisers? How does the intuitive way of knowing relate to other ways of knowing? What does it look like and feel like to be in touch with your intuition on stage? What do we mean when we use the word intuition in this context?

I find intuition to be a really tough thing to describe. Gut, impulse, instinct, are words that I think of. I think of it as a sort of sense that you have of a situation that you maybe cannot explain why you have it. Paul Sills describes intuition this way: “the direct knowing of something without the conscious use of reasoning. It is a way of knowing other than intellectual knowing.” Viola describes the feeling of direct contact with the intuition: “all of us have known moments when the right answer *‘just came’* or we did *‘exactly the right thing without thinking’*.” How does that fit in with our practice as improvisers? I imagine that we all at some time have experienced the feeling of improv being easy: you are out of your own way, out of your head, things are somehow simple and surprising. Things are just happening, as if on their own. It often gets described like, “*I wasn’t thinking, I was just doing stuff.*” This to me feels like a sweet spot for improvisation, and also, what a weird thing! What is that??

There is a Spolin mirror game where two players are coached to trade off initiating movement and reflecting movement until eventually players are coached: “*On your own! Follow the follower!*” Neither player initiates; both reflect. When the game is working, there is this wild sensation of things happening, but neither player being in control of it. How are things happening if neither of us are choosing consciously to do them?? The motion is somehow coming from the space in between the players.

Side by side with intuition, or a kind of non-intellectual *knowing*, is something like “reason.” Paul Sills draws our attention to Greek mythology:

Ceres wandered the world searching for her daughter, Persephone, carrying two torches: Reason and Intuition. The intuitive way of knowing is neglected in our education in favor of reason (intellect). And yet what we prize—love, faith, art, and insightful knowledge—all reach beyond the intellect and depend on intuitive knowing.

To connect this with our practice: reason or intellect feel like our use of structure, form, rules, logic, organization. The sensation of being *in one's head* during performance is in relation to this way of knowing. We hesitate to act because we aren't sure if what we're about to do is correct according to the rules of the particular form or artistic convention. On the other hand, reason plays a crucial role for the improviser-artist; it is the faculty that finds a frame and a shape for the primordial impulses of the intuition. Without the mediation of reason, our intuition is unformed.

I hear that duality echoed and expanded in Friedrich Nietzsche's *The Birth of Tragedy*,<sup>45</sup> where he talks about two contrasting artistic elements, which he calls the *Apollonian* (from Apollo, God of Knowledge & Order) and the *Dionysian* (from Dionysis, God of Going Wild & Nasty). The Apollonian element was represented in plastic art—think of beautiful, proportional sculptures and columns, while the Dionysian element was represented in wild, drunken parties and music that brings people to bacchic ecstasy. The Dionysian experience was an experience of return to primordial unity and a profound and terrifying feeling of

undifferentiated oneness with the world. The Apollonian represented differentiation, labeling, and individuation. Nietzsche claims that there was one particular period of Greek tragedy that was the best art ever, because it represented the perfect marriage of these two energies. The awesome horrors of the Dionysian element were given beautiful shape by the reason and proportion of the Apollonian element. So that lasted for a little while, and then apparently the Apollonian element got too strong, and the tragedies got sort of staid, naturalistic, reasonable and boring. The Greeks backed away from the wild and vicious Dionysian recognition of human suffering, and sorta lost their edge, man. For Nietzsche there needed to be a living tension of these two elements in order for the art to really get hot.

I wonder if there is room for us as improvisers to have a fuller relationship to our intuition.

Every so often you'll see a show or performance that has a *spark*. Something about it is alive and kicking in a way that lots of performance that we see isn't. My first experience that I distinctly recall as being in this category (though I'm sure I saw plenty of others before that) was at the Upstairs Gallery. It was almost certainly some garbage improv show where everyone was being very naughty and bad. But it felt dangerous and unpredictable, like the rules and conventions that we had been taught that were VERY IMPORTANT in order to do improv the *right* way were being de-powered. Suddenly there was a feeling of radical freedom and possibility in the room, like we were free to do what we were moved to do, rather than what we were supposed to do. I also think about the improviser and actor Rebecca Krasny, who is a player with very direct access to her intuition. Whatever that experience of the spark is, it happens during a lot of

Rebecca's performances, which are frequently truly wild and truly out of control. The whole audience sits up and is suddenly there in the room with her. There is a shared feeling that no one, least of all Krasny, knows what is about to happen. In that way it feels like *true* improvisation. I think a part of that feeling of spark and life on stage is the experience of freed intuition. There is very little intervening distance between the inspiration and the expression, and that is thrilling.

In improvisation, our entire creative process is so public, and because of that, our art form has a special relationship with the tension between these elements of intuition and reason. Our moment of inspiration is on full display. The vulnerability of that creative moment constantly tempts us to wrap ourselves in more and more rules, notes, conventions, formal guidelines, things to remember and obey, so that we might have as our focus the following or not-following of directives instead of being in actual direct contact with ourselves and our own expression.

Viola describes one barrier to free self-expression as "approval/disapproval syndrome." It's the very-familiar phenomenon of wanting to please (or avoid displeasing) an authority figure. Instead of being in direct contact with your environment and your self, your experience is mediated through this other person. Viola says, "We become so enmeshed with the tenuous threads of approval/disapproval that we are creatively paralyzed. We see with others' eyes and smell with others' noses." The theater artist and director Anne Bogart has a similar thought in her book *And Then You Act*.<sup>46</sup>

I have found that the word "want" is often misused in the American theater environment. This simple word

has created an unnecessary hierarchy. How often do you hear a director say, “Now I want you to move stage left,” or an actor says, “Is this what you want?” This small word has already, just by irresponsible use, set up a parent-child dynamic in the rehearsal hall. Is a rehearsal about doing what the director wants? ... What would happen if we spoke differently to one another? Will the hegemonic system in a rehearsal room change? Is a director’s job simply to know what he or she wants? And is an actor’s job to do what the director wants? Is the actor’s job to please the director? I do not believe this to be necessarily true. A rehearsal can be a mutual attempt to find something for which neither party has any easy answer. The actor’s job in the rehearsal room can be to articulate rather than to please. Let us examine the way we speak in the creative process. What are the words that will engender a collaborative, nonhierarchical, creative environment?

These hierarchies emerge sometimes almost by accident. Despite our intentions otherwise, we find ourselves repeating the same imbalanced hierarchical relationship of teacher to student, even though it is often destructive of freedom and creativity. We model a lot of these relationships from the world outside the rehearsal space, mimicking the relation of sports coach to players, or boss to employee, parent to child. Viola’s claim is that when we are able to purge some of those unbalanced relationships from the rehearsal room that all players have more opportunity to self-express. They are less worried about pleasing the coach or teacher or director, and can focus on playing the game/solving the problem in their own way. When all participants in the room are equal

## GIVE AND TAKE WARM-UP

**FOCUS:** on trying to move within the rules of the game.

- Players stand in a circle. One (any) player may *take*; start a movement, and when any player takes, all other players must *give*; hold their own movement, waiting to move. Any player can take (move) at any time, in the space of the circle, but must hold if another player starts a motion. Sounds may be considered taking.

**SIDE-COACHING:** *Hold when another player takes! Give! Take! Even the slightest movement takes it! Hold your movement—ready to continue the flow of your movement when the chance arises! Take! Give!*

**EVALUATION:** None.

## POINTS OF OBSERVATION

1. Even a beginning group can play this game successfully.
2. Players sensing another player taking are said to be giving.
3. The word "hold" is used instead of "freeze." "Freeze" is total stoppage; "hold" is waiting to move as soon as one can do so.

explorers of questions, as Bogart puts it, "for which neither party has an easy answer," then we are finally entering into the unknown together.

I have found the Spolin game *Give and Take Warmup* (see next page, apologies for my homemade scan<sup>47</sup>) to especially give a heightened experience of the intuition. It, like all the rest of her games, bring us into a different mode of relating with one another.

This game in particular illustrates Viola's careful and economical language and minimal rules. I am so blown away when I watch this game played and see the richness and variety of performance that comes out of it. One person does something and keeps doing it until someone else starts to do something and then the first person stops until they feel moved to start doing something again.

That's it. Within this simple framework, you see natural rhythms and patterns and conversations emerge. A sound or a gesture or a word or a relation moves and transforms



through the circle. It emerges, disappears, and reemerges in the easiest, most natural way. Having watched that game played over a few years with different groups, it isn't hard to imagine where an idea like the Harold might have come from. When several years ago I got to work with a wonderful group of improvisers to try to develop that game into a piece for public performance, it also revealed some of the problems with trying to codify things that were arrived at through free play. In the Harold, you often see groups pursue things hesitantly, or compulsively. It's easy to imagine an alternate history where people played the Give & Take Game (or some similar game) a bunch of times, and were like, *"Here are the very cool things that are happening when we play this game—let's make those things the rules, and then it will be very good every time."* But what that seems to miss is the agency and freedom of the players to PLAY and discover those things, which might have been the real pleasure of it all along.

Closing this puppy out here, I think the intuitive aspect of our creative process has space to be heightened. In our work in the rehearsal room and on stage, if we are able to move closer to an environment of equality between individuals, closer to an environment free from compulsion, where we find ourselves doing things because we are *moved to do them*, rather than because we are *supposed to do them*, we may find that our intuitive selves emerge and flourish. It's at least worth a try!

Lastly, I want to give some recommendations of sections to check out if you're curious about the book. It's a pretty meaty little sucker, especially compared to other books about improvisation. Paul Sills' introduction and both of Spolin's prefaces are beautiful and very short. Each are just a couple

pages long. Chapter 1: “Creative Experience” (15 pages long) lays out the tenets of Viola’s thoughts on creativity and theater. Chapter 2: “Workshop Procedures” (~30 pages long) is a great resource for teachers and coaches, dealing with the challenge of fostering a space where players feel free to explore and play.

Alright! Thanks for reading!! See you around!

# Various Authors on Introductions

**When** does the show start?

**Does** it begin after the suggestion is taken, when the performers begin to improvise?

**Does** it begin just before the suggestion is given, with the entire team standing energetically on stage?

**Should** that team stand energetically? Lethargically? Neutrally?

**Should** we ask for a suggestion “of anything at all,” or something more interesting?

**What** makes a suggestion interesting?

**Does** the show begin when the lights go down and the music blasts?

**Does** the audience need to know anything before they watch the show?

**Do** they need to feel anything?

**Who** is responsible for convey everything to the audience?

The Hambook asked for short essays on the topic of introductions. **Here's what we got.**

## DILLON CASSIDY

Have you ever had to ask for directions before, but no one you asked seemed particularly interested in helping you, or seemed to know much about where you're going? To me, this is very similar to attending an improv show. No audience member knows what exactly is going to happen, and the audience is just looking for a little bit of direction. They know the destination: entertained. They just need someone to provide them with the directions.

I've hosted some several hundred improv shows by now, and I truly believe that a good host can make a good set great, and bad set forgivable. I watch a lot of shows. I watch a lot of shows with bad hosts, and a handful of shows with good hosts. I think a good host does the following: sets the audience at ease, provides the necessary 'information,' and most importantly is excited to watch and enjoy the show they're hosting.

Set the audience at ease. This is a piece of advice I got a long time ago from one of the guys of Cook County, I can't remember which anymore, but it's always stuck with me. "Take care of the audience at the top of your show, and they'll take care of the rest of your show." As the host, you are the collective first impression of the show. This first impressions is universal, it is going to affect both veteran improvisors and layman's opinion of the show. Provide them a taste of what they're looking for, show them how fun this show is. Validate their decision to be here instead of at home watching *King of the Hill*.

Provide the "information." What does the evening's roadmap look like? Who else is playing and why do they matter to the audience member thinking, "I only came to see

my friend Karen, who is playing with her improv group ‘Porn on the Cob.’” Is there an intermission?

Enjoy the show. If you are hosting a show that you don’t enjoy, stop. Don’t do it. Get anyone else to do it. If you can’t enjoy this show, the audience won’t. If you don’t like hosting, don’t do it. I love hosting. I live for it. I don’t think I’ve ever had a bad show I hosted (that isn’t true, but I think the hit rate is markedly higher). I just don’t know what I see so many people half-assedly hosting a show that they claim to be passionate about. Right now, I want you, reader, to stop and think of the last person you met that was disinterested or bored with you. You probably can’t remember them. I can’t. I truly think one person making an effort to enjoy a show can change the whole tune of the show.

Lastly, I’m gonna get a little weird here. Improv is a shared experience. We need the audience as much as they need us.

Something I always try to emphasize is that if the audience shows support and love to the team, they’re going to have a good show. It’s reciprocal. “The Crowd is a place of love and support, so let’s show a lot of it to.....!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!”

## JONAH COOPER

I've participated in a number of conversations recently about the role that a host plays in an improv show. The consensus seems to be that the role of a host has a much bigger impact on our shows than we often realize. Weird, low energy hosting often leads to weird, low energy sets. The host establishes the audience's expectations for the show and then the audience looks to the improv to validate their expectations. After an engaging, high energy introduction, the audience reacts to the first scene with more energy, laughing a little louder than they otherwise would have. That momentum then carries throughout the show. We could all stand to devote a little more attention to our hosting, and our teams and the other teams in our shows will thank us.

With that in mind, what should the host say to introduce an improv show? Personally I'm skeptical of anyone who says there is one hard and true way to do it. I think the correct answer is going to vary a lot from show to show, based on both the type of show and the type of audience it attracts.

Are you playing towards a more general audience? Are they tourists and others who are very likely seeing improv for the very first time? Great! You would probably benefit from explaining to the audience (briefly, PLEASE) what improv is and what they can expect.

Are you playing (like most of us do, more often than not) for an audience of improv students and performers? This is also great! You don't need to explain to the audience what improv is. They get it! They want the show to start! Keep your intro short and sweet, and maybe throw a bit or two in there for good measure.

One thing that I've seen hosts do that I really don't think is ever called for is to explain their form to an audience. A general audience doesn't need to understand how a Harold is structured to appreciate Revolver. Explaining a form to a general audience is like having a magician give a lecture on how his trick is going to work before he performs it. As an improviser, when I see someone explaining their form at the top of the show, I often assume the worst; that this improviser is doing so because they don't have faith that the form will speak for itself. I see this most often when a form calls for the improvisers to do something 'silly' and it's clear not everyone is on board.

I want to end with a more general thought. As an art form, improv is still in its infancy. If we kept painting the way we always had then we'd still be painting deer on cave walls. Art can and should grow and change from generation to generation and as an art form, improv is capable of changing faster than most. Let's embrace new styles, and new ways of thinking. Let's innovate, and push the boundaries and fail and have fun and perform in ways we can be proud of. We are all students and we are all pioneers and the world is falling apart around us but at least we can get on stage and make people laugh.

## MARY CAIT WALTHALL

Hi, welcome to the Improvisation Theater, home of The Improvisation! How many of you have seen The Improvisation before? Great! That's what we're going to be doing tonight! The Improvisation is the art of trying to be OK with not knowing what's going to happen next. You're all doing it right now! We all are, all the time! But you need special Training in order to be allowed to do it up here, where I'm standing.

[Lighting change, hopefully blue, or maybe red, yes, tell the person in the booth that you need a Red Wash for this part.]

You pay for this Training because it is Fun, and you hope you will be allowed to do The Improvisation on Stage. You love The Improvisation. You love the People you meet doing The Improvisation. The Improvisation becomes Your Life. You Need It. You would do It for Free. You would Pay for It. You WILL PAY for It.

[Normal lighting. What is this called? Full Wash?]

So! Everyone you see up Here Tonight is a Volunteer! We are all volunteering to promote the practice of The Improvisation, which we all love and to which have dedicated hours and hours and years and years. Because Community. Because "FRANDZ." Most of our friends and lovers are Practitioners of The Improvisation. Practitioners of The Improvisation are frequently Volunteers for a for-profit Institution. In fact, we are usually the most frequent Customers of the Institutions we support! WE LOVE IT SO MUCH.



We hope you love it, too. But if you don't, we don't care. We will probably blame you, say you were a "Weird Audience." And then we will buy more Drinks, pay more money to this Institution. WHY. Oh why? WHYYYY???

[Now that Blue Wash I was talking about before.]

Do we believe that Friendship is worth more than Art? Is that Wrong? Are our Friendships standing in the way of making Great Art? Should we only play for Each Other? Is it Fair to make the General Public pay to watch us Hang Out with our FRANDZ?

Does Money enhance or inhibit Art? If we are, indeed, Volunteers or Customers and not Employees, why don't we feel more Free to create what we Want?

[FULL WASH. As bright as possible. Painful on the eyes.]

Now please, let's get a Slow Clap going for Little Tiny Butt Daddieszsz!!!!!!!!!!

## JORIN GARGUILO

An invocation of the feeling and tone of what an audience is about to consume is substantially more important than the specific information delivered within the introduction of a show.

The most effective beginning to an evening manifests as a mirror of the oncoming work. The audience serves as the focus of the style of communication that will be on display. The hope is to open a channel so that observers may intuit how people will interact with one another. The moment is about establishing a connection, a tone of fun, and a sense of spontaneity and playful honesty.

Some element of sharing logistics may help that interaction. Knowing things about the space or the work is great if it helps people feel comfortable and ready-to-go. It's not so great if it is artificial or presumes that the assembled are not naturally equipped to engage new modes of experience.

People will get it, or will fill in the corners and figure out the details. We ought to put them in a position to be engaged, relaxed, and excited to participate in absorbing and living the show.

*Hello! Hi there! How are you?!*

...

*OK, good deal. Yeah, me too. Good to hear we're all  
feeeeeeeeling pretty good. I have high hopes for the  
evening.*

*High hopes. In-deed.*

*And the personal experience with these teams on the docket  
to back those high hopes up with an appropriate body  
of empirical evidence.*

*You! Will! Be! Seeing!*

*(Here at the CIC Theater Saturday night showcase, that's where we are and what's happening, in case this all was an overwhelming flood or someone brought you here without filling you in on the reality of the situation...)*

*GLAC! Majority Rules!, and finally: The Mall!*

*We'll have a brief intermission in between the middle and final teams, and you can conduct yourself then back that way to the bar if you so desire or require.*

*Or, if you need to relieve yourself of your wasteful poisons, take a right and visit either of the bathrooms, disregarding the gender assignments, they're both single occupancy, and really you'll help yourself better deal with the way the world is moving if you can detach hard-and-fast gender rules from your consciousness.*

*But! Without further ado, please welcome to the stage:  
GLAC!!!*

## LAUREN MORRIS

The buzz of excitement is in the air as you are about to get on stage. You get out there and... get one word? This could lead to a let down for the audience. Assuming we are long form performers, we have mere moments to make an impression on our audience and invite them along the journey of process and product. No introduction about what they will experience, no welcome and thank you from the team and only asking for that one word can invite your audience to “prove” that this isn’t a waste of their time versus a prepared audience looking forward to what you are going to create together.

The improv introduction is as much an art form as the performance itself. Your audience is the other member of your team and having their back is important. Understanding, appreciating and acknowledging the audience sets the tone and creates a lasting image for improv. Too many times, I have watched shows where a team hits the stage and gets the obligatory word and moves on. Your audience deserves more!

Having introduced long form improv to a community that had no idea what those words even mean, I have found success and failure in our approaches but have always focused on taking care of the audience.

Audiences want us to succeed and have a good time. The opening should be honed and polished. You can do this by practicing your opening! Yes, practicing! We used to get on stage and over-explain what improv was and what it was not. It both confused the audience and destroyed the energy of the room.

Give important details to the audience. Details like the name of your team, the type of form you use if your

audience understands the concept of forms, and getting the right suggestion. If you are a team that just likes to use one word suggestions, please don't just say, "*we need a word.*" Invite them to become part of the process and in fact for the next thirty minutes, part of the team. This sets up your audience to be on your side! Be energetic when you hit the stage, thank your audience for being there and remember that performing is an honor, so treat it as such!

Personally I like, "*we need a line of poetry or lyric from a song,*" for suggestions. I feel it provides an opportunity for players to hear something different while sparking ideas, feelings, and connections quickly since there are several words or phrases to deconstruct or associate with thus pushing our exploration and creativity.

If it's an object or location we need to get then set the audience up for success. Try using a prompt or give enough of a detailed question that the response won't be that weird, awkward pause as their mind goes into panic mode and they struggle to find a single word. Here is one way to approach the introduction:

*Hello everyone! We are so glad you have joined us tonight! We are (team name). For those of you experiencing improv for the very first time, we do not use props, costumes, sets, or scripts. Everything you see here tonight is made up and it will be the first and last time this performance takes place! For us to get started, we need your help. Can we please have a line of poetry or a lyric from a song?*

Audience answers.

You repeat the suggestion and say, "*THANK YOU!*"

Thanking the audience is super simple and a big deal. In fact, improv is a big deal! Remember this; put your best foot forward every time you perform and that includes the

introduction. Simple tweaks and adjustments during your introduction can make the entire improv experience magical and you get to leave the stage feeling invincible!

On  
Necessary  
Encouragement





LIZ FITZGERALD

## lol that was bad

okay so i started doing improv when i was 26 and now i'm 30. i don't mention age to be like... a thing. it's just to show the passage of time, like when a woman gets bangs in a movie.

so when i was 28, i remember how i improvised. i was super bold and loud and i would embarrass myself all the goddamn time. but then sometimes things would click and all be great and yada we know how improv works.

but like... am i bad now?

i mean i'm not but something keeps happening to me.

okay so it's not happening "to me" so much as i'm the one "making it happen" but enough semantics, let's get into it.

the other night i saw someone that really intimidates me in the audience of a show, someone who i think is an incredibly talented improviser, someone who literally does not know me, and someone who is a man. i feel like mayyyyyybe two years ago this person said "good show" to me and welp, i've been hanging onto that compliment for give or take 24 months.

so yeah i saw this guy and i literally stopped improvising. i walked to the back wall and did not speak in great fear that he would not approve of me.

and if this hasn't happened to you (bc it's happened to me like three times in the last month with three different people), i've included a guide below so you can hop right into my shoes, which in case you haven't seen me around are usually very cute ankle booties.

- step 1. see someone. anyone. a peer. an authority. a server. a student. anyone.
- step 2. acknowledge this person as male (daddy issues) & award him king of your feelings.
- step 3. decide that it doesn't matter what happens in the show, as long as daddy oops i mean this person approves of your performance and says good job liz, consider it to be a great success.
- step 4. (daddy?) enter a scene.
- step 5. don't improvise at all, not even an ounce. adhere yourself to the back wall and definitely hold onto a chair. stay frozen as part of your master strategy to get approval from the wrong people in the wrong ways.
- step 6. repeat!

now, did i recently explain this phenomenon to a woman i paid to both heal and clear my energy? yes, yes i did.

she said i was dimming my light and i venmo'ed her an amount of money i would rather not say out loud. (my energy feels eerily similar to how it did before... but after the session a dear friend asked me if i got a haircut so it's safe to say a shift happened somewhere.)

okay but like... she's right. i am dimming my light. i am literally creating a world in which i am afraid to be great because a few years ago someone thought i was good and now i've convinced myself that i can never be less than excellent.

my fear of doing poorly is rapidly eclipsing my ability to do anything at all. i've wisely determined that if i can't achieve the level of my BeSt ~SCENE~ EVER, it's not worth it (!!)

lest the PEOPLE of the GREATER CHICAGO IMPROV COMMUNITY will shout via text, "eh she's not that good of an improviser??? not trying to be petty but like, why do people like her??? she's not that talented???"

and i find that there is a sort of pressure out there to not admit all of this but dude. am i supposed to say that people don't intimidate me? that's ridiculous. they do. motherfucking constantly. and i react, most times and especially the \*longer\* i improvise, verrrry unhealthily.

i get very intimidated very easily and i make myself small so i don't fuck up in front of people i respect.

and look. i very much don't want to be doing that.

but i am. and according to my therapist heidi, who i'm sure doesn't approve of my infidelity with the aforementioned energy healer... it all works the opposite way of how i want it to work.

i actually do become worse. in fact, i dim my light so much and so often that one day, and i'm sure of it... it's gonna go out entirely.

this is the part where i'm supposed to say but i'm not gonna let that happen, and listen i hope i don't. i hope i don't lose my ability to perform or be funny or write or whatever. but i might if i keep swimming around in my obsessions, because one day i'll tire and drown.

*Liz Fitzgerald*

it's a special thing to me, to improvise. to have fun and to  
laugh and to make other people laugh. to move around like a  
kid and be joyful and try.

and right before the lights come back on, right after it's  
over, to find someone's hand in the dark.

so we'll see.

CONNIE OSHANA

# The Dichotomy of Total Control and Going with Your Gut

I am a chicken. My biggest fear is riding on a roller coaster with loops. I know it is against physics to fall out of an unseatbelted car, but I'm convinced I am the exception. I have "Ride On A Roller Coaster With Loops" on my bucket list, but I'm certain I'll never cross it off. I'm a tight ass, but the possibility of surrendering to my fear appeals to me, so it's still on the list waiting for a line to pass right through it. If there's one piece of advice I begrudgingly apply from misogynist Del Close, it's the one written in every copy of *Truth In Comedy*. It's the quote instructors used ceaselessly when we first learned how to improvise: "follow the fear." Other platitudes are applicable: "Fall and figure out what to do on the way down." "When you fall off of a cliff, you'll always feel exhausted, but you'll always be proud." I have notebooks filled with these foreboding life or death cliff-falling scenarios. I understand it's corny and unrealistic to

devote my life to inspirational sayings, but objectively chasing this attitude has helped my scene work. I'm still no expert, but on nights when I have good shows, it's because I allow myself to lose a bit of control. I follow my gut instincts. I pay attention to my partners, chase my curiosities/inspiration, react honestly, and edit whenever the fuck I please.

I still get nervous before shows. My first instinct is to flee. My mind sits in the car at the top of the hill ready for everyone to witness my death. Any performer who says they don't get nervous and that there's nothing to be afraid of is lying, but I still want to have their fake sense of bravery. I also want to be liked. I am intimidated by a lot of my peers and respect their opinions. Audiences are often filled with well-revered performers in the community (who are mostly white and that's a problem), agents, comedy writers, family members, and judgy friends. The stakes are high to put on a quality show worthy of 20 minutes of their time. When my team *The Dark Web* plays Saturday night shows, I do everything in my power not to nervously poo in our communal 501(c)(3) non-profit performance space. A few of my teammates even silently retreat to their own corners of the green room to release a few loose booty belches. Buy me a drink and I'll name their names. Instead of exploring a cavernous well of words I can use instead of "fart," I will go back to my point. The way I handle nerves is by feeling the nervous energy in my gut, applying that energy to any emotion, and then allowing that to shape a character.

It's difficult to describe a scene in a show where I have let myself run wild, Dionysian, and free like Stevie Nicks waving her shawl out an Oldsmobile Vista-Cruiser's passenger side window: fresh and confident after doing rails of coke off of a mustachioed roadie's nasty-ass elongated pinky nail. It's

difficult because it's easy to forget shows, and it also feels dishonest cerebrally explaining a fleeting moment of ultimate waywardness by taking apart that lawlessness and analyzing it step-by-step. It might be Imposter Syndrome, but it also feels gross saying, "Here's a time I did it right." For the purposes of what I'm trying to encourage in this essay, I'll do my best. Just act on impulses. The worst thing is not acting on any impulses at all and dreaming of possibilities on the sidelines.

An example of a time where I let my nervousness charge me into Bald Britney territory, *The Dark Web* had our first show. For a majority of the show, I played out of my body, completely stupefied and nervously charged on the side. When I was actually in scenes, I was so nervous, I had trouble forming sentences. I told myself I *had* to be in the show—no excuses. Then my teammate Roneesh and I were in a scene where we were two soft-spoken new age women working at a spa. We were specifically located in a Ylang-Ylang scented bathroom and his character revealed she was sleeping with an ex-boyfriend who recently dumped me. The second I heard this, my id fired up and I turned the nervousness in my actor gut into anger in my character's gut. Forgive me for explaining this cutely, as if I were undergoing some kind of mystical shape-shifting, as if I were suddenly sprouting hair and teeth like a London werewolf a-wooing in a Warren Zevon song. It's not simply choosing to be emotional, but actually feeling something, even if it is nervousness at first. This requires checking into your body mindfully. If I could demystify this, I'd say I took the nervous feeling and simply changed its name to anger and made myself believe it. The point was I made a decisive, reactive choice and didn't drop my shit.

In the scene, I reacted to Roneesh's words by slowly turning around to collect myself. Then I slowly turned back

around, almost shaking with controlled outrage, while carefully tearing down framed art on the walls. This is the “oh shit” moment. It’s relatable, because many of us have had our hearts broken at one point or another. It’s relatable because every human is expected to behave like an adult in moments of anguish, but the best part of improv is being able to do and say what wouldn’t be said or done in real life. The moment of disconnect is how my character chose to react to this heartbreak. The speed ramped up and I quickly started breaking everything in the store’s bathroom. Tiny bottles of essential oils were smashed, sage sticks were trampled by my feet, a mop was snapped in half over my knees. Roneesh helped a shit ton by adding fuel to the fire so I had more reasons to break things. Bedlam reigned in the bathroom and my actor brain was tickled by destroying everything. Every item damaged was a surprising discovery. You know how in spa bathrooms you wash your hands over a bed of black rocks or bamboo? I saw the rocks and just the act of seeing the rocks tickled me. The big takeaway is I didn’t let myself stop, no matter how ridiculous the situation started getting. The most unhinged thing was I even washed my hands angrily, pumping the soap dispenser with wild resentment. I angrily turned on the faucet. I angrily rubbed my hands together for a long fucking awkward time. I angrily turned off the faucet. I angrily pulled strips of paper towels out of a frustrating paper towel dispenser. William Woods coming into the scene as an interrupting janitor ready to clean up the bathroom was the cherry on top of the tension. Explaining this doesn’t really do the moment justice, but I think my chaotic moves worked because the moves were emotionally driven and I operated on instinct. I also took my time by exploring my environment. The mundane act of washing



hands became an absurd one when paired with an emotional reaction, especially after I had already broken everything in the bathroom. This scene wouldn't have worked as well if it was just a talking heads scene where I just talked about how angry I was with no charged emotion behind it.

Having a sense of control can exist in tandem with mischief. It's easy to feel like they are on completely opposite terrains. The straight man can never enter the state of the stooge and vice versa. I don't believe this. I don't believe in a stringent divide between cerebral performers and clowns, as if one has more artistic merit than the other and that there isn't the possibility of comfortably fitting in both categories. It's more like a spectrum, actually. *The Hambook* features a valuable dialogue between Scott Adsit and Jet Eveleth on restraining impulses to make clever jokes in scenes. More often than not, it is performers on the more cerebral end of the spectrum who are quick to make these clever quips. They're usually writers ready with a premise for their scenes. This tendency isn't reprehensible, but it does prevent a sense of spontaneity, emotional discovery, and forward momentum. The interview has valuable advice on not chasing after clever ideas for the sake of being humorous, but by allowing the humor of a scene to spring naturally from reactive emotional discoveries instead. Hamfisted cleverness comes from the panicked desperation of not hearing laughter and wanting to heimlich it out of people *Doubtfire*-style, polite chuckles projecting into the air like fake teeth and dislodged shrimp. Desperation supplied from a laughterless audience can kill a piece. There is nothing more agonizing than being in a group scene where nobody is latching on to any ideas because the audience isn't laughing and the team is desperately reaching for THE PERFECT HILARIOUS IDEA. Someone will introduce

something, another person will negate it and introduce something else, and the cycle continues. The audience is left confused and the actors are left scared to make any choice at all for fear they'll get denied.

It may seem counterintuitive as a comedian, but accepting that I'm not always hilarious has trained me to make moves that creatively propel a show forward instead of making sell-out jokes that force a few chuckles out of people. Trust that the audience isn't dumb and is watching in full support. This doesn't always work; sometimes audiences are full of smug white men who don't get it, and want their ambitions praised and their egos stroked (among other appendages). Most of the time, though, people are forgiving. Even when the audience does laugh, there is merit in re-focusing and reinvesting in commitment. I'm not saying play everything dramatically, like every scene needs to be a salacious courtroom drama where all your second cousins accidentally overdosed on the krokodil they found hidden in your aunt and uncle's garage, but playing with controlled, conscious commitment can supplement wild child instincts instead of working against them.

Now, this will go against everything I just said, but sometimes the fucking joke in your head is very hilarious and you should just say it. Every now and again, Stevie Nicks wants to emerge from the woods and peep her head from the wing of her fringed shawl and do several lines of coke regardless of the septal perforation she has from doing so much of it. Last week, a sub-coach encouraged us not to brandish guns in our show because it's a lazy improv move and the topic of gun violence carries a very heavy emotional weight on our society. Obviously I agree with this sentiment, but I still introduced a gun in my scene. It depended on

context. Here's the context: my teammate Paul and I were a couple trying to spice up our sex life by taking nude photos in a child's bedroom in an AirBnB. The bed we were on was one of those cars that are shaped like red corvettes. I found a glock in this child's box of musty 90's video games that presumably the child would never find because the gun was at the bottom of the box and the games suck so much the child would never care to get to the bottom of the box. My teammates and I laughed at the discovery of the gun because our sub-coach explicitly told us not to brandish guns in scenes. Still, I insisted on finding one. Introducing the gun itself wasn't funny, but introducing it was cathartic because I did what I was not supposed to do. As a result, we all laughed. I don't think wild instincts are an excuse to violate a teammate's space when they don't want to be touched. Nor are wild instincts an excuse to be racist, sexist, homophobic, transphobic, ableist, or politically incorrect in any context. However, in other cases, we don't always have to take ourselves seriously by following the rules or worrying that we are ruining scenes with our walk-ons. Politeness as an actor can get in the way of wildness.

Which brings me to the topic of editing. Everyone seems to be so fucking scared of editing a scene that isn't theirs out of politeness, or because they don't have the slightest clue what they want to initiate in the next scene. Go with your gut and edit when it feels like a scene has come to a natural end point. Don't let the double dutch ropes turn to steel.<sup>48</sup> If the fear is out of politeness, it's kinder to edit. It's ok to edit without a solid initiation in mind. It's preferable to edit after the previous scene has established a game, or, if it's a grounded scene, a who, what, where. It helps to edit on a laugh, but that's not always going to happen. It's not a

popular technique, to edit without a solid initiation, but it does keep the show energy alive and it allows more scenic threads to blossom. To help spark some creativity, scenes can be initiated based on the show suggestion, emotion, previously mentioned characters that haven't been seen yet, ideas pocketed from previous scenes, thematic elements, physicality. Everything is usable. Editing also provides relief for teammates who have endured playing in a scene for far too long. There is no expectation to be in the next scene after it's been edited; other teammates may come in with their own initiations. This doesn't happen a lot, but it should happen more often. I do notice that doing this can sometimes startle people and there can be a few moments of blank stage before a brave soul comes out. To prevent this, fellow teammates should be aware that there is a possibility of editing with no expectation of being in the next scene. When everyone goes in knowing this, people are usually on top of initiating right away. There is a great satisfaction to watching improv and seeing a scene where it is supposed to end. Let the scene have room to breathe, but also edit it at the right time so more can be unpacked later in the show. This is a great and precise way that all performers (but most especially cerebrally-driven performers) can use their natural inclination for control to provide opportunities for wildness to unfold as a groupmind. It's everyone's responsibility to pay attention, watch the show with an analytical mind, and help keep things moving or slow things down. The shows I see that move with brevity usually have more punk clout.

It seems as if everything I have described seems to be working against each other. There is a lot to be said about acting on impulse, but also acting with tact and precise control. All of these things need to work together to create a

solid overall show. It's important to go with one's gut and edit when it's appropriate to increase show energy, but it's also important to let scenes breathe and establish relationships to provide sufficient fodder for the show. It's important to let our characters emerge out of reckless abandon, but it's also important to be aware of when we are alienating our partners by acting outside of the realm of the established reality. It's important to watch our impulses when it comes to cracking jokes that take away from the overall focus of the show, but it's also important to not take ourselves too seriously and to fuck with rules every now and again. If I can provide any useful take-away, it's the encouragement to force your presence in shows, commit to characters, react emotionally, edit constantly, explore environment, and pay attention.



RAYNA CASKEY

# Dear Diane: Improv Slumps

“Dear Diane” is an advice column by Diane.

Diane is the manifestation of every character named Diane in every improv show ever performed. She’s your bubbly coworker, aggressive neighbor, favorite astronaut, and fun aunt. You are Diane and Diane is you. She is wise, she is fallible, she is funny, she is kind, she is strong. She has failed many many times. She’s here to answer your questions. This week she’s talking about improv slumps.

*Dear Diane,*

*It feels silly and selfish to write this down but lately I’ve felt lost in improv. I’ve had high highs and low lows and lots of fluctuations in between. But for months I’ve felt solidly in the middle. Not great, not bad; just fine (with maybe a lil tinge of bad).*

*I’m scared that this thing I love is actually a thing I love(d) and have been living in denial about it for a while.*

*Maybe I’m just being over the top, but I know I’m not having as much fun as I used to have. I feel like I’m in a slump and I don’t know*

*what to do about it. And saying that makes me feel ungrateful, whiny, and guilty. Do I take a break? Or recommit in a new way?*

*Sincerely,*

*Stranded*

*(PS: Big fan of all your walk-on and character work, Diane)*

## Dear Stranded,

Oh, the improv slump/funk/lull/plateau. Maybe it's a few bad shows, a stretch of off classes, or months of rehearsals and shows that don't quite do it for you.

First of all, everyone has experienced an improv funk or something like it. It can happen in lots of ways because it's a regular thing.

Second of all, you're not ungrateful or whiny or selfish to voice how you feel. I don't recommend fixating on the bad because you risk losing perspective. But it's important to express your feelings. You are saying something that's hard to say. Because of course improv can be fun. Like, the most fun. Like, the best high of your radiant life. And sometimes improv feels bad.

Sometimes improv feels bad. Sometimes improv feels bad. Sometimes improv feels bad.

It's worth repeating because it's a regular and normal thing that we often try to ignore. Or we talk about it for 45 minutes during notes at 11:30PM. Or we discuss it for 3 hours at tense improv rehearsal. It can feel bad for lots of different reasons. There's the bad where a teammate was being an unsupportive jerk. Or the bad where someone made you feel small or unsafe onstage. Or the bad where a scene alienated audiences. Or the bad where every scene where two women are onstage together a man chooses to do a walk on. Every. Single. Time.



But you're not asking about that kind of bad. Those things have potentially contributed to the slump you're experiencing (they have certainly contributed to my improv disillusion from time to time as a Diane). But you're talking about something a little different. You're asking about when improv doesn't feel good or fun like it used to feel.

## There is no there there

*or, Something an Acting Teacher Told Diane Once.*

Okay, my stranded friend; so improv doesn't feel as much fun to you anymore. You're afraid that you don't love improv the way you used to. It doesn't make you feel as good as it has in the past.

For me, Diane, I often feel like I'm chasing the fun all the other versions of Diane have experienced. The Diane who piloted the plane during a monoscene. The first time Diane had a satisfying out line. Every time Diane edited a scene at the perfect moment. The Diane who made a callback that tied the entire piece together so effortlessly and she didn't even realize it. It's easy for me, Diane, to try to run back to those things. But comparing today's Diane to another Diane is both confusing and not helpful. It's the same for you. Comparing yourself to yourself won't make you feel better or the slump go away.

You've changed. You've grown. Everything's always changing. But you're expecting improv to stay the same and guiding yourself directly to a vague improv lull swamp. It doesn't even have a real name, it's so vague. It won't change if you don't do anything about it. You're frozen and you're not expressing opinions. You're afraid and you're not making a choice one way or the other. You have to make choices.

## Take a Break or Recommit? Yes. But first: Talk to people.

Here's the thing, I'm not the authority on what to do. No one person or manifestation of improv tropes (hello, nameless waiter carrying wine or water silently on stage) is the authority. Except for you! With the help of your friends, peers, and fellow performers.

There is power in expressing how you feel. Talking to people makes a difference because you can connect with another human being who has felt that way, is feeling that way, or might someday feel how you feel. If that doesn't make sense to you, think of it this way: Talking about your feelings is like looking your partner in the eye at the top of a scene. Both things help you connect to people.

Maybe you actively avoid talking about improv. For Dianas, it's because we're an amalgamation of Dianas named in improv scenes. So we're in the scene, and when you're in the scene you're living improv, not talking about improv. Or maybe you like talking shop. If that's you, keep it up! Any way you do it, be a person who expresses opinions and feelings as opinions and feelings, not facts.

### Practical Magic: Advice

There are a lot of opinions, options, and ways to address a slump. Probably not all of them will help you. But some will. Especially after you've taken the time to be honest with yourself, talk to people, and make choices. Here are some pieces of advice about facing an improv slump from former, current, and future Dianas:

- Invest in your life.

- Take a break. There's nothing to push through when you're feeling stuck in improv. It's okay to stop for a while.
- Go see your friends and people you admire do shows. But if that's not fun either, stop.
- Do and see other art.
- Examine your motivations/goals/expectations.
- In a show: Don't initiate. Instead: Listen to/support/heighten your partner's moves.
- Take a longer break.
- Ditch toxic people. This is true for life, too.
- Take an even longer break.

There is a brave, vulnerable person who fuels your wild characters and smart show moves in all the improv ups/downs/inbetweens. Listen to her. And talk about it. You're gonna be fine, but first you need to be honest with yourself.

Yours truly,  
Diane (truly!)

PS: If you're looking for some other helpful thoughts and perspective from talented improvisers, Diane recommends these past *Hambooke* essays:

- Shantira Jackson: *Be Better* (p. 387)
- Alice Stanley Jr: *Destroying the Scene on Principle* (p. 139)
- Yazmin Ramos: *Character vs. Stereotype* (p. 115)
- Atra Asdou: *Ins and Outs* (p. 73)

Special thanks to Matt Myers, Lawrence Collerd, and Erin Uttich for helping Diane with specific pieces of advice for improv funks.

## A Note from Rayna

I realized I was in a months-long improv slump when I started to think about writing this piece. I was worried that if I thought or talked too much about improv I would discover that I actually didn't like it. I was worried that by the end of writing it I would decide to quit improv.

A fun thing about me is I'm kind of dramatic.

But surprise! Ignoring my feelings didn't make them go away. Surprise again! Talking about improv didn't make me decide to stop doing improv.

It turns out that I was actually thinking a lot about improv. I was thinking about how much I wasn't enjoying myself. I was thinking about trying to make the right show moves. I was thinking about the bullshit and drama that can happen when trying to work closely with other people. Obviously I was in a pretty negative space and it made it hard for me to be grateful or enjoy improv. I was stuck in my head.

Talking about it with my friends and my girlfriend was the most helpful thing for me. It gave me perspective. It was good to be validated and also called out for my own shit (remember how I like to be dramatic?). I took some breaks and cut back on improv commitments. I did other things with my time. I cried at a lot of books. I started other creative projects.

But even then, sometimes improv still didn't feel fun or fulfilling. I realized I was trying to control my improv experience which, wow, really doesn't work and isn't fun. This took me a while to figure out.

By cutting back on commitments, trying new things, and sleeping more, I was able to change my approach. I made a choice to show up, support, and bring my voice to rehearsals and shows. I can't control the other things. There isn't more I

need to do or push through. But I can say yes to my wild, brave self and to the gentle monsters I call teammates.

And a big thanks to spring and summer for all the sunlight.

Remember: I'm Diane. You're Diane. We're all Diane. Go do the damn thing and talk to your friends.

Miigwech!



ROBEL AREGA

## It's All in Your Head

My hands are sweaty. Stomach feels like it's dropping out of the bottom of me. I'm going into a small theater. Three years earlier, I made the trip up to Chicago from Urbana Champaign to watch friends open for Pimprov, the pimpest improv in all of Chicago. Back then, the theater was nothing but a blackbox with loose 2-by-4s littering the floor, and to use the bathroom you had to cut across the stage between bits. Now, I was coming to CIC to perform in their weekly improv Jam, *The Blender*.

I was new to the city and heard Jams were the way to get introduced to the scene. It was horrible. The people running the Jam were wonderful, kind improvisors, taking time out of their busy schedule to make new people in the scene feel welcome! That was great! It was the implied competition between new improvisors that was *horrible*.

Healthy competition is good in most cases. Adopt other people's techniques, learn from experienced comedians, learn from friends, try to make your friends laugh harder than they make you laugh. *Healthy, friendly competition*. In this case, I felt zero friendly competition. I felt overwhelmed by the notion of NOT BEING FUNNY! I was officially *in my head*.

The phenomenon of “getting in your head” isn’t exclusive to improv or any other performance. There are times men can’t perform sexually. We’ll call them impotent men, or *iMan* for short. Which causes everyone involved to get in their own head. Everyone has their own narrative which might not be the reality of the situation, and starts them into this weird downward spiral of thought:

INT. NICELY LIT BEDROOM - MIDNIGHT

iMAN

(internal monologue)

Oh man, was this my one shot with  
this person?

THEM

(internal monologue)

Oh man, what’s going on? Do they  
not wanna hook up?

iMAN (i.m.)

Are they gunna be disappointed?

THEM (i.m.)

Okay, he doesn’t wanna do this.  
What did I do?

iMAN (i.m.)

Oh man, I hope they still think  
that I think that they’re hot!

THEM (i.m.)

I’m still hot! I don’t care what  
they think!

Without any discourse, the people have decided in their own heads that the situation is much worse than reality. iMan is nervous and it gets in the way of his performance. The other person has a feeling simplified to, “WHAT THE I-MAN!?” But



this is all in their own heads. They don't know what the other is thinking. They could be thinking something completely different than what they think the other person is thinking.

This is the same thing that happens in an ecosystem like Improv. When I find myself wanting to impress someone while doing improv, whether it's someone I admire in the scene, or someone I want to like me, that's when I do the worst on stage. Those are the shows that I walk off the stage saying, "Sorry about that. I don't know what I was thinking."

I'm just being honest. A lot of people do Improv for fun. What about the need to *impress*? Was it *impressive*? Were people *impressed*? Did you leave a *good impression*? The need to impress your comedic peers is not mutually exclusive from your own personal enjoyment of Improv. Although, when you obsess over the *impression* you left, it only hinders your performance.

Something comes over all performers when they feel as if they must be funny. The performer suddenly stops enjoying the performance and becomes *preoccupied* with impressing the audience or strangers on stage. In the case of the Jam, I wanted to impress *everyone*. I wanted everyone to walk away thinking, "Wow, that guy is supes funny and good at making up stuff. Does he want to do comedy with me all the time?"

When you care about who you're impressing in improv, you completely forget about the most important thing: THE MOMENT, BRUH! That's all we got with improv. Improvisors don't go home and write punchlines, Improvisors don't write fleshed out stories, all Improvisors got is the moment to moment experience of live performance. If you're worrying about disappointing your heroes or your peers than you'll be in a different place than "the moment;" you'll be *in your head*.

How do we break this "fake hierarchy" we're building up in our own heads? How do we combat the feeling of "the

other” on an individual basis? How do we get out of our heads!?

I can only tell you what I do to calm myself down and perform my best. Hopefully it helps you in the future.

1. If I’m fan of someone, I let them know (I won’t be a creep about it [what’s a creep? You know... Don’t be *it*.]). I think people are flattered when they hear other people like their work. We’re all just trying to make each other laugh and understand different experiences. Letting people know they’re doing a great job is encouraging for them to keep doing what they’re doing and great for me because then I get to go watch more great comedy!
2. If I don’t have the confidence to be straightforward with someone I admire, I find it helps to take power away from the “heroes” I’ve built up in my head by asking them questions which make them seem human. “How was work?” “What do you do for a living?” This make me remember, “Oh! We’re adults! We both pay taxes! We both are about to make things up on a stage together!” which brings me to the next thing that helps me feel more comfortable...
3. I remind myself: Longform improv comedy is a very niche form of comedy, with a very specific fan base. It’s not for everyone. Thinking about this fact lowers the stakes in my head by a lot. I like to think about me explaining improv to an outsider to improv:

INT. FLUORESCENT LIT CUBICLE – 5PM FRIDAY

JENNA

What are you doing this weekend?

ME

Oh, I got a couple of comedy shows.  
Improv shows.

JENNA

Oh! That's kinda like Stand Up,  
right?

ME

Uhh... Not really. My group gets one  
word from the audience and then  
performs a show that's all made up  
for 20 to 30 minutes.

JENNA

Hmm... I like Stand Up. You should do  
more of that.

ME

Cool. See you next week.

4. I try to use the time in the greenroom before the show to relax with friends and fellow performers. Warm-ups are fine, I like them a lot, but sometimes you need that honest time with other performers. Relax, and enjoy the seconds before a show.
5. I like to talk to people about anything BUT comedy! It's great! There are so many kinds of people doing this artform, from dog-walkers to people who code for IBM (yeah, they're out there). We all have different perspectives! (Also, whenever I find myself only talking about comedy with other comedians or improvisors, that's when I realize I need a HUGE break from improv. Live outside of the ins and outs of a theater.)
6. Second City, iO, and the Annoyance are not the end all be all of comedy in the World, let alone Chicago. I've stepped outside the bubble of improv comedy in Chicago

and it's been amazing. I've felt stagnant in the Improv scene many times before; it comes in waves. I'm good at improv, I'm bad at improv, I'm good at improv, I'm bad at improv. Another way to keep perspective for myself is to see the vast creative scene in Chicago (like theater acting, stand up, sketch, and on-camera acting).

The freedom I feel from a clear head and clear motives makes me a better performer on stage. I'm not worried that I'll say the wrong thing. That I'll disappoint someone whom I admire. That the idea I want to explore on stage is stupid. All I care about is being stupid onstage and enjoying the time entertaining people (even if they like Stand Up better).

Now, I'm at the Crowd running a Jam with my improv team Mrs. Housefire. I love these folks. They're sweet, kind people. I never have the fear of judgement from any of them. There's no fear that I'll say the wrong thing. This trust is something earned. I know they don't want to hurt me on stage. I know they've my best interest at heart, and I have theirs.

I could see the hesitation on the new people's faces. New improvisors on the scene that heard Jams were a great way of getting introduced to the improv scene. We're in a theater that's nothing but a blackbox with pages from books laminated to the floor, and to use the bathroom you had to just walk to the back (it can get stinky). I know Mrs. Housefire isn't judging anyone, so what are these new faces afraid of? What is the hesitation?

*It's all in their heads.*

ZOE AGAPINAN

# Why I Feel Helpless at Auditions

- OR -

## ON THE ETERNAL WORK IT TAKES TO LOVE YOURSELF

Please bring a physical copy of your headshot and resume. Please have them stapled together. Please respond saying you have received this. Please do not reply to this email with questions. Please adhere to the business casual dress code. Please be prepared to move.

Auditions are scary. There, I said it! If you came here looking for advice from an expert, I'm sorry, but that's kind of funny you thought that about me!!

In college, my professors used to preach that you have to learn to love auditions. As an actor, auditions are what lead you to work: "A lot of being a working actor is being a professional auditioner."

There were a couple ways my professors tried to re-imagine an audition for us. One told me to imagine it like a free workshop. Another said that I should see it as an

opportunity to perform. These helped leading up to the audition, but as soon as I was in it, I found myself forgetting it immediately.

I am a terrible auditioner. When I walk into... well, anywhere, my general vibe is, "Is everyone mad that I'm here?" I enter rooms and project that vibe on to the wall.

Hi, my name is Zoe Agapinan. There are many reasons why you should hate me, but there are also a couple reasons why I would be like, so good in your [play/reading/dance/musical/class]. I hope I can prove to you, in the next 90 seconds, why I am good and not bad, even though my brain likes to do this thing where it tells me I am bad. And I am! But I am also good. Oh my god, am I bad at this? Am I an unlikeable performer!?!?

I will be doing a piece from Sarah Ruhl's *The Clean House*.

At least in those auditions, I can prepare *something*.

My first improv audition in Chicago was for the Conservatory at Second City. At that point in my life, I was regularly going to theater auditions and was well into the work of conquering the fear of an audition room. But this audition was different. I felt like I couldn't quite walk right, like I knew the muscles were there but I wasn't sure how to work them yet. I had to wrap my head around the fact that there was nothing I could, or should, prepare. Also, I wasn't too worried about getting in at all. If I don't get in now, I can try again later. So, I decided I was just going to enjoy the audition. I tried to pretend I was in class, like I was just watching my classmates do scene work. It was over before I

knew it, and I was happy to get the acceptance email several days later!

Do I think I did really good improv then? No, probably not. But I do think I gave the illusion that I was confident in whatever I was doing.

I have been out of the theater world for a bit. I pretty much do only improv auditions now, and it seems like the more I do, the more and more nervous I get for them. I am an anxious person (Does everyone here hate me?). My anxiety manifests itself in different ways and therefore makes a lot of things hard. There are many ways I torture myself, but improv auditions make it easy. It's essentially the nightmare scenario of, "I think everyone here hates me." You walk into a room of mystery people (no control) and try to impress them with the improv you do (still no control) and hope whatever you did makes them like you (absolutely no control/ oh my god please don't hate me).

One must come in intentionally unprepared and ready to listen, react, initiate, support, and keep a scene moving in the most perfect, raw, skilled, honest, and funny way. We must clear our minds and open our hearts and become the performer who makes all the right moves. Ideally, we are supporting our scene while also being the stand out. In a perfect scenario, you are radiating beams of too-cool-confidence, while also just having fun! It is optimal that your auditors are not hungry or tired, and have seen you do something before that was pretty good so they already kind of like you and they laugh at all your moves. This is a lot to leave to fate.

However, there are some small things you can control, and oh man do I let myself worry about those things. First, there's the fun fact. I once excitedly said, "I just quit my job!"

And the room went, “Aww, oh no.” They were all bummed. One of the auditors even crossed their arms and frowned. I followed with, “It’s a good thing!” And they were... still bummed. Now I go with happier fun facts in hopes I’ll get that small golf clap and chuckle. Then there’s your outfit. Here is where I go kind of totally bonkers. I love clothes! I love to feel nice and I spend a stupid amount of money on chasing this feeling. But after all that, I still sit in my room the night before trying on everything I own and begging for something to speak to me. Nothing really does and I take that as a sign I’m not ready. I search “#businesscasual” on Instagram and try to get inspired, but I end up on a page for a new diet that is designed to never give you bloat, and now I’m making a grocery list. Do I have time to go to the grocery store tomorrow? Then all of a sudden it’s 1AM and the audition is at 9AM and I still don’t know what I’m going to wear.

I have been frustrated lately with how nervous these auditions make me. All these worries are just consequences of one frustrating question: How do I show them what I know, which is that I can do this? I feel like I’m doing improv all the time. Why aren’t I nailing these?

Most of us get caught up in the grind of the improv comedy scene. You can do the 8pm show if you go first, so that you can grab a Lyft and run to your 8:30pm show. The intermission will start around 9:45pm-ish, then you will grab another Lyft to see your friend’s sketch show at 10pm—by the way, is there an opener? You’re going to be like 10 minutes late, but it’s the only week you can see it. Afterwards you hang out at the bar for a few hours talking about how you’re so tired of running around and never eating dinner at home. You ask what the opening sketch was, since you



missed it. Then finally, you take the train home and wonder, “Should I be writing more?”

For me, I realize it’s not as much about the skill not being there, but the confidence. I think many of you are reading this and thinking, “No duh?? You said your general vibe is constantly wondering if everyone is actively mad at you??” When I am in places I have raised up on a pedestal as important, I shrink. And that’s not just auditions; it’s also most shows and any crowded space full of people I might recognize. I think that I apologize for being somewhere, so I try to make up for it while I’m there. I ask forgiveness from people who neither know me or care about me. I focus on the bad I see in myself, therefore I have tricked myself into believing that’s all anyone can see.

The mirror used to be a bad place for me. I used to practice my monologues, and if I messed up I would say really mean things to my reflection. I was looking in the eyes of the person who hated me the most, and they didn’t let up. After all the outfit prep, ruminating on the fun fact, and the re-framing of the room being fun and not scary, I would stand in the mirror and say hurtful things. Then, I would go to the audition and I would hope I was good.

If there was any kind of advice I could give you in this essay, it’s that hating yourself won’t work. Maybe you know that, and I think I thought I did, too. I was fully confident in my skills as an actor and improviser, but I didn’t like myself. Even if I got cast in something, I would tell myself I didn’t deserve it. I would make myself feel guilty for getting where I was. I couldn’t win.

I think that’s where the real work is. You have to face yourself again and say, “I’m going to be better to you, because you deserve that.” You have to say it until you believe

it. Say it everyday, or show it by the way you treat yourself. Give yourself the space you need to complete the things you want to. Be easy on yourself when you slip up. Let yourself express what you need to through journaling, or physical activity, or crafting, or cooking, or however you like to. Strive to do it everyday. Know that you will mess up and that it's okay, because learning to love yourself is fucking hard.

Now, I try to be kinder. I'll say, "Okay Zoe, let's do this!" I will change my shirt a couple times and then put back on the first one. I will take a breath and say my favorite quote that I got from Sierra Boggess' Instagram: "You have nothing to prove, only to share." I will say it until I believe it. I'll think about wearing eyeliner for the first time all year, then realize I have to leave for the train like, now. I'll throw my blazer and some extra flats in my bag, just to give myself the peace of mind. Then I will arrive and realize I am nearly 40 minutes early. I'll stretch, listen to some pump up music, and try to remember that I'm here because I love this and not because I need this.

How do I show them what I know, which is that I can do this? By doing it. By showing up. By believing I can. By knowing that what I can do and what they want doesn't always line up, and that has nothing to do with whether I can or cannot do.

Hi, I'm Zoe Agapinan, and I know I can do this.

NATHALIE GALDE

# Are You Having Fun Yet?

Sooo you had a bad show...

Must be time to quit. You're in a slump. You've been in a slump for months. Why do you even DO improv anymore? It's not fun for you. It sucks when people play over the top characters and don't really connect with what you're doing on stage. No one ever shows up to the shows anyway. You don't even like half of your teammates, and the other half are just delusional hobbyists who think they're hot shit now that they're in the Second City Conservatory program. Is anyone even editing or is it just you? It seems like nobody knows the rules except you. Even your friends tell you that they really enjoyed watching you perform, but they tolerated your cast mates because they're clearly not as talented as you. Now that there's so many new people, you're the only one who gets what the show is *supposed* to look like. When even was the last time that you had a rehearsal with everyone in attendance? When was the last time you had a rehearsal that everyone was on time? I mean, you've been late a couple of times, but you had a real excuse. Clearly the group dynamic is affected because everyone else isn't pulling their weight.

If you've never thought a single one of these things, especially after a mediocre performance, then congratulations,

you're perfect. Also, you don't exist. There's no such thing as a perfect improviser, no matter how flawless TJ & Dave seem to be. There's also no such thing as a bad show. There are no bad shows, only bad improvisers. By bad, I mean improvisers who aren't having fun.

"Don't forget to have fun." It's a mantra that, as a teammate/coach/teacher, I find myself delivering often. I haven't kept track of how many eye-rolls and sarcastic "Thank you's" I've received after saying it. It's uttered so often that it's lost its core sentiment: *enjoy yourself and what you'll create together*. "Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, 'have fun,' thanks, coach." It's just words to many improvisers these days. For real though, *have fun*. Don't forget that at the end of the day, you've been playing pretend all along. You know who else likes to play pretend and take it very seriously? Kids. Except when pretend time is over, kids don't walk away beating themselves up—"Next time, I'll make sure to filter my thoughts and make better choices about my pretend and remember to have fun"—said no kid, *ever*. When pretend time is over, kids just move on to the next thing, at most thinking of what they'd like to do the next chance they get to play. That's how you should feel about your improv. Only give your self-diagnosed mediocre performance as many brain cells as minutes that it lasted and then move on.

Even new improvisers seem to have a better grasp on the concept of having fun than their "veteran" counterparts. They don't have the years of cynicism and perceived failures to filter their improv through. Sure, their scenes are rich with cliché moves and tired gimmicks, or pop culture references that don't serve the scenes, instead serving a punch line—but look at their faces. Look at them having so much goddamn fun. Because they've just discovered something so

empowering and liberating and they can't help but just be in that moment and enjoy the ride.

The second they take their first improv class, it's over. Once you know something you didn't know before, you become conscious of it, and then you can't unknow it. Oftentimes, developing the consciousness of "how to improvise" results in forgetting what attracted you to it in the first place—all that fucking fun you seemed to be having. The classic double-edged sword: once you learn improv, you lose the fun—the only way to keep having fun is to know nothing Jon Snow. Yet, while there are several successful improvisers who've never taken a class, there isn't a single one I've met who hasn't felt like garbage at some point after a show. But, it's not lack of improv knowledge that keeps you from having fun, and it's not never growing up. It's you. You're the only person who's ruining the show for yourself and for everyone around you.

Somehow, in the process of writing this, holistic forces allowed for me to be in the same room when Jimmy Pennington of *Sight Unseen* said this: "When you finish a good show, you're frustrated about all the things you wanted to do, and all the moves you didn't get to make and play with. When you finish a bad show, you just think about how much you hated the things you did." Every bad show you've experienced has its roots in fear. Being stuck in a slump, low performer/audience attendance, being green, being steamrolled—it's all of these fears that narrow your sense of play and disallow you from engaging faithfully with your scene partners. You're not onstage playing; you're having an out-of-body experience and you're actually just watching yourself and the rest of the cast bomb. You're so concerned with so many things that are out of your control that, without

even realizing it, you're trying to control those very things, and your failure to maintain this "control" is manifesting negative thinking that results in no fun for anyone.

ImproviSEXation is a show that's near and dear to my heart. We've run on and off at the Annoyance with a sex-positive and body-positive premise. My inspiration for it was a show called Ruuudy's Fun Fest in Miami. It's an in-your-face performance, and Ruuudy challenges the audience to embrace love and just love life. I wanted to capture that love and apply it to my love of improv. I wanted improv to be everything it advertises: funny and fun. For three years, I've been able to walk away from every Sexation performance with nothing less than a beaming smile. This show encourages anything to happen, which would include the biggest fears any improviser. All of these things have happened at any one performance, and all of these things have resulted in some of the most genuine and jovial moments my castmates and I have had the pleasure of drenching ourselves in.

We root the show in sex and body-positivity and we encourage Murphy's Law to take full effect. It's a show that is bereft of control, and I feel absolutely in control when I portray Määääääärk with seven umlauts. Being in the skin of that character has allowed me to practice letting go of the things that are beyond my preparation and expectations. I've only prepared myself for the possibility that anything that can happen will, and it's just my job to enjoy the ride and apply what I know when the situation calls for it. I don't plan for the drunk heckler; I encourage them to make themselves known. I don't agonize over the capabilities of my cast members; they auditioned and were cast because they killed it in the audition and they've put in the work at rehearsals. The format of the show itself is a huge safety net; our characters

never remember the set list, and which invites a balanced contrast of insane audience interaction and grounded improv, making for an inherently textured show. I trust that improvisation will prove itself useful in a show where anything can happen. This show isn't unique by applying these notions.

Be sure to trust and love your improv on and offstage. The only people who know that your castmate was late to call time are you and your castmates. The audience is otherwise oblivious to that information. So why hold it against them on stage? The amount of rehearsals that you or your castmates have attended is irrelevant to the show you are currently performing in front of a paying audience. In the famously obnoxious words of Elsa, fucking let it go. How is that noise at all beneficial to a show? Come to terms with what is, not what it should or could be. It doesn't mean that what is is what's right. It just means that you understand the task at hand when you release yourself of everything you're *anticipating*.

None of this is to say that objectively bad shows don't happen; they do. Every bad show had the potential to be amazing until you drenched it with your urine-soaked pants of fear. But knowing that you have universal fears should be a freeing notion. There is no secret to a good show. More than anything, I can only hope to achieve awakening your consciousness of this fear that drives you directly into bad shows. Because your bad show is someone else's best show in days/weeks/months/years. It's probably the first improv show an audience member has ever seen, and they *liked* it. It's all in your head and you should liberate yourself.

Fear is a you problem. We're all a bunch of little narcissists striving for perfection or coming close, resulting in

our fear of failure. I don't necessarily subscribe to the tenets of "zen-prov," but I do believe that our energies affect each other. Unchecked negative energy can saturate a team before they hit the stage and affect the players without them even noticing. Fear is a negative energy. It's why you hear time and time again to leave your shit at the door. Because that's where it belongs. Your shit has no business in a performance/rehearsal space. It's not to say you can't explore your shit and that you should pretend everything is ok all the time. It means, don't let your bad day become everyone else's bad show. Getting to play is an opportunity to work on something that should remove you from your shit, so when you walk back out that door you might even have the mindset to process your shit in ways you couldn't see before.

Knowing this (if you didn't already), you're going to be overly conscious of it. You're going to think about it more often before you hit the stage. It's going to affect your performance. Good. Embrace that fear and release it from your tense shoulders, and don't forget to have fun.



JENA WALLANDER

# Revisionist History

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 longform 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 perform. 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<sup>49</sup>, 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<sup>50</sup> (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.





JULIA WEISS

# Jaded

There's a little demon that sneaks into your brain through the cracks and starts whispering things to you. It cozies up nice at first, gives you a squeeze, reminds you of all the good ideas you've had over the years. "Such good ideas," it tells you, soft. "It's a shame you never did anything with your talent."

You try to reason with the demon. You're still young...well...ish. "You'd be young if you were already doing something, sure" the demon corrects, "But too old to start now." You didn't waste your time, you insist. You had a lot going on. Personally. "A genius would have turned it into something. Worked through the pain."

Gently, it leans in deep and says, "But you aren't a genius, are you?" You brace yourself for what's next: "You're average."

Growing up, I listened to *The Fantasticks* soundtrack on a cassette until I wore it out. I'd play the song "Much More" repeatedly, which is hard with a cassette because you have to learn exactly how long to let it rewind. I loved that song. I'd perform it for no one in my room, each time gathering my hands to my heart to plead along with Rita Gardner, "Please, God, please. Don't let me be normal!"

I believed then that I was special. That I'd spend my life in the theatre. I grew up in a community of talented artists and I'd thank them in the Tony acceptance speech I practiced in my bedroom before settling down to dream my life on the stage.

And like...I didn't even try.

I wasn't brave enough for New York, and after college, I moved to Chicago instead. After several months of hiding in my apartment, I began a career of mostly short-cutting through the comedy scene. I did theatre for a moment, but I haven't written a play in years and it's been even longer since I auditioned for one. The comedy world has filled me with fleeting moments of what have felt like brilliance, but nothing ever stuck for me. I couldn't handle the dynamics of competition or the allure of jealous, terrible men. And as much as I wanted to move away, here I stayed, watching my life slip behind.

With the help of the demon, I can admit it really was me. It really was my fault. And that it wouldn't have been different if I'd stayed in straight theatre.

Sometimes it depresses me. I'll poke at the wrinkling eyes looking at me through my mirror and ask what the hell I've been doing. In elementary school, I always took it as a compliment when teachers said I don't live up to my potential. "Well, then. Bravo," says the demon.

Right around the corner from this sort of depression is a darker feeling. The kind of sorrow that mutates into anger and twists a night you could have spent writing or drawing or seeing a show into one you spend self-sabotaging, cataloging your failures, downplaying your successes and comparing yourself to every other person doing the thing you wanted to do, but didn't do. Worrying that "didn't" means "couldn't."

You get mean about the other people, too. “How come...” “Why not...” “What’s so great about...”

It’s an ugly place to be. It freezes what talent you do have and makes your work desperate.

It sucks to feel like you’re better than what you’re doing. It’s embarrassing, right? You told all these people you were going to BE SOMEONE and here you are eating Easy Mac over the sink staring down 40. You bet your entire self-worth on a single, impossible iteration of a career and anything else is failure.

Don’t get jaded. Here you are having contempt for being the human you are, being the human most humans are – if they’re lucky. If you can’t have empathy for that, why are you in the arts?

So you haven’t “made it.” So you probably won’t. Fine. The gatekeepers aren’t always good and they aren’t always tastemakers and the tastemakers aren’t always good and they aren’t always gatekeepers. The industry is full of guys like Steven Mnuchin. Make your art for its own sake.

Just don’t get jaded.

Fame is this lurking wish that the demon lords over you.

Anyone who throws themselves into this work might get famous. You might get famous because you’re brilliant. You might get famous because you’re hot. You might get famous because you’re safe. You might get famous because you’re rich and made connections at an Ivy or your parents golf with Judd Apatow. You might get famous because you work really hard and put yourself in front of the right person at the right time and who knows maybe also you’re brilliant and/or hot and/or your parents golf with Judd Apatow.

But you probably won’t get famous. Some of the most brilliant people I know aren’t famous. And almost all of the

least brilliant people I know aren't famous. Some of the famous people I know are brilliant. Some of the famous people I know are fine. Sometimes your talent doesn't match your ambition—in both directions. It's unreasonable. The world's not reasonable. Don't reason with it. Don't try.

Fame can't be all of it.

And then there's the money.

It's reasonable, yes, to want to make money from your talent. But making money can't really be the point, either. Although please make money and try to do that with your work because you deserve to participate in the society you were born into and to do so in a way that engages your mind.

If a good piece becomes a failure because it didn't make you rich, what are we saying about the work? If a bad piece becomes a success because it lined your wallet, what are we saying about the work? When we cautiously admit to each other that we didn't actually like a show or a movie that we've all publicly been raving about, what are we saying at all?

Money can't be it, either.

Or be jaded about money as a whole. As a dumb system. Be jaded that our country doesn't have a robust endowment for the arts, fostering flourishing scenes across the country, enabling those with the most to say, who are generally those with the least cash.

But don't be jaded about the work.

Even if your work's not great, don't be jaded that you didn't have the talent. Embrace the hobby and find something else to pay the bills.

Our improbable existence on this dying rock is marred by eons of subjugation and cruelty and greed and destruction. And in the worst of times, art has always been a tool of survival -the way we remember we're human and that there's

some value to us being here, a reason to fight, a way to die with dignity. When the powers that be decide to tighten the leash on the masses, they always seek to control the arts.

That's powerful on any scale. Don't be jaded. Keep making your art.

Make people laugh. Tell stories that shouldn't be forgotten. Teach some lessons. Jerk some tears. Make people mad. Make people forget. Make. People. Laugh.

Bigger audiences exist, so work hard to get access to bigger audiences, but if that access doesn't come, don't get jaded. Just ask yourself what the point was to begin with. If you were only doing this to get famous, quit if you don't get famous. If you were only doing this to make money, quit if you're not making money. If you're doing this because you have a gift, and you're reaching some audience somewhere, then why be jaded? The work is still there.

I have three zits on my face right now. One on my chin. One over my lip. One right under my nose. I got them because I got sad about how little I've done, how much time I've wasted, how embarrassed I am that I'm not doing anything with the ideas in my head, so I ate a bunch of stuff my body's allergic to. The step before jaded is often "gross self-indulgence." I'm puffy and slow today, sitting on my couch with my dog and the demon. It's reminding me that this is the same sort of self-sabotage that kept me from doing anything about my dream. I let the demon talk—after all, it's having great success in its field.

But now's the time to pick myself back up and take my own advice. Ask myself what I love about writing, comedy, theatre, and art, and make something good.



IAN ORNSTEIN

# A Reminder of the Value of Others

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?

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>51</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.

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 longform 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>52</sup>.

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.

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, "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 literally 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 others. 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.

SHANTIRA JACKSON

## Be Better

I grew up as an athlete and a musician. Both of those activities really shaped me as a person. I wanted to be good at jump shots, so I spent hours shooting jump shots. I wanted to be a first chair flute player, so I spent hours playing scales in my driveway. (I played in marching band, so occasionally I needed to be on the move.) In the end, I accomplished both of those aforementioned goals, but I digress. To be better I had to do the work.

After I graduated college I moved to Chicago to study comedy (the art of improvisation to be specific). My goal was to eventually be a cast member on a resident stage at the famed Second City Theater like so many great comedians before me. I went to college for broadcast journalism and after spending two years working in a newsroom I knew that I hated working in newsrooms. I always considered myself to be a storyteller and I felt like comedy allowed for me to be honest and vulnerable in ways that news couldn't. Good comedy can be just as informative as good journalism and I felt that I could reach more people as a comedian than as a local newscaster. Honestly, I was getting more news from *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* than I was getting from most major news outlets. I loved the brass observations of past greats like

Richard Pryor and Moms Mabley. These comedians told stories that the people needed to hear, informed the people of social injustices and made them laugh while they did it. I wanted to be like that.

When I got to Chicago I took every class and did midnight shows at Improv Olympic and Underground Lounge, because in everything I'd ever accomplished, putting in the hours got me the results I wanted. But in this instance, things weren't working out as nicely as my jump shot. The sheer amount of hours wasn't making me a better performer. Quantity did not equate to quality. Doing eight shows a week didn't mean that the shows were good; it just meant that I was doing a larger amount of mediocre comedy than some other folks.

Improvisation is an art that comes from bringing your personal experiences out in the characters you create. At that time in my life, I honestly didn't have anything to bring. It was hard to pretend to be a fully developed character when I hadn't even tried to be a fully developed person. I knew I didn't have to be a pilot to pretend to be a pilot, but I was in no way a whole person, mentally, emotionally or spiritually, and it was fucking up my art. I'd never been in love, or told my Mom how I wanted our relationship to be more than wasted youth and I really wanted to try escargot. I lived in one of the greatest cities in the world for experiencing different cultures, meeting new people and loving new people and I needed to become a fully realized person.

I had work to do.

How could I tap into the depths of joy or sadness in my characters when I was going about my life ignoring the most human parts of myself? Ignoring how I felt about the world around me? Ignoring how I thought I fit into that world as an

androgynous black woman in a very straight-laced white world? I had to start living my life before I started pretending to make-believe people who were living theirs.

So, I started doing new shit and being open to new experiences. When I loved someone, or when people made an impact on my life, I told them. I didn't go around confessing my love to just anyone, but I did tell my friends and mentors that they mattered to me. I made a habit of not assuming they already knew. Turns out that it's just nice to hear when you matter to someone. It's also nice to say it. I also started creating boundaries for my time so that I could participate in the things that inspired me both as an artist and as a person. When I didn't want to go to a party or a show, I didn't go. Comedy is something that I do, but it couldn't be the only thing I did. What if after all that hard work I didn't get what I came to Chicago to get? Who would I be then and would I even like myself? I decided to find out.

I went to concerts and poetry readings and museums and I ate food I'd never had before. I'm from Tallahassee, Florida and regular poetry readings were slim pickings. Now, I had options. Options help you build character.

Eventually I got a job working as a performer on a cruise ship and performed 198 shows in four months. There's no way you can perform that much and not get better at your craft. As we sailed, I saw what the stars look like when you gaze up at them from the middle of the Atlantic Ocean. Every character that an artist creates knows everything the artist knows and has the entire wealth of that artist's experiences from which to pull. I had new experiences to pull from and it was exciting. It made me more confident that no matter what a scene was about, I would be familiar with some

aspect and be able to play. I was now a jack of all trades, and a master at quite a few.

For me, when my well of experiences was empty, so was my art. When all I did was watch improv, all my opinions were just based on things other people made up. Trying new things and going new places allowed me to develop my own point of view. That POV expanded my comedic POV. My opinions, my scene work and my art was now based on what I had actually done in my life as opposed to what I'd seen other people do. I had options. Obviously this isn't the be-all and end-all to how someone can become a better improviser or even a more well-rounded person; this is just what helped me. Being willing to open myself up to the world and the wonderfully weird people in it allowed me to become more open about my art than I'd ever been. I did the work. And looking into our own shortcomings and being honest about them is so much fucking work. But I'm still doing it.

When I was 22 I wanted my improv to be better. This may sound silly but it doesn't matter. Finding the catalyst I needed to go on the journey of becoming my most fully realized self was worth all of the midnight shows in the world. Well, almost all the midnight shows, because a lot of them were really, really bad. But in the end, it doesn't matter what the catalyst is. I had to be in active pursuit of what I wanted, and in this case it was not only to be a better artist, but also to be a better version of myself. The escargot wasn't bad either.

MARY TILDEN

# I Am Not Amy Poehler

HOW I FOLLOWED MY DREAMS,  
INSTEAD OF SOMEONE ELSE'S

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 performing (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, ILU 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.

ALAN GILES

# Letters From God

*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 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

*Alan Giles*

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.*



# On Saying Goodbye





HARRISON GEORGE

# Why I Left Chicago

- OR -

## YOU REALLY ONLY GET TO DO SOMETHING ONCE

I first started doing improv in high school back in Kansas. The team was called “Quirks!” and we met once a week after school in the drama room. All of our games were lifted directly from *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* A lot of the kids on the team were already really interested in theater, or were just there to pass time after school till their parents could pick them up. For me, it was the start of something very important, something that would completely dominate the next 12 years of my life.

Before I started doing improv I didn’t have a lot going on, honestly. I had few to no hobbies, I played zero sports, and I didn’t have a lot of friends. I was painfully shy as a child, and a severe speech impediment discouraged me from meeting new people. Even after I got over my speech impediment and into high school, I never felt comfortable around most people. It’s not shocking to say that a person’s teenage years are tough; I was overwhelmed at the idea that I could be anyone I wanted, I just couldn’t be everyone. At some point during your adolescence you have to make some decisions about the kind of person you want to grow up to

be. The million dollar question is, how does one learn to be a person? I think that's why you have to latch onto something when you're young; sports, a hobby, music, anything. You need a framework to set your own beliefs against (I was in the Boy Scouts for one day, and remember thinking everyone there was too loud, so I never went back). I knew a kid who was completely lost in the world until he joined the robotics team at school and it completely straightened him out; taught him responsibility, team-work, all of that. Skills like that can be taught a million different ways, but man, if you don't do anything, those lessons have no way of reaching you.

The only thing I did care about was school. I loved being at school with all my heart. I had smart, academic parents who raised me to worship teachers and respect public schools. We were not a religious family at all (another great way to learn values and meet others, I later learned) but we were radically devoted to reading and learning. The two primary personality traits my parents passed down to me were politeness and a strong sense of curiosity. And in school, curiosity is a perpetual motion machine. Questions lead to answers which immediately lead to more questions, and so on and so on. For the first 10 years of my life, the only problem I had with school was it only last so many hours a day.

And then I got to high school and found out that kids my age weren't supposed to like school; you were, in fact, suppose to hate it. All the cool kids in school hated being there, disliked reading, and didn't show any respect for teachers. At first I tried to play along when my fellow classmates would complain about homework, or boring subjects, or whatever. But that strain of shitting on something that you love so much to me was too hard to bear. I discovered at an early age how exhausting it is trying to conceal your enthusiasm. Trying to hold back how much you love something, how important you think it is, not just for you but for the whole world, is a floodgate that won't hold forever. I became anxious at school, embarrassed to raise my hand in class and ask too many questions.

When I discovered improv, I knew right away this was something I could pour myself into fully. First of all, it was an art form; a creative pursuit built around creating something, and that always took energy and dedication. Being super enthused about sitting and reading was one thing, but being excited about something that required a lot of energy and focus seemed to make more sense. Second, it was a group activity; the idea of being around other people who possibly love it as much as I do was very appealing to me.

I performed throughout the rest of my time in high school, and when it came time to pick a college, I made sure to pick one with an improv team. At this point I had been doing improv for 3 years, and I felt like I had become a completely different person; I was more outgoing, driven, organized, and far less anxious around people. Improv helped me by getting me out of my shell, but, more importantly I finally had a “thing,” a central object of interest through which I saw the world.

Overcoming some of my anxiety allowed me to branch out and try a lot of new things in college; I stayed busy and joined a lot of different clubs and met a lot of people my younger self never would have thought possible. But improv remained my main focus. My college improv team (it was called “Zoiks!” like the Scooby Doo expletive minus the N) rehearsed 3 times a week for 2 hours at a time, but only performed once a month for an hour and a half show. We had no coach, and most of us had never seen actual improv performed anywhere but on Drew Carey’s TV show. It was all short form, and the students on campus absolutely loved it. I distinctly remember once during our show seeing an audience member clutch their sides while laughing, a self-hugging gesture I didn’t know people actually did outside of the audiences in the old America’s Funniest Home Videos reruns. On the weekends, I’d drive to Kansas City, which was 2 hours away, to play in shows up there. It was a 4 hour drive round trip to do a 20 minute show.

Things changed when we were introduced to long form improv. Like most college improv teams, this came in the

form of 3 things: *Trust Us*, *This is All Made Up*, *Truth In Comedy*, and the UCB *Asssscat* DVD. I had those things memorized from start to finish, especially the TJ and Dave one. It was as if the universe had suddenly unfolded upon itself, and everything I thought I knew about improv comedy vanished. The transition from short form to long form was one of the most exciting experiences of my young adult life. Once I realized there was more to improv than 3 minute games, I decided to move to Chicago. The rest of my time in college was just killing time until I graduated and had enough money to move. What free time I had away from rehearsals or class was quickly consumed with grand daydreams about what life in Chicago as an improv student would be like. It appeared to me as a Mecca for the world of comedy, a place where the most dedicated, the most curious about comedy's inner workings, could go to seek a true understanding of what makes humor work. I thought it'd be a modern day Paris or Vienna, an oasis for hungry artists, especially as someone from the Midwest where calling yourself an artist was almost as alienating a gesture as coming out of the closet or telling people you're a vegetarian. I was ready for Chicago to welcome me with open arms and for my real education into improv to begin.

I moved to Chicago in the spring of 2011, and started classes within 3 weeks. I decided to take the plunge and sign up for multiple classes at once. I took classes at iO and Second City, and a few months later at Annoyance, too. I was proud and excited, and probably a little cocky, to be taking in as many different ideas as possible. After waiting 3 years I was finally there.

I honestly don't remember a lot about my time as a student at iO, except that the teachers were great and my fellow students were very kind and fun to do scenes with. At Second City, it didn't take long for me to realize that wasn't the place for me. I got the sense from my classes that improv was best used as a tool to create something else—namely, sketches. Being totally in love with improv and terrible at

sketches, I quickly decided that wasn't going to be a good fit for me long term.

What I really remember about that time was being an intern. I interned at all 3 theaters tearing tickets, bussing tables and cleaning bathrooms. I cannot over-estimate the impact being an intern had on my early Chicago experience. Not only did it make my classes fiscally possible, it gave me a deep understanding of the buildings and community. I met so many people that weren't in my normal circle, from the bartenders and wait staff to the featured performers who closed on the weekends.<sup>53</sup> The best part about being an intern was that if there wasn't any work to do, you could watch the shows. I still believe you learn more from watching improv than from doing it—it might be one of the only art forms where that's true. By not being on stage you have the ability to watch the audience, which is just as important as what's happening on stage—what kind of stuff makes them laugh, what kind of stuff makes them reach for their phones or get up and go to the bathroom.

Eventually I found other ways to work behind the scenes within the community. Instead of using all my time and energy trying to book shows with my independent team like most of my classmates were doing, I was focused on furthering my comedy education before setting my sights on performing. I interned for the *Improv Nerd* podcast with Jimmy Carrane and for the *Late Live Show*, a live talk show hosted by Joe Kwaczala. In both cases, I just reached out to them by email and basically said, "Hi, I just moved here, can I work for your show?" Both were very kind and found things for me to do, and in exchange I saw their shows for free every week. Again, I was learning about how the community operated and meeting a lot of new people.

Let me say something about social anxiety and idolatry, two things I suffer from. Talking to people has always made me nervous, especially talking to new people, and most especially talking to new people I look up to. And Chicago was full of people I looked up to who I didn't know. If improv was the most important thing in the world to me,

then the people who were good at it were the second most important. I idolized anyone who was on a house team at iO. I would get tongue-tied after the shows trying to make small talk with any improviser I came across. I was fascinated by the surrealness of it all; these were people who, to the rest of the world, were normal, everyday humans but as soon as they stepped inside an improv theater, they were treated like gods. I knew it was silly to put them on a pedestal as much as I did, but I had no idea how to stop it. It turned out the best thing I could do was just be around them and talk to them. I was eventually able to just start seeing them as regular people with lives and interests outside of improv. I still absolutely worshipped some of them, but at least I was able to make small talk.

Eventually classes ended and I was put on a team at iO. I was over the moon, thrilled and honored to be performing at iO. It was, and remains, one of the proudest achievements of my life so far. But my experience during the first two years of performing at iO was fraught with tension and disappointment, brought on by a variety of things. One, the inevitable learning curve that hits once you leave classes- not just for improv, but for all things. Less learning can mean less progress, and less of those “a-ha” moments that made the classroom experience feel so special. The first few months after I finished classes I felt like I was performing in molasses- I was making unenjoyable choices that I wasn’t making in classes which forced me into boring, stressful scenes. I also went from some of the oldest, most experienced teachers in the city to some of the youngest coaches available, and while they did a good job at providing enthusiastic support and guidance, concise notes on what to focus on were lacking. Also I was completely uneducated as to how the building worked. I thought there’d be some onboarding/welcome-to-the-family style meeting to explain what the Harold Commission was, who was on it, how or why teams were cut. I had a million questions and no idea where to go for answers, so I just shut up and listened and

tried to take in as much information from passing conversations as I could.

The team experience was also different than I expected. I thought I'd be around the best of the best who rose to the top through their classes and graduation shows through hard work and dedication. What I found was that, just like in classes, team attendance was largely not enforced, and it was surprisingly hard—even from the start of my first team—to get everyone in the same room. Suddenly everyone was busy with other shows, teams, auditions and projects, and rehearsals took a back seat. There's a weird thing that happens when you're going through classes; you just want to make a team. You tell yourself, "If I could just get on a team, I'd be happy. That's all I need." You go to class and see shows and have, like, 5 nights a week completely free. But then, while you are waiting you make indie teams or branch out to other art forms or get put on other teams in other buildings. And then Harold teams are rehearsing on Sunday nights from 10pm to midnight just to accommodate people's' schedules. And that sucks. Good comedy can happen just about anywhere, but it cannot and does not happen in a tiny rehearsal space on a Saturday morning at 10am. People missed rehearsals for all kinds of reasons; once a teammate said they would be missing because they wanted to see a Second City show. It was hard not to show my frustration when it felt like my teammates weren't making the team a priority.

Looking back, if I'd been a stronger performer I'd have focused on the things I could change; my attitude and my performance, mainly. But I was, and remain, a performer that's only as good as the people I play with. In standup and sketch you have a lot more control; over content, quality, when and how rehearsals are structured. But I was adamant that I could only be as good as my team, and vice versa. My goal was never to be a singularly good improv performer. What I really wanted was to be on a great team. One that operated with speed and fluidity and could work together like we were reading each other's minds. Any one person can be

funny, but real magic is found when teams work together. But my team and I didn't view improv in the same way and as a result, we never really felt like we were on the same page.

I'm going to make a strong statement here and say that one of the reasons, and there were a bunch, people were not prioritizing improv was because of the rise of The Upstairs Gallery<sup>54</sup> and its performers. The Upstairs Gallery was just coming into itself as I got to Chicago. Whole essays could be written trying to properly capture this theater's impact on the community, but I'll just make three points:

1. The most obvious take-away is the importance of making your own opportunities instead of waiting around for others to give them to you. The theater was founded in rejection and carried this anti-establishment punk rock vibe that no other performance space had at the time. It was the only place that had its own unique style of comedy—the theater itself affected how people played until an “Upstairs Gallery” genre was created. Which leads me to point two;
2. The comedy of Upstairs Gallery was primarily about being cool. Playing the in the manner of Upstairs Gallery meant being above and apart from what was happening on stage. The characters and situations created were usually so absurd and ridiculous it was like watching a live-action cartoon. Performers did not take on characters as much as wear them as a light outer jacket; they knew they were being ridiculous and they wanted the audience to know they knew. I rarely laughed at the characters being created, instead laughing with the actor playing the character as they seemed to say, with a knowing smirk, “Isn't this guy nuts?” This was just part of what made the place so successful—it captured the honest feeling of friends making each other laugh at a dinner party. The pretense of “audience” and “performer” was razor thin, and we all laughed at what was in front of us, whether we had helped create it or merely sat and took it all in.



3. The problems arise, then, when younger performers start to ape that style of play. And not caring on stage usually lead people to not care off stage too, when it was most important. Most of my favorite performers at UG, people like Annie Donley, Carmen Christopher, Gary Richardson, etc, played like they didn't give a fuck about improv but had actually put in years of hard work by the time I got to Chicago—I was seeing them operate, on stage and off, in a completely different phase of their comedy career than my own. But you watch them get up and play zany, random characters and see it get huge laughs and think it's that easy.

But there's more to it than that—there's an “it” factor, that dark matter-esque quality that just makes some people funny and others not, that let John Reynolds just be John Reynolds on stage. The city was suddenly awash with young performers doing their best John Reynolds/Devin Bockrath/Connor O'Malley impressions<sup>55</sup> in every scene. And they thought they didn't need to rehearse, they could just show up, walk on stage and kill it. The truth is that all art takes attention and focus and thought, and even the dumbest improv scenes in the world still have to rely on basic, fundamental good group work. Upstairs Gallery did a whole lot of good for Chicago, but damn if it didn't fuck up the next couple of generations of comedians that came after it.

I was now in the lowest point of my improv career. I wasn't fulfilled on any of my house teams, and instead of actively trying to change it, I just sent passive aggressive reply emails when people said they'd be an hour late to rehearsal. I had determined decidedly that a traditional “career path” in comedy was not for me—I knew I wouldn't do well at Second City, I had no interest in fighting the other million comedians in the city for a shot at SNL, I was a terrible actor who regularly embarrassed myself at commercial auditions, and didn't possess the willpower or consistency to write for TV. It was right around this time that the a great exodus occurred of Chicago comedians; people moved en masse to

New York and LA. The city felt like a ghost town, like all the enthusiasm and energy was zapped out over the course of a few months. Performers from multiple generations, from Main Stagers to recent graduates, all jumped ship and left the rest of us looking around for a sense of structure and normalcy. Moving on to LA or New York had never been a goal for me, but once I realized how limited the options were in Chicago for a full time comedian, I felt stuck. I was too “old” to go through more classes, which I sorely wanted, and too young to start teaching, which I really wanted to do. I looked around at the people left in Chicago, talented incredible people and saw what they were doing; performing regularly once or twice a week, sometimes booking commercials, slowly making gains at Second City. I looked at the people above me and wondered if I’d be happy at 40 working my same dead end customer service job, playing the midnight show on a Friday night to 12 people. I just see didn’t much of a path for real artistic performance in Chicago. And to top it all off, I had gained a reputation of being super into improv, which while not untrue, can be a death sentence for your comedy potential. One thing I’ve learned over the years by seeing it first hand is that whatever your passion is, you have to succeed at it more than you love it. If someone’s asked what they think about you as a performer and the first thing they say is “Harrison? Well, he’s super dedicated. That guy really loves improv,” you’re sunk. The worst thing you can be is seen as someone who is just okay at the thing they love. The city was full of these people—I called them “Austins,” after the kid at my college who tried out 6 times for our college improv team and never made it. He still showed up to every show to watch and was always the first to track me down on campus to “talk shop” about comedy. For whatever reason, and I never figured out why, the world despises over-eagerness. It recoils from it like a foul stench. Maybe it’s the inherent tragedy of loving something you’re just not great at.

So, with all this swirling in my head, I gave up on trying to be on the perfect team and just focused on making

progress individually, any way I could. I signed up for more classes, first at CiC and then at the Chicago Improv Studio with Bill Arnett. The classes were incredible (I cannot recommend CIS classes enough—Bill Arnett is a genius), but I could never find a way to bring what I was working on in class to my shows. The vagueness of lessons in gift-giving and physical characterization immediately dematerialized in my brain the minute I stepped on stage, and I found myself doing the same old stuff I was always doing in scenes; standing, talking, relying on my cleverness to get through scenes. I looked deeply into my favorite artists, both comedic and non, for inspiration; people like David Lynch, Frank Zappa, Yoko Ono, James Brown. I loved them for their confidence, for the way they revolutionized the world of art and music, and I tried to carry over their world view to my scene work. If you've never entered an improv scene and thought to yourself, "What would Yoko Ono do?" I don't recommend it. Comedy does not spring forth from such open-ended prompts.

During this period, I was consumed with getting better. I let all other aspects of my personal life completely slip away—I stopped returning phone calls from friends, I neglected the news and politics, my diet was poor, I let all personal relationships slip away. I stayed out late and drank too much and blew all my money on overpriced, bad bar food. I skipped a family reunion to do a 1 day workshop with an ex-cast member from SNL. This was my nadir. I became bitter and judgmental about all things "comedy." I couldn't make it through an episode of *SNL* or *The Daily Show* without scoffing loudly to those around me. I performed a handful of tirades at Spitballin'<sup>56</sup> about what "real" comedy is. I was told by friends I was no longer allowed to sit in the front row of improv shows, because if I didn't like what was happening on stage, if I didn't think they were doing improv right, I had no problem with showing my displeasure. I was some self-appointed hall monitor of comedy in charge of defending the fragile principles of improv comedy from lazy, hack

performers. The only thing that frustrated me more than the community was my own lack of personal progress.

Beyond my own hangups, I started to notice some disappointing facts about the community as a whole. The improv community has never been a culturally diverse place, filled mainly with white, middle class men from the Midwest (me). But I never thought it was against diversifying—in fact I thought we all could see that at its core, improv required a diversity of thoughts and experiences to keep it fresh and alive. As more people spoke out for the need for more people of color, people of the LGBTQ community and women both in places of power and on stage, I was disheartened to witness so much resistance—mostly from white, middle class men from the Midwest (not me). I was ready to see a revolution take place within the community, but instead was met with calls for slow progress and incremental changes. Also, I was totally blown away there were so many performers who didn't think, or didn't care if, improv performers should get paid. Absolutely they should, no questions asked. While it's true, big picture questions arise,<sup>57</sup> the simple truth is that if someone is profiting off your work, you are entitled to a fair share. It was devastating that so many performers were against creating a working wage for performers.

Thankfully, 3 things happened that brought me out of my funk. First and foremost, I started seeing someone. I had let multiple relationships fall apart in the past as soon as I was forced to pick between improv and the other person. But Lindsey loved comedy just as much as I did, and when we weren't watching each other do shows, we were at the theater watching them together. She brought me back to life by reminding me I was more than just a comedy-doing robot.

I had also been asked to start coaching at iO. Coaching was everything I had possibly dreamed it would be, and so much more. I had no idea how satisfying it could be to watch a team grow and come together. Coaching absolutely 100% saved me from forever hating myself for falling in love with improv. I finally had an outlet I could pour all my love and passion for comedy into, and it would be safely dispersed

between the 10 members of the team. My mood began to lighten and I found myself enjoying performing again. The founding of the Flat Iron Comedy Theater<sup>58</sup> was also instrumental in pulling me out of my artistic depression. Starting that space with those people, and getting to see the shows there saved me as a performer. They performed with the commitment and zeal I had been looking for. I had more fun watching the Tuesday night shows there for 6 months straight than I did my first year playing at iO.

I came to peace with where I'd reached as a performer, and decided that I'd be happy just being a coach full time. Even more than that, I wanted to be a teacher. Specifically, in my mind, I wanted to be a kind of improv guidance counselor—I wanted to be able to sit down with new improv performers and just ask them some open ended questions to help figure out what they wanted to get out of improv and how they expected to achieve it. All I wanted to do was help other performers become the best possible versions of themselves. Sadly, that job didn't exist, and the reality of teaching or coaching as a way of full time employment was still realistically another 5 years off. I could either wait around, keep performing, and hope to get hired as a teacher eventually, or move on. I decided to move on.

I don't know if there is a grand lesson to learn from all this. I've spent the last 6 months since leaving Chicago trying to find out what it was. Maybe it's *Don't Let Your Hobbies Turn into Obsessions*. Or that *There's More to a Person than What They Do, and How Good They Are at It*. Maybe the lesson is that, while it does possess a handful of positive virtues, *Comedy is Not Something You Should Build Your Entire Life Around*. But then again, and maybe this is only because I'm the main character in the story I'm telling and I want it to all be worth something, maybe the lesson is this: *You Really Only Get to Do Something **Once***. Like improv, there's no run through in life, no practice; you just do it and hope for the best. And if you love something, the worst thing you can do is bury your love for fear of what others will think.



DR. RONALD HARVEY

# UnRegrets<sup>59</sup>

This is a love letter to the improvisers I've met throughout my life, and to improv the art form. Since I am an academic, I can't just say what I feel and in one go, so I've divided this piece into three parts: Part I covers some of my personal history and how I came to love the Chicago improv scene; Part II describes how my training as a community psychologist informs my improv, and how improv has helped me be a better psychologist. Part III is just a little taste of the improv in different parts of the world. Enjoy!

## Part I: How Improv Saved my Life

I discovered improv in 1995. Unlike most people in the mid-90's, I was pretty cool. I had long blonde hair and wore contact lenses. I played guitar and wrote songs in an alt-rock band named Plume. We released singles and a CD called *God Bless Men and their Rockets*.<sup>60</sup> I dated Beth the Singer. We were a Chicago alt-rock power couple. I drank a lot of booze and did a lot of drugs and was not a great boyfriend. I desperately wanted people to like some version of me.

In 1995, Beth the Singer of Plume worked for an auction house that sold used industrial equipment. Beth's personal assistant was a guy named Kevin Dorf. This place was the

We looked like this:

Groupon and Cars.com of the 1990's—lots of improvisers worked there hoping to sell a \$50,000 cement mixer and slack off for some months on the commission.

One day, Beth the Singer told me that we were going to visit the opening of a new show at an improv comedy club on Clark Street. I remember going to this show: it was called *The Armando Diaz Experience and Hootenanny*, hosted by a guy named Armando Diaz. I am not absolutely sure who was in that first show; I am pretty sure it included Kevin Dorf, Brian Stack, Miles Stroth, Jimmy Carrane, and Noah Gregoropoulos. Later shows I remember included Tina Fey, Rachel Dratch, Amy Poehler, and Matt Besser. I thought it was the fucking funniest thing I had ever seen in my life. Beth and I lived on Cornelia Ave. and so we went to every show we could at Improv Olympic.

Graciously, some of these improvisers would come to a Plume show at Lounge Ax or Metro or Double Door or Beat Kitchen or Empty Bottle.

This was the period when Smashing Pumpkins and Urge Overkill and Liz Phair were playing gigs or were being picked up in the Great Chicago Signing Frenzy of the 1990's. You may read that the bands during this period were super-supportive and friendly with one another. Do not believe this. It was competitive and cut throat. We would poster our gigs in clubs and come back a day later to find them torn down and replaced by a more ambitious band's posters at the same club even though they were playing on a different night. We'd replace them and they would be torn down again. People would not make eye contact with you at parties and clubs—





they were always looking behind you to see who was coming in, and would excuse themselves, or just walk away, when they saw "their people over there."

I remember the improvisers were different. These improv guys would take their dates to our shows and were cooler AND more polite than our fellow alt-rockers in the Chicago scene. They were always super-supportive of us and our band; they would ask about our music and not talk during the shows. I was amazed. They seemed to actually want other people to succeed. I never forgot that.

For the next few years, I went to a lot of improv. I grew up on Monty Python and watched "Saturday Night Live" from the beginning. I loved to laugh, so I went to a lot of improv shows at Improv Olympic. They were always great. I remember seeing The Victim's Family and Blue Velveeta and Jazz Freddy and some Harold teams I do not remember the names of. These shows at Improv Olympic were better than *Python* and *SNL*. It was rougher, but the performers seemed to be having a good time. Like most people, I could not believe it was made up. I remember being particularly impressed with Brian Stack, who would just wait and watch and then do something brilliant and funny that would tie everything together with a minimum of fuss. I remember an old hairy guy always sitting at the downstairs bar who would occasionally grunt-laugh at something. Later I learned that this was Del Close.

But this was not to last. Beth the Singer and I broke up when Plume broke up in 1999<sup>61</sup>. At the time, I was suicidal with booze and depression and failure. In retrospect, I am not bitter I didn't get to be a rock star. I did not have the work ethic or talent, and I liked to drink too much to be a rock star. If we had made it, I am sure I would be dead from

heroin or booze or AIDS and would have dragged a bunch of people down with me. I stopped going to improv shows and just drank with purpose for a year because booze was the only thing that provided me with relief. When the booze stopped working, I got really scared. I knew I was at a crossroads, so I checked myself into rehab and have been sober ever since.

I decided to go back to university in 2003 to finish my bachelor's, and pursued a PhD—first in social psychology at UIC (which I failed and got cut from the program), and then in community psychology at DePaul (finding your proper place to thrive is a huge thing for me now). Fast forward to 2012. I am writing my dissertation (essentially, a really long book report) which is truly a solitary trudge, and I am miserable. I needed something fun to do, and so when I saw an advertisement for Second City on a CTA bus, I recalled my fun times seeing improv in the late 90's and decided to try. I did Second City's levels A-E. I was a solidly mediocre improviser. But the classes were super fun! Improvisers were really nice! I liked being in a community. I'm still (at least Facebook) friends with several of those first classmates.

In 2013, I started classes at iO on Clark. I had great teachers, without exception. I was single, so I went alone to shows every night except Sunday to do my laundry. I loved Revolver and The Hague and the Deltones and Coup de Grâce and Smokin' Hot Dad and Dummy and the late-night jams and others I don't remember. iO staff and performers were nice to me but distant and looked at me curiously; I was a couple decades older than most improv students. That's OK; I was entertained. Then, everything changed for me when a bushy red-haired guy named Joey Ramone shuffled by my bar stool and said, "Hey dude, like, who are you?" Joey

introduced himself to me and started introducing me to other improvisers. From then on, I fell in love with almost everyone I met, almost every theatre I went to, and almost every class and classmate I ever met.

Here is a secret: I wanted to be an actor since I was 8 years old after I was cast in a small role for a stage play in middle school. However, my family made it clear that this behavior was unacceptable. Acceptable activities: sports. Playing rock guitar was an absolute act of rebellion.<sup>62</sup> But I was desperately unhappy for most of my life. I had to wait 40 years to be in my next stage production – as Giles in Maggie Gottlieb’s production of *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* musical, *Once More With Feeling*. It was super fun! But I was also startled by an overwhelming feeling of sadness, which I later came to understand as regret. Regret is a form of bargaining that happens during the process of a dealing with loss, even if the regret is realized decades later. It is the feeling, “If I only had known then what I know now.” But that is impossible; everyone is doing the best they can at that moment.

Many more good things and great people have happened since then! Being part of the improv community in Chicago saved my life. If it weren’t for you, I would not be here.<sup>63</sup>

Better late than never! That’s been the motto of my adult life.

## Part II: Psychology and Improv

In 2014 I got a PhD in Community Psychology from DePaul University.<sup>64</sup> So what is Community Psychology?

You are probably familiar with Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis, B.F. Skinner’s operant conditioning using rewards and punishments, or Abraham Maslow’s humanistic

Hierarchy of Needs, recently re-branded as “positive psychology.” These individualistic approaches have dominated psychological world views, but are regrettably ineffective when it comes to scalable relief of systemic human suffering. For example, massive investments in prisons has done little to protect us, but rather has stigmatized and victimized generations of our most vulnerable citizens while unwittingly training them how to become seasoned criminals. Hundreds of thousands of people are given individualized treatment for drug use, and are then sent back to the social networks and ineffective programs that often further cement hopelessness and demoralization. Everyone needs dignity, safe and supportive housing, and decent jobs, but we are often provided dehumanizing shelters and dead-end job training programs.

Psychoanalytic, behavioral, and pop-positive psychology therapeutic models were not designed to address contextual factors. Individualistic models perpetuate programs that are expensive, ineffective, and fail to address the social environments that provide so few constructive opportunities or resources. The failure to embrace more preventive frameworks dooms our efforts to control or eradicate many problems caused by poverty, discrimination, inequality, and powerlessness.

Fifty years ago, the field of Community Psychology (CP) emerged out of the crises of the 1960s, a time of turmoil involving the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. The most important word in CP is “context”—understanding the entire context in which people live and function is the most effective way to institute long-term positive change. Individuals feel, behave, and change according to their environment and systems in which they live, and individuals

change their environment accordingly. Therefore, CP holds that any psychological intervention must ALSO acknowledge and address the root contextual systems—injustice, poverty, dis-empowerment—to improve individual well-being. CP also offers the powerful message of prevention as an effort to move beyond attempts to treat each affected individual and promotes collaboration by actively involving citizens as true partners in efforts to design and implement community-based interventions.

To give an example: In the U.S., I study a type of self-run recovery home for people who wish to remain abstinent from drugs and alcohol. These homes are unique because they have absolutely no professional staff to run them or tell anyone what to do from a position of authority. They are small scale—typically 7 to 12 individuals. Everyone pitches in equally on house chores, pays their fair share of the rent, and all decisions affecting the house must be made democratically. So long as you meet those requirements, residents can live there as long as they want. Everyone depends on one another for the success of the house; if one person is faltering, it is in everyone's best interests to help that person. If someone relapses, that person has to leave—and now the remaining residents' rent/chores have increased until a new person replaces the person who left.

These homes are effective, with success rates over 2 years of up to 90%, whereas most interventions are only 20-30% effective. They work because they operate within a naturalistic environment where people learn from one another, have a voice in what happens in their group, support one another to relieve stress, and form friendships, with the caveat that there are clear consequences for violating this harmony.

Huh: a small group of 7 to 12 like-minded individuals working together for a common purpose where they are required to trust each other in order to achieve a goal? To me, that describes the basics of an improv team. So when I think about my own community psychology research studying group recovery homes, in the back of my mind, I'm thinking of improv teams, group exercises, and so on. So although I take classes and workshops and see a shit-ton of shows to have fun, I also think improv makes me a better community psychologist.

The need to belong is a fundamental human need. It has been well-established that social support can influence emotional and physical well-being, and as such, the study of group-related phenomena and interpersonal connections has been a key component of community psychology research and other fields. In CP, we all exist in three layers: “the individual” with our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. We interact within a “microsystem”—our immediate network of individuals, such as family, friends, coworkers, and classmates—which in turn is embedded in a “macrosystem,” comprised of governments, cultures, and societies, and the planet Earth itself. Community psychologists are concerned with an individual’s own experiences within these larger systems and how these systems interact to affect one another. Real change involves changing ALL levels, not just the individual.

These systems are most effective when you really feel part of it—what we call the psychological sense of community (PSC). PSC is “the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interdependence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for

others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure.”<sup>65</sup>

If you don't have PSC, it's hard to cooperate and get things done as a community group, or to help one another recover from addiction in a recovery home, or play on an improv team.

It turns out you can measure PSC. My colleagues at DePaul came up with the Psychological Sense of Community Scale, which consists of 24 statements/questions that tap into three domains called: Entity, Membership, and Self that reflects group membership, fulfillment of needs, shared emotional connection, and influence. And when you do this measurement, you can find out whether people really connect to their groups. It's fucking awesome. And when we measure this in recovery homes, those homes that have collective high sense of community and have individual members who feel really connected to their group home and other members, tend to do well over time.

So as improv teams (or substance abuse recovery homes) form and develop over time, you can do certain activities to enhance the sense of community. One example is just acknowledging, explicitly or implicitly, that you need one another and you're glad that your teammates are there. These are exhibited via the group hugs or “I got your back” huddles or just pats on the back before and during shows (I love seeing these gestures). Another activity is just acknowledging that you're grateful to be in Chicago, at iO or at CIC, or a theater that supports your talent and wants you to succeed. Just say it out loud, and you will strengthen your bonds to others and be a better improviser.

But if there's someone in your team that you don't like, or you feel disconnected with your group or “the scene” in

some way, it's worth thinking about what you can do to enhance your own psychological sense of community to reconnect and re-energize yourself and have fun again. Much psychology research supports the notion that it is much easier to behave your way into right thinking and feeling, rather than the other way around.<sup>66</sup>

For you experienced improvisers, I don't think I'm telling you anything you don't already know. I think Del Close and the other pioneers knew these things in their bones and tried to invent games to create a strong psychological sense of community, though they called it something else, like "one group mind." And you can probably come up with specific games to enhance this beyond the trust fall. This is why I love going to shows and hanging around you people and taking classes: it bonds me to the best of humanity.

Over the past seven years that I've been hanging around the improv community, I've wanted to share this idea of how important it is, and how lucky you are here in Chicago, to have this incredible powerful psychological sense of community that you can tap into- if you so choose.

### Part III: Improv Around the World

Since 2016, I've lived in Sofia, Bulgaria. There's not a big improv scene here, so I know almost everyone who started the different theatre groups and training centers. If it makes you feel any better, the same short-form vs. long-form dichotomy happens almost everywhere, the "we were here first so we own improv in this town and how dare you invite us to participate in your dumb festival" happens just like in every other small market everywhere. So it goes.

In March of 2016, I performed with Sarah Cowdrey, Phil Meister, and Jeff Murdoch in the very first English-language



improv show in Bulgaria (so far as I know). It was a blast! People asked us if we had really “made that all up,” which is the nicest compliment there is!

In September 2018, we had our 3rd Sofia International Improv Festival. During this and the previous three years, we have had great teachers come from Chicago and all over the world to teach at the festival and at workshops outside the festival. This has been such a great connection to home for me.

I am writing this in Moscow, Russia, where I am performing and teaching a couple workshops. If you have not yet gone to an improv festival outside of the United States of America, then you are really missing an amazing experience. Even teaching foreign visitors at a summer intensive in Chicago is not the same. I have been to “impro” (which still sounds awful to my ears) festivals in Oslo, Copenhagen, Tampere (Finland, brutes), Brighton, Sofia, and Bucharest. In 2019 I hope to go to festivals in Dublin, London, Lyon, and Strasburg (France, Europe), Berlin, Athens, and to Cape Town, South Africa. Improv people are generally as friendly, welcoming, and fun to be around as they are anywhere else.

Attending international improv fests have really opened my eyes to how isolation can impact a community. There are absolutely cultural differences on what improv “is” depending on where you go and how long the scene has been around and who has come through town and the vibe of who “started” the improv culture where it is (this is all solid gold information for a community psychologist interested in context). Simply put, what people see as possible in improv depends almost entirely on the founder(s) and what they have seen before. If you have never seen a “talking band poster in a teen bedroom” scene, then you will probably never think

about doing it, but you'll be blown away if you see it. If all you see are arguments and conflict in two-person talking-head scenes, then that is what improv is. If you live in a low-trust culture (and most places in Eastern Europe are extremely low-trust cultures), you will have a remarkably difficult time cross-pollinating improv groups to perform together.

But it really gets interesting when you teach improv to people whose lives are different from your own. For example, it is extremely difficult to run social status exercises in Bulgaria. If I assign low and high status to two improvisers respectively, they will ALWAYS treat each other poorly, but in different ways. The rationale is, why would a high/low status person ever treat a person of the opposite status well? The idea is unthinkable in Bulgarian culture. It is super-fun and frustrating and interesting all at the same time.

International festivals are a great way to open eyes to what improv is elsewhere and what improv actually could be, for better or for worse. I have seen some amazingly great shows that, on paper, I thought I would despise but ended up loving. I've seen hour-long dialog-free improv from French groups that are utterly captivating because they are so heavily influenced by mime and clowning. Seeing people beat-box rap in a second language is fun as hell. But I have also seen some of the most boring, offensive improv in my life get standing ovations. In many places, improv groups will pick and choose suggestions from the audience and then discuss which ones they like ON-STAGE and then choose one. This offends my purist Chicago improv sensibilities of choosing the first suggestion one hears.

*Dr. Ronald Harvey*

So dear readers, have no doubt: improv is everywhere, and seeing it elsewhere stirs up all kinds interesting and sometimes contradictory feelings. But this is the nature of the art and where it came from.<sup>67</sup> GET OUT THERE!

That's all the space I have for this essay.

Thank you for being my Facebook friend!

Love,  
Dr. Ron

P.S. THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING!



TED TREMPER

# Letter from the Future

## Author's note:

*My friends at The Hambook asked me to write a piece about what I've learned about producing improvised/scripted content for film/video. In order to eschew my fears of coming across as a condescending know-it-all turd, I've decided to voice these thoughts as a letter to myself in the past.*

*A letter I receive on May 1, 2011 to be exact.*

*If you're looking for more technical knowledge on filmmaking, I learned nearly everything I know from constant failure, lynda.com, Vimeo Film School, and the blog "[NoFilmSchool.com](http://NoFilmSchool.com)." All, especially the first one, can teach you far more than I ever could.*

*And if I can leave you with only one piece of actual advice, it comes slightly paraphrased from Neil Gaiman:*

*There are only three rules to being successful...*

- *Do good work.*
- *Show up on time.*
- *And be fun to play with.*

*Otherwise, I hope you're all well. Don't forget to tip your bar and waitstaff.*

*Yours truly,  
Ted Tremper*

*Los Angeles, CA | March 6, 2018*

Dear Ted,

Hi there. It's me—you. I'm writing to you from nearly seven years in the future.

Don't believe me? That's understandable.

Here's a bit of proof: tomorrow night at about 9PM Central, President Obama is going to have a press conference and announce that we killed Osama Bin Laden.

Fucker was in Pakistan all this time.

As you're reading this, a bunch of guys from a military squad called, "Seal Team 6," are on their way to his compound. They're gonna bust in, shoot him in the eyeball, then take his body and throw it off an aircraft carrier in the middle of the ocean. Kinda nuts, huh?

In any case, I'm here to give you some advice.

You're doing pretty well right now.

You just won that Vimeo Award for *Break-ups*. Pretty awesome. You've got your first manager. Well done. And as I recall, you've just gotten back from the Second City boat contract (more on that later.)

Right now, you're working at that production company, which is great. One of the best decisions you made was intentionally seeking out work with productions companies, so you learn how shoots work, and even borrow their gear from time to time.

You're positioning yourself to become a somewhat competent filmmaker some day. Congratulations.

Now for the "advice" part:

It's probably no secret to you, but a lot of people in Chicago really don't like you right now. And guess what? They're right.

For the first few years you've been there, you've been a really self-righteous asshole.

I'm sure that's hard to hear. Trust me, I know more than anyone that your dickishness is fueled by a terrifying dread that you're a talentless failure. But it doesn't matter.

People care about how you make them feel, and right now you come off as a dismissive egoist. And most destructively: someone who's not very fun to play with.

You'll realize I'm right when that slot you were promised on a Harold team after you got off the boat disappears. SPOILER ALERT: *you're going to have to wait almost a year to audition because the people running the auditions hate you (justifiably). They're going to try to pass you over, but Charna is going to force them to put you on a team. Then, after one schedule, they're going to cut your team and place almost everyone on a new team except you. Sorry, dick.*

But, that's OK.

Because if you realize you're being an asshole—and I mean, *really truly internalize that*—almost everyone will forgive you.

Some won't, and that's their right. Some will quite literally (and successfully) sabotage your career as a performer, but that's OK too. Because the important part is, once you begin accepting yourself, loving your friends and their ideas, and cherishing this stupid and brilliant art form you've decided to dedicate your life to, you'll start having something that you haven't had your first four years in Chicago:

Fun.

Once you stop worrying about being “the best,”—a fucking ridiculous notion when it comes to scenic improvisation—and start allowing yourself to have fun, you'll end up becoming who I hope we are now: a friend and collaborator who makes a conscious effort to be kind, loving, respectful, and encouraging without any expectation of anything in return. Someone who allows themselves to be

stupid, and silly, and joyful, and terrified. A person who knows they are deeply flawed, but also understands that you can't hate-away your own imperfections.

*Please note: I'm not saying that we actually are that person now. I'm probably just as big of an asshole as you are, just triple-delusional. What I'm saying is, if you actually start trying to fix this shit, we might end up a happy person that people want to be around sooner than early May of 2017.*

That's really the huge thing I wanted to tell you.

But while I have you, here are some other things that might help, (in no particular order):

## Keep making work. No matter what.

When you were on that Second City ship, you had an idea for a television show called, "Shrink." Recently, you pitched your manager on the idea of making it into a pilot for the New York Television Festival. He told you to not make it. "You should focus on selling a piece of writing," he said.

### **IGNORE THIS MAN!**

You end up wasting two months of your life writing the buddy-cop script he asked for, and it doesn't amount to anything. You know why? You didn't want to write a buddy-cop script! You wanted to make *Shrink*!

And even after you make *Shrink*, you still fuck up! You become so worried about making something that's not as good, you essentially stop making films in Chicago altogether. It's pure cowardice!

So I'm here to tell you: continue making everything you can while you're in Chicago. Make things all the time. Films, podcasts, sketch shows, anything!

You are surrounded by a wealth of brilliant performers, beautiful FREE locations, and pals with an indefatigable desire



to create art. And you're never going to believe this, but when you're 34, things like just waking up and moving around HURTS YOUR BODY.

So use the energy, and general ability to move your limbs without pain, and keep making things!

## Learn Every Job.

The concept of an auteur filmmaker who comes out of nowhere, plops her ass down in a director's chair and starts making beautiful work, is, (as far as I can tell), complete and utter horse fluff.

Every successful filmmaker I know started by doing grunt work, (if they were lucky enough to have a job in the industry). Then, after years of persistence, they learned how to do literally every job, and started cranking out their own films. Shitty, horrible films at the start—sometimes for years—then work that was worthy or sharing with other people.

By learning to do every job, you also gain sympathy for each person you will be hiring when you are the boss. You can applaud their work with genuine praise, commiserate over difficult days, and celebrate the amazing ones.

Learn every job. It is not always a joyful path, but it is an honorable one.

## Make Promises to People You're Terrified to Disappoint.

When you do make *Shrink*, you ask Tim Baltz, (the guy from *Family Treehouse Boat Accident* and *Best Friggin' Time of Your Life*), to be the star. This is an amazing decision for a several reasons.

First, he's one of the best improvisers of his generation. What's more: he's an even better *actor* than he is an

improviser. Your respect for his artistry will propel you keep going with the project when your life completely turns to shit around this time next year.

*(Sorry—I don't have enough space to really tell you about that, but there is some seriously shitty, life changing stuff of the horizon. You get through it, but it's not easy. Just remember: no matter what happens, you will always have music.)*

Ninety percent of filmmaking is persistence. Showing up and filming stuff is incredibly fun! Everybody loves that part. But the key is to develop what Quincy Jones calls, “Ass Power.” The ability to park your butt in a seat and keep writing, editing, and planning after everybody goes home or gives up.

And making promises of finished work to geniuses like Tim Baltz is a darn good motivator.

Never try to replace an Apple laptop's battery yourself.

You try this in early 2017, and it destroys your logic board. Those things are superglued in there for a reason. Just pay the \$250 and have the “geniuses” do it.

Develop your own process and trust it if it works.

There's not a film school in this country that would recommend shooting improv as a foundation for building a career in film, but improv is what you love. Keep investing in it.

And if this letter causes some weird-ass butterfly effect where you end up only wanting to film time-lapses of log cabins being built, that's ok too! Most of the world thinks that's a hell of a lot more entertaining than improv.

My point is: the world is big enough that if you create any kind of good, honest work, it will find an audience.

## Always yield to the better idea.

In my timeline, you end up working at *The Daily Show* as a field producer and doing a piece with Jordan Klepper—one of the other guys from *Family Treehouse Boat Accident*.

The piece, called “Good Guy with a Gun,” sought to prove Klepper could pass the Texas Conceal Carry exam after a single day of training. But, when you were working with the firearms instructor, he let you know about a loophole whereby Klepper could mail his certificate of completion of the New Jersey based NRA safety course to Florida, and the state of Florida would send him a real concealed handgun license through the mail that would be honored in 30 states. So that’s what we did instead.

I know that’s confusing, but the point is: when you’re shooting something—especially something improvised—go in with a solid plan, but be present enough to completely ditch your plan when a better idea comes along.

## Look into Positive Psychology

This is useful in developing the self-love you’ll need to stop being such an asshole to people. Here’s a jumpstart guide:

At the end of each day write down three things you really loved, relive one of those memories in paragraph long detail, exercise, and meditate. That’s it.

If you want to know more, *The Happiness Advantage* by Shawn Achor is a good place to start.

## Have a purpose.

You started making films for a very simple reason: you wanted to make people watching improv on film feel the way you do when you're watching it in person. But that falls away after a while.

For years you lose your purpose.

Working at *The Daily Show* helps you find it again. It becomes, "to use comedy to elucidate hypocrisy." But then the 2016 presidential election kind of fucks that all up.

Right now it's just, "To make good, honest work." Which feels OK for the time being.

Regardless of what you say your purpose is, being able to speak it out loud somehow helps.

## Call Grandpa more often.

During a routine stint replacement in the winter of 2016, an anesthesiologist at Overtake Hospital accidentally kills him.

You miss him a lot. And you really wish you had recorded more of your conversations like you always said you were going to.

## If you find yourself hating someone or something, try to find one thing about them that makes them vulnerable or interesting.

When you're working at *I Love You, America* with Sarah Silverman, you meet a dog named Olive.

Olive is a plastic cone wearing, half-brained, half-pug half-chihuahua who everyone in the office hates because she shits everywhere. Literally every office in the building.

But one day, after months of seeing Olive wearing that little plastic cone around her hideous little head, you ask her owner what's wrong with her.

"Oh, nothing," he says. "She just likes wearing the cone."

Let me repeat that:

"She just likes wearing the cone."

And with that, your heart cracks wide open. For some reason the idea of a dog liking the one thing all dogs are born to hate, makes you stop hating Olive, and start loving her.

I'll invite you to do the same thing with all the people you dislike in your life. Because really, in the end, we're all just stupid little dipshit asshole dogs with cones on our heads.

And we all deserve to be loved.

That's pretty much it.

I could go on, but I've probably done enough to completely fuck up the space time continuum. If I wake up tomorrow to discover I'm a crab fisherman in the Bering Sea, I'll know why.

But really, again, if you've read this far, I just hope you give yourself permission to stop being so goddamn afraid all the time and start loving yourself. It's really the key to everything.

I know you won't, but that's OK too.

In the meantime, see you later, asshole.

Love,  
You.

P.S. I almost forgot. Buy a fuckload of Bitcoin! Like, right now. I know you have no idea what I'm talking about, but look it up tomorrow. We'll thank me later.



ZACK MAST

# On Improv, Anxiety, and Saying Goodbye

You moved to Chicago with a five-year plan. First, you were going to study improv, here in the city where improv became an artform, where every stage bears the molted brilliance of Tina and Stephen and Chris and Cecily and Stephnie and Bob. Where one can truly focus on the craft. Where one has the freedom to be bad.

In Years Two Through Four, you'd use that freedom to get good—so good, in fact, that you could finally break free. In Year Five, you would move on to bigger and better things: writing for TV, or acting on TV, or getting someone to adapt your webseries to TV. Whatever the case, you'd leave Chicago, pack up your new (used) Prius, say, “Sayonara, Charna,” and ride off west into the sunset.

That was the plan, anyway.

The problem with the five-year plan, at least in my case, and maybe even in yours, is that improv isn't for everyone. That might be obvious to anyone reading this, but then again most of the wisdom we acquire in life should have been obvious at first. For me, it took a while to learn. For me, the

five-year plan to forge a career through improv was more like a five-year odyssey to overcome my own anxiety. To find the courage to quit.

My first year was pretty typical. I started classes at iO and made it my mission to get good. Like almost everyone, I was bad. When we first start out, none of us are equipped to understand exactly what makes bad improv bad. I started an indie team with some friends, and we insisted we didn't need a coach (we did). I performed upstairs at Mullen's and downstairs at Underground Lounge and coveted a slot at Upstairs Gallery. I joined the casts of Improvised Whatevers. I even took notes in class! Can you imagine?

In year two, I finished 5Bs, and when I didn't make a Harold team, I cried on my girlfriend's shoulder for ten minutes. It's always heartbreaking to hear you aren't good enough, but now I had to face an even more devastating truth: things were not going to go according to plan.

At 24, I was wise enough to know that the right thing to do was pick myself up, move forward, and adjust my plan. But at 24, I was also foolish enough to believe that I must have been wronged. If I was going to get my plan back on track, I had to know what went wrong—and who was responsible for it.

I've never told anyone this, but somewhere along the line I had discovered the hidden URL to the teachers' portal on the iO website. Which meant I could get in and view my feedback, level by level, class by class—if only I could hack in and look at my record. It was, of course, an idiotic operation, a fool's errand rooted in my arrogance and insecurity, but I was desperate for any intelligence on why I had failed, and the only thing standing between me and the truth was a



simple login screen. I spent a week trying to guess teachers' passwords:

brett@ioimprov.com | level2teacher  
craig@ioimprov.com | late90scoach  
charna@ioimprov.com | mustlovedogs

Nothing.

With no other shortcuts, I resigned to find out my shortcomings the old-fashioned way: asking a panel deliberately designed to judge your shortcomings. When my notes from the Harold Commission came back, they felt, at the time, like a punch in the gut:

*Hi Zach,*

*We don't share teacher notes with students, but we do share your 5b show notes. So I'll share those with you now.*

*We found you to be a smart and often funny player. You work hard and always seemed articulate and high in reference.*

*Our notes going forward would be to work on listening a bit more actively and live the scene more and analyze it less, if that makes sense. Also, right now you can sometimes be an active player but with too much behind your efforts, which can make you come off as an over-the-top player, even if funny. So give that area some focus as well.*

Reading these notes now, it's clear that they're rather kind, smoothed out with encouraging words and focused on my most glaring tendencies—both common pitfalls for young improvisers—with some helpful direction on how to fix them. But as I pull them up in my inbox, I see that I had immediately forwarded these notes to my friend with the comment, "WOW. Your notes are MUCH more positive!"

They were tough to swallow then, but in the years to follow, these notes would haunt me in the back of my anxious brain.

*You work hard...*

I'm only "often" funny—I need to be funny more often.

*Work on listening a bit more actively...*

"High in reference"? Like that's a bad thing?

*Live the scene more and analyze it less...*

I'm too active—I need to calm down.

*...if that makes sense.*

No, always funny. That's what I need to be.

Over the next two years, things began to take shape: I started classes at Annoyance, where I met the friends that would come to form my indie team, Law Dog. I made an incubator team at The Playground. I went back through iO and finally made a Harold team. When I auditioned at CIC, which I believed had the best improv in the city, I stood outside and whispered to myself, "You can do this. You belong here." It worked—I made a team. The plan was back on track.

As I started to perform regularly, my skill as an improviser sharpened, but so did my identity as an improviser. My creative pursuits became my life. I remember hearing a friend saying, "I do comedy in my free time," and thinking: Wait, "free time?" It didn't feel like improv was what I did for pleasure; rather, it was the thing I needed to do, the center of my identity, and paying attention to the other priorities of life—my relationship, my job, my personal well-being—was the hobby.

It also made me miserable. No matter how well a show might go, I'd come off stage believing I had done everything wrong. People would say, "Great show!" and I would think, *Thanks, but I know you're just being nice*. During notes, I would listen with dread, anticipating the moment the coach would point out some mistake I'd made. At CIC, I put pressure on myself to live up to what I saw as the standards of the theatre, and as a result, I entered every show feeling like I didn't belong, like they had a mistake in casting me in the first place. While I've never been uncomfortable on stage in general, I was uncomfortable being on that stage, terrified of being exposed as a fraud.

I'd confide in my friends and teammates about how I felt like I wasn't good enough. "Why do you say those things? You're the only one who thinks that. You're great." That might have been true, but the voice of those who loved me was no match for the voice inside that hated me. "I don't know," I'd say. "I don't know why I say it."

I should be clear that none of this is the fault of the 5B notes. It wasn't the notes themselves that bothered me. The notes were a convenient stand-in for my own anxiety, something which my spiraling self-criticism could latch onto and fester. The exact words didn't matter, other than that they gave me a way to articulate my self-hatred.

In Year 4, things fell apart. I went through a bad breakup, driven in part by the strain that improv had put on the relationship. I got cut from both iO and CIC (where I was told, "You seem uncomfortable up there"). My Playground team went its separate ways.

In response, I focused on Law Dog, and on our weekly show at CIC, where we hosted a showcase of other independent teams. It brought me genuine joy to play with

Law Dog, maybe because it was a group of my best friends. But it was also a chance for me to take the pressure away from my own improv, to focus instead on having fun with my friends and watching a newer generation of improvisers find their voices. It didn't matter anymore whether I was good enough.

When Year 5 began, a friend convinced me to audition again at iO. I went into the audition just trying to have fun, and I shined. The team that formed, Gideon, was full of bright veterans, many of whom I'd known from my first classes at iO. I was excited for a second chance at iO, to just enjoy performing at the theatre without the pressure of proving myself.

One night, I had a Harold show at 8:30 on a Thursday. When I got backstage, I began suffering what can only be described as a full-blown panic attack. As my teammates patted my shoulders and said, "Got your back," I only wished someone would strangle me so I wouldn't have to step on stage. As the lights dimmed, I closed my eyes and mustered the strength to open the fake door, slide out onto the stage, give the audience a twirl, and smile. The show itself was a blur. During notes, all I could think about was that I'd let my teammates down.

Afterward, I headed to CIC for my indie show. When I got there, the anxiety lifted. I had fun. I could breathe again.

Why did that show at iO fill me with such dread? It wasn't the people; the team was stacked with folks as friendly as they were funny. It wasn't that I hated doing the Harold. Maybe it was that I felt conflicted about iO itself—but this is not an essay about systemic issues in our comedy institutions.

To find the answer, let's go back to my inbox. Here's what I wrote to my coach when I was considering whether to step down from iO:

I think it's fair to say that sometimes the Harold doesn't seem right for me. My brain doesn't quite gel with the relaxed groupwork that a 10-person piece requires. I think too much. I get nervous about making moves. Sometimes I'm too aggressive...

It breaks my heart to read this now. Four years after I'd first internalized The Notes, I still told myself that being an active player was a bad thing, that it made me "over the top." This time, The Notes really did make for a convenient excuse—a way to justify to myself that there was a better reason for quitting than the simple truth, which was that improv made me deeply unhappy. I hated it. I hated the pressure I put on myself to do it well. And most of all, I hated what would run through my brain after a show, the voice telling me "that wasn't good enough."

*Live the scene more and analyze it less...*

When I first started studying improv, I would often say something idealistic and smug like, "I want to study improv because I'm afraid of it." This was bullshit. I was afraid of improv, but not for the reasons I thought. When we hear the mantra "Follow the Fear," I think we're supposed to subscribe to the Fear of the Unknown: improv is scary because we don't know what's going to happen. The mantra always seemed off to me, because that's what was actually exciting about improv. I liked venturing into the unknown. I liked making something from scratch, surprising myself with my own ideas and delighting in the moves of my teammates. On the contrary, what I felt was the Fear of the Known—the

prospect that any given improv show would expose the things that only I seemed to know: that I'm not funny enough, that I'm never going to be as good as I want to be, that I don't deserve to be here.

But was that really unique to me? We all suffer from Imposter Syndrome sometimes. In the beginning of this essay, I said that improv isn't for everyone, but it's true, too, that, for lots of people, improv is the jam. In these very pages, we've read personal accounts of people finding themselves through improv. It's led people to find a sense of belonging, or to find new forms of self-expression, or to lift up others who might also be struggling to find their place. We've seen the ways improv inspires people to sort through important issues of creativity and representation and the purpose of art in our lives. Improv can be good, and fun, and cathartic. And sure, it can hone the skills that lead to a successful career in the arts. For some people.

But it's not for me. I couldn't overcome the central challenge, at least in my experience, of improv as a creative pursuit: in seeking validation of myself as a performer, I ended up seeking validation of myself as a human being. If my improv was bad, then I was a bad person. And because I was so hard on myself, no improv show was ever going to feel good enough. I was never going to feel good enough.

*...if that makes sense.*

In shaping my five-year plan, I had set the stakes impossibly high. I had made succeeding at improv into a non-negotiable goal. When I enrolled in that first class at iO, I wasn't just signing up for a class. I was locking myself into a creative identity for the next five years. And it took nearly five years

for me to realize that Chicago Improviser was not the right identity for me.

Around the time I was pondering leaving the Harold for good, I read a piece on *Vulture* by Liz Meriwether, the creator of *New Girl*. The piece is a fun, breezy reflection on how Meriwether's discomfort of living in LA ended up fueling her creative engine, but it's this passage that stuck out to me then:

In New York, I was going to every stand-up performance and improv night I could go to. I actually saw David Cross live when he dropped in unannounced at a show on the Lower East Side. Comedy in New York was dirty, absurd, subversive, alive. I don't know, man, I just really loved it. But I wasn't a stand-up, and I wasn't enough of a joke writer to work in late night, and I blew my 30 Rock meeting by talking for 45 minutes about robots—in New York, the options were limited.

The thing that resonated with me, specifically, is that small, self-assured aside: "But I wasn't a stand-up, and I wasn't enough of a joke writer to work in late night." Although she recognized that New York was a thrilling place to be doing comedy, Meriwether had the confidence—and the mental clarity—to discern what was really, truly not for her.

It's been almost two years since I quit improv. Since then, I've focused on independent projects that make me feel confident in my voice. Heck, it's a good thing that I'm only "often funny," as that just means my life has some balance. What's more, I have a much healthier relationship with creativity now that I don't feel like I need to compete to prove I belong. When I do dabble in improv, I've enjoyed doing things like The Co-op at The Crowd, where there's no

pressure to do anything other than to have fun and support a community.

I'm always going to be a creative person. But when I set out to enact my five-year plan, I made "creative person" my whole identity. It wasn't until I separated my creative pursuits from my sense of self that I began to feel good about either.

As I write this, I'm in the midst of a run of a play that my friends wrote. It's a comedy, but it's not part of the Chicago comedy scene. There are no stakes involved other than to enjoy performing, to make stuff just for the sake of making stuff.

A few weeks ago, I said to my girlfriend, who's not a performer, "I haven't done a project since October. I need to do something creative. I'm getting restless!"

She stared at me. "What are you talking about? You've been rehearsing a show for two months."

"Oh, no," I laughed. "That doesn't count. That's fun!"

It's been eight years since I moved to Chicago. Somewhere in Year Three or Four, I had trained myself to believe that I wasn't doing anything creative unless I hated every second of it. I'm now in Year Eight of my five-year plan, and I'm only just beginning to break free. L.A. may be where my sun will set, but Chicago, right now, is where it will shine.



# Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> [Editor's Note] This quote is attributed to Howard Thurman by Gil Bailey in the forward of his book *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*. New York: Crossroad, 1995. Print.

<sup>2</sup> [Editor's Note] As of April 15, 2016, this quote could be found on Choquette Publishing's website, on the "Your Questions" page under the heading, "Why is Caillou Bald?" Chouette Publishing, n.d

<sup>3</sup> Quick explanation: If you spoke out against Saddam's regime, or were believed to be against Ba'ath party or in any way disloyal to the Iraqi government, well, then you'd be off'd by the Iraqi government. And depending on the severity of your supposed sedition, it may not just be you, but your entire family who gets killed. Government officials would try to trap people. They'd do things like go to schools and ask kids what their parents say at home about the government, and sometimes kids would rat their own family out on accident by saying the wrong thing, and the entire family would be exterminated. Hi, OK! Let's talk about how shitty it is to feel "out" in the improv community now...

<sup>4</sup> [Editor's Note] Peter is referring to a sign that was put up in the entrance of the Second City, asserting that hateful and prejudiced speech would not be accepted in the theater. Chris Jones, a Chicago theater critic, wrote a strange response to it in the Tribune. I'll let you track it down, if you must.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.womeninclothes.com>

## Endnotes

<sup>6</sup> I will offer a caveat here. There are apparently some classes that have been created with medical professionals for specific mental illnesses. I have no experience with them nor have I spoken with anyone who has taken them. This is in reference to regular old improv class. Not “Satire for the Suffering Levels A-E”.

<sup>7</sup> Put a pin in that.

<sup>8</sup> If they then decided to place my allusions into a different context then they surmise I intended, like making my astronaut an actor, then they actually did two sets of inference, inferring what I meant AND a second interpretation, then picking the one they like better. (This, incidentally, is my absolute favorite thing to do in improv. If I can add another layer of context without invalidating anything that’s been said, I will.)

<sup>9</sup> Put a pin in that, too.

<sup>10</sup> **DEFINITION BREAK:** “Diegetic” is a film term that means something (usually sound) that the characters on-screen are aware of. So like, Harold and Kumar singing along to “Hold On” in the car, that’s diegetic music. “Non-diegetic” means something that the characters on-screen are not aware of, like the ominous cello in *Jaws*.

<sup>11</sup> Factually inaccurate; cannot be seen from space.

<sup>12</sup> Page 108.

<sup>13</sup> Page 109!

<sup>14</sup> Butler, Judith. “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory.” *Performing Feminisms: Feminist Critical Theory and Theatre*. Ed. Sue-Ellen Case. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1990, 278.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid, 273.

<sup>16</sup> Butler, Judith (2002-05-03). *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition* (p.15). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition.

<sup>17</sup> Felluga, Dino Franco. (2015). *Critical Theory: The Key Concepts* (p. 307). New York, NY: Routledge.

<sup>18</sup> Butler, Judith (2002-05-03). *Gender Trouble: Tenth Anniversary Edition* (p.13). Taylor and Francis. Kindle Edition

<sup>19</sup> Ibid, (p. 23).

<sup>20</sup> [www.somniafilms.wixsite.com/info](http://www.somniafilms.wixsite.com/info)

## Endnotes

<sup>21</sup> Here are two of the projects; *Framed (Episode 1)*: <https://vimeo.com/301039965> and *The Late 90's in 360 Virtual Reality*: <https://littlstar.com/videos/26462bc0>

<sup>22</sup> Even do it in your daily life; give your friend a made-up nickname and call them that for the hour, then change it every hour. Boom, you can invent and remember names now. You're more annoying to be around, sure, but you have more improv skills, and *dammit if that isn't the trajectory of all improvisers*.

<sup>23</sup> When I say "montage," I am including its current bizarrely popular variation; one (typically abstract) "opener" followed by three unrelated scenes, followed by a montage. It's often chosen by teams that are still trying to "find their form." Look; a montage is the *most* difficult form to pull off. It has no rules, no direction, and nine times out of ten I watch performers hyperventilate on the sidelines at the pressure of an infinite number of choices. It doesn't even have a clear way to end it. Why has it become our go-to "lazy" form? When has anyone ever said, "I'm so tired, I barely have the energy to cook... I'll just whip up an improvised dish from all the different things I have in the fridge and whatever is in the cabinets?" Why would you ever give yourself such a huge challenge when you don't know what you're doing yet?

<sup>24</sup> How many times have you seen a performer comment on a car horn honking outside? I hope the answer is "many times," because it's a solid joke with a proven success rate, and ignoring the horn would suggest that the performer isn't open to all present stimuli. When something takes the audience's focus away from an improvised performance, the improvisation fails. The real "magic" of improv is that the simple act of existing in the room can *be* the show. When something takes focus away from the show, like a horn honking, the suspension of disbelief falls apart. But if the stimuli is folded back into the show, it becomes texture, and the illusion of the show holds strong.

## Endnotes

<sup>25</sup> This is why most a cappella has always confused me. If you're going to do all the instrument noises with your mouth, and try to fool us into thinking we're hearing a band, why not just put in the effort and learn to play the real instruments? Because, you know what does the best impression of a guitar? *An actual guitar*. If you're going to insist on only using your voices, why not make noises you can *only make with your voice*? Show me the awesome, untapped power of a cappella, baby!

<sup>26</sup> This is sometimes called a "commentary" scene, though I hate that term. "World pull" more accurately explains the goal; to take a little thing mentioned about the world and explore it in more depth. If the previous scene mentioned a nearby church, let's see that church; if a character loves their job, let's see an office with a healthy work environment. "Commentary" suggests we must make a comment on what just happened, which is confusing and constraining, whereas "pulling from the world" is open-ended and encouraging.

<sup>27</sup> To be fair, that's a metric few teams bother to come up with, and it's the lack of any metric that leads to those depressing moments in the green room after the show, when all the performers mumble, "I had fun," and the coach taps at her notebook and says, "I mean, you're all funny, so it's always going to be a funny show." If the team had done the work to figure out what they want to accomplish with *every* show they do, then it would be easier to walk away from a show and know whether it was a success or not. Instead, everyone has different ideals and metrics, so each performer grades it on a totally different basis. Imagine if each of the Beatles had a different opinion of how their albums should sound! They probably would have broken up a long time ago, instead of continuing to put out powerhouse pop hits year after year, to this day. Oh wait, that's *literally why they broke up a long time ago*.

## Endnotes

<sup>28</sup> This realization first came to me when I attended a workshop lead by Thomas Kelly. He had us do a form based on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, where one performer was elected as Orpheus and the show would end when that performer saw one of the other performers. After two complete “shows” that lasted about five minutes each and only consisted of one scene with one character always staring off into the audience, we started to explore the other options. We realized that we could still do tag runs. We realized that scenes could change but the Orpheus character wouldn’t immediately realize, which lead to a lucid tone that we chose to lean into. The Orpheus realized that moving and turning suddenly meant the other performers had to leap comically out of the way if the show was to continue. And we realized that the show could end in three distinct ways; the Orpheus could choose to end the show by dramatically turning and making eye contact on a final line, another performer could end the show by stepping dramatically into the Orpheus’ field of vision, or it could happen by accident. In this instance, one rule defined an entire form.

<sup>29</sup> Some of us liked to twist patterns. That someone was usually my friend, Nick Lehmann.

<sup>30</sup> In Nick Lehmann’s book, Charna wrote “Welcome to the family, Nick!” In my book, she wrote, “Welcome to the fold.” *Why is he in the family, and I’m just in the fold? We have the same name!* Later that night, I would look in the mirror and wonder if I were just simply a forgettable person.

<sup>31</sup> Me. Mainly, me. But keep reading, because (spoiler alert)—I come back around!

<sup>32</sup> There’s a reason that so many teachers also call the Harold the “Sitcom” form: it’s what *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *30 Rock* and most other television comedies use to organize their stories. We set up an A-plot, a B-plot, and a C-plot, and throughout the episode we weave them together in a satisfying way that gives us short-term, immediate pleasure and long-term, delayed gratification when everything resolves in the end.

## Endnotes

<sup>33</sup> I feel that it's worth mentioning that I am suggesting ways to make improv more "theatrical" or "artistic," when other people may see improv as a means to a comedic end. This is something that has come up when I have had late night conversations with my friends about improv, and I don't think these camps are mutually exclusive: shows can be hilarious *and* artistic. Improv lends itself to both. And, I would argue, that if you have more tools in your toolbelt to make funnier moves, or weave together more interesting plots, or vary the energy, or whatever it is that the show needs, you can produce even funnier shows.

<sup>34</sup> In this case, it's a **historical** lens: "In this form, we do tag runs to play out a game, theme, or idea." Admittedly, some coaches and teachers will teach moves like the revolving door and others in rehearsal. And if moves are practiced and become part of the typical vocabulary, then those choices can be made. *Otherwise, the habits we've developed in watching and performing the "standard" moves with a form will usually take over.* And we can feel more like "just another improv team."

<sup>35</sup> Sweep edits, tag-outs, asides, walk-ons, and group games. Forms like the Harold, Living Room, LaRonde, or a Montage.

<sup>36</sup> Not an exaggeration: the improv audiences at Northwestern University were usually huge and *stupidly supportive*. This definitely contributed to taking risks and creating a form alongside an audience.

<sup>37</sup> Also, people had heard that Nick Lehmann was part of the "iO family." He was incredibly popular and had many friends.

<sup>38</sup> Shit.

<sup>39</sup> Damn.

<sup>40</sup> Motherfucker.

<sup>41</sup> Guess who. Yep. Nick Lehmann.

## Endnotes

<sup>42</sup> I'm not sure I know why things changed—maybe I felt the pressure of being on a professional comedy stage. But I do know that I never really talked about it with my after-college teams. *The Queen's Tears* “nailed” our “Harold” because we had talked in rehearsal about bending away from forms if it felt right and in service of the show. We talked about observing the interplay between content and form as it unraveled and see the structure that was presenting itself, and to capitalize on it. I think, *maybe*, if my teams had talked about this healthy kind of relationship with form, all this frustration with form would have never happened.

<sup>43</sup> <http://violaspolin.com/bio>

<sup>44</sup> Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater; a Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern UP, 1963. Print.

<sup>45</sup> Nietzsche, Friedrich Wilhelm. *The Birth of Tragedy, and the Case of Wagner*. New York: Vintage, 1967. Print.

<sup>46</sup> Bogart, Anne. *And Then, You Act Making Art in an Unpredictable World*. New York: Routledge, 2007. Print.

<sup>47</sup> [Editor's note] *The Hambook* has no idea if reprinting this is legal.

<sup>48</sup> This is something Susan Messing said to me in a level 2 class I took. I was a very hesitant performer and I missed many opportunities to tag in and edit. When she said this, I think she meant that it's harder to edit a scene or tag into it when the moment has passed. Again, go with your gut, and don't let shit pass you by. This also applies to real life.

<sup>49</sup> Macnamara, Brooke N., et al. “Deliberate Practice and Performance in Music, Games, Sports, Education, and Professions: A Meta-Analysis.” *Psychological Science*, vol. 25, no. 8, 2014, pp. 1608–1618., doi: 10.1177/0956797614535810.

<sup>50</sup> Nuwer, Rachel. “The 10,000 Hour Rule Is Not Real.” *Smithsonian.com*, 20 Aug. 2014, [www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/10000-hour-rule-not-real-180952410/](http://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/10000-hour-rule-not-real-180952410/).

<sup>51</sup> I'm borrowing Kevin Mullaney's term here as a less problematic replacement for the term “straight man” You can read more here: <https://kevinmullaney.com/2016/03/20/do-we-really-need-a-straight-man-to-make-comedy-work/>

## Endnotes

<sup>52</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.

<sup>53</sup> Side note—you learn a lot about a performer by the way they treat the theater’s staff. Some of the funniest people in the city were assholes to the staff on a regular basis. Conversely, one of the first pieces of lore I heard about TJ Jagodowski was that he would still show his iO ID to interns at the front door when coming in, in case they didn’t know who he was.

<sup>54</sup> [Editor’s Note] The Upstairs Gallery was an independent comedy theater run by and for Chicago comedians. It opened in September 2010 and closed in August 2014.

<sup>55</sup> Side note—remember when Connor O’Malley’s Vines blew up big time, and you couldn’t walk through an improv theater without hearing someone say, “Hell Yes Pimp!” for like the next 3 months?

<sup>56</sup> [Editor’s Note] Spitballin’ was a variety show in Chicago every Monday night at the late Quencher’s Bar & Saloon. It was hosted by Sand, an improv team featuring *Hambook* Editor Thomas Kelly.

<sup>57</sup> Does getting paid affect how you play/should it?, the intricate economics of paying 200+ performers in a building, etc...

<sup>58</sup> [Editor’s Note] Flat Iron Comedy took place in the Collaboration Theater in the Flatiron Arts Building in Chicago’s Wicker Park district. The show happened every Tuesday and Wednesday night.

<sup>59</sup> This is a big, gushy love letter to the Chicago improv and theater community. I am surprised and flattered by how much you love me back. I am a middle-aged white guy. You shouldn’t love me that much. But I appreciate it!

<sup>60</sup> <https://www.dropbox.com/sh/6zb8jdg8pyirmln/AAC8hYQBIJY9Ukb3ogYIJIEfa?dl=0>

^ It doesn’t matter anymore—rock is dead.



## Endnotes

<sup>61</sup> Beth the Singer is still the coolest and nicest person I have ever met and still sings and performs in local bands.

<sup>62</sup> To this day, I still dislike sports.

<sup>63</sup> I cannot name every single person who was kind to me. There are just too many names to name. Suffice it to say that if I know you, I love you and am grateful to you.

<sup>64</sup> This is 100% the truth: Joey Ramone sat in on my dissertation defense and then took me out for pancakes afterwards. Later that night, I went to a show at iO on Clark in my dissertation suit. It felt like the most natural thing to do.

<sup>65</sup> Sarason, S.B. (1986). Commentary: The emergence of a conceptual center. Journal of Community Psychology, 14, 405-407

<sup>66</sup> If you want more on this, the best academic books on improv are written by Keith Sawyer. Dr. Sawyer actually studied Jazz Freddy and other improv groups in the 1990's and wrote about jazz and improv in Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration. I also highly recommend Zig Zag: The Surprising Path to Greater Creativity.

<sup>67</sup> The recent book *Improv Nation* by Sam Wasson posits that improv has replaced jazz as the USA's most important artistic gift to the world. I like improv more than jazz, so I agree with Sam.

