

David Razowsky - Part 1 - 2/15/07

David Razowsky is a veteran improviser, actor and teacher. In Chicago, he was a member of the second Improv Olympic Harold team, Grime and Punishment, and a long-time writer, actor and director for The Second City. He currently lives in Los Angeles where he is Artistic Director of The Second City, Los Angeles.

JF: Where were you born?

DR: I was born in Chicago, IL.

JF: What were some early influences on your sense of humor?

DR: My mom would take my brother and I to the Adelphi Theater in Chicago on Saturday afternoons, where they would show cartoons and Laurel and Hardy shorts. Every Christmas Eve and New Year's Eve my Mom would stay home and we'd watch the Marx Brothers. So, that was the beginning right there: Charlie Chaplin, The Marx Brothers, Laurel and Hardy. As time went on, we'd watch Monty Python on television. That blew my mind. I couldn't believe that things that were that ridiculous could be funny. I think that totally influenced a generation. Some of these students don't know Laurel and Hardy well, certainly don't know the Marx Brothers well. I'm not making a judgment call on that. That's just the way things are, but I think it would benefit anybody to watch those films, so they can see how ensemble works, how dynamics work between high status and low status works, physical comedy, and all that kind of stuff. You can learn all that kind of stuff certainly from the Marx Brothers.

JF: So, have you been aware 'Oh, I saw Laurel and Hardy or the Marx Brothers doing this' when you're doing some of your own comedy?

DR: Absolutely, certainly Charlie Chaplin, the silent stuff. I've always been a very physical improviser, and aware of my space, and slowness, and low status characters, and the joy of playing low status characters, and connecting with the audience with a way where you're not attacking them. Instead, you're saying 'Why don't you come on my side? It's really fun. Look how adorable I am.' I use that a lot.

JF: When did you know that you wanted to be a performer?

DR: In fourth grade, my family moved to a new house in Chicago. We moved from one place in Chicago to another place in Chicago. My father said 'Why don't you take this drama class?' I didn't know what drama was. I took Drama for Kids at the Bernard Horwich J.C.C. in Chicago, the Jewish Community Center. I took classes there, and the teacher of the class was also a director of many of the projects there, which had all adults in the show. She said 'Why don't you audition for the show?' I did. I had one line and it was 'Look at the bird! The bird!' I was in a panic right until we got onstage. My friend's mother, Devida Hodges, I'm crying stage right and she clutches me to her breast and says 'It's all going to be ok.' I thought 'Wow, I don't even know this lady.' There was something sexual that went on there [laughs], and I said 'I wonder if I could do this again.' So, that's where that came from. At that moment I said 'more of this,' because I'm getting attention and I'm getting attention from a woman, although I was only eight. But I thought 'I think I know what I want to do.'

I remember driving in a car with my Dad, and I said 'I want to be an actor.' And I really believe my Dad said this, although he doesn't remember saying it. He said 'Peter Falk is an MD. You might want to do both.' I don't think Peter Falk's an MD. I remember him saying that. That was around the same time, 4th or 5th grade.

JF: He just made that up out of the blue?

DR: I don't know where it came from. In my head, I remember him saying Peter Falk. I clearly remember where we were driving, around Rockwell and Morris in Chicago. I just remember it so well. Shit like that you can't make up.

JF: Did you continue acting or doing theater in your teens?

DR: I've been solidly working since 4th grade. I don't mean working in huge productions or anything. I don't mean being on camera. I took five years of when I was in college. I got a degree in photojournalism from Northern Illinois University. I really fell in love with that. I became the photo editor of the newspaper there. That was a blast to do.

Then I said 'I want to go back to acting.' I just happened to want to get back into acting at the exact same time Chicago theater was exploding. I went to Improv Olympic back when it was on Wilton and Belmont, not that this means anything to you, but in their first space. And I took classes from Del. It was just the genesis of Chicago as a theater Mecca, because it really is.

I auditioned for one show and didn't make it. The director of that show gave my name to John Bergman, a director from Geese Theater Company that performed in prisons. I auditioned into that. That was non-comedic improvisation. I got into that and I toured prisons for a year doing theater in prisons. We were doing mask work and very structured improv in correctional facilities across the United States. I left that after a year and started taking classes at Improv Olympic from Del, directly from Del. I didn't take classes from Charna at all. I was on the second Harold team after Barron's Barricudas. We were called Grime and Punishment. It was Mick Napier, Tim Meadows, Richard Label, Madeline Long and myself. That's who I remember being on that team.

From that Mick and I and a couple other people, Mick started Splatter Theater, which was the first Metraoform show. Metraoform became The Annoyance. Mick and I were looking at spaces together where we would open up the new theater. That's when I got cast in the Touring Company of Second City. So, I said 'This is where I'm going now. You go that way. I'll go this way.'

JF: But it was amicable between you guys?

DR: Oh my gosh yes, yes, yes, yes. I think at the time there was Improv Olympic. There was Second City Player's Workshop, and I think that was it for improv. It was Joe Bill, Susan Messing, Mark Sutton, Ellen Stoneking, Mick, Jennifer Eslin, Mick's partner. We all started a company called Metraform. We were like 'We can make an improv structure out of anything' like 'queen for a day,' or 'I won the lottery,' structures that weren't being done at the time. We had a bunch of people at IO working on that thing. Mick wanted to start his own company with all these great people. It was a really amazing time. They started the Annoyance. I did The Real Life Brady Bunch with those guys. I was in New York when they were in New York. I was in L.A. when they were in L.A. The people that came out of that were really good. Faith Soloway and Jill Soloway came out of that show. They went on to do Six Feet Under, to write on it. Jill and Faith were the people behind the Real Live Brady Bunch, which changed everything for The Annoyance. It changed a lot for The Annoyance, that and Coed Prison Sluts.

JF: What were those forms that you were talking about, 'Queen for a day' or 'I Won the Lottery'?

DR: We would get an occupation from somebody. We would see a person have that occupation, then somehow, sometimes through a telegram or something [laughs] they would be alerted that they are now King or Queen. We see all their

interactions with the people they work with or their family. It was a long-form. Those are the two I remember.

JF: I'm really curious about that first experience you had out of college with working in prisons with dramatic improv. How was that experience for you, especially with dramatic improv? How did you find it? And how would you compare it with comedic improv?

DR: The experience was amazing. It was very hard. I was twenty five years old. I'm forty seven now. I remember John Bergman, the director, saying 'We have to beat the fucking Method out of you.' I had to respond quicker. I became a very physical actor, like I said it was mask work. It was furious. It was visceral. It was connected. It was raw. You're dealing with things like prison rape. You're dealing with relationships. You're going to prison and you're getting the shit beat out of you by your cell mate, or getting raped by your cellmate. We would deal with that onstage. When we didn't know what to do, we lift our masks up, ask the guys, women or kids in the audience what do we do at this point. They would tell us. We would put the masks back on and we would play the scene that way. It was intense.

When I left that and went to Chicago and there were piddly little theaters going doing things that I didn't find very challenging, it made me want more out of theater, and it made me want more out of the work that I do. I was very cynical about profession performances. I was very into guerilla theater, hitting the street, connecting with people. What happened was, I had to let that go, because I'm not a very cynical person. I had to realize this is all a journey, and the journey is about me finding what my voice is and going into that.

I worked with the Steppenwolf theater last year, teaching with them up at California State University, Fresno at the Summer Arts Festival. That changed my life, because it made me realize everything we do is about emotions and

connections, and how easy it is for us to watch you emote the yoke of the joke of the scene. It's the same sort of scene, but it's deeper. When I see somebody on stage doing some sort of farce, like 'Hide in the closet my husband's coming,' that bullshit, it's not interesting to me, because I want to see the truth of the scene. What's the truth of the scene? Humor always comes from you are in a sacred space where you can say whatever the fuck you want to in front of people. This is your opportunity to say it. Do you want to dance around? Do you want to do theater games? Parlor games? I'm not good at that stuff. I've auditioned for it, and I'm not good at it. I really respect the people who are good at it, but to me isn't there more to a fire than that? As Peggy Lee says 'Isn't there more to a fire?'

My work is all about challenging myself. This is something I learned out here in L.A.: the only person I'm in competition with is myself. When I say competition with, I don't mean beating the fuck out of myself. I mean I did this thing yesterday, or I did this thing in a performance, I don't ever want to do it again. Not saying it's bad, just saying I did it. Let's move on. It's a work in progress my life. That's what I realized from doing all this stuff.

I have a really blessed life. I get to perform. I get to teach. I get to be the Artistic Director of the Second City out here. I'm respected and I respect people. I just want to see people grow, because I want to grow. If anybody's going to stop me from growing, I'm going to go 'Fuck off. I'm out of here.' Luckily, I don't have to. Does that answer your question?

JF: Yeah, very much. I have another question about your training up until that point. You said you were a method actor. How did they want to change you and did that change ultimately help you as an improviser?

DR: I never realized what method meant at that point. I've hadn't taken an acting class in my life. I still really haven't, except for the classes at Second City, which is an acting school but in a different way. So, I kind of new what the guy meant, but

what I think he meant was stop thinking and just be. The director would have us just go, go, go. He would have us do something called Biomechanics. It's a series of physical exercises over and over again to break your body, to move yourself forward, then we would start doing character. He would say 'Transform,' and we'd have to transform the character, and transform and transform and transform. That just got you the fuck out of your head. Once you're out of your head and realize anything could happen, then the world was open to you. It was about getting out of your way. Get the fuck out of your way. Once you get out of your way you can move forward. You can only move forward when you get out of the way. That's what I learned there.

JF: So, what specifically got you involved in Improv Olympic, and how were the classes when you started there?

DR: I have no idea how I found out about it. I keep trying to think who told me about it, or how do I know about it, because it wasn't that well-known at the time.

What I got out of it was, well, I had just gotten off of working with John Bergman, who's just a megalomaniacal task master, but a genius. This guy's mind worked really, really quick. I kind of picked up on how his mind worked and I really appreciated it, but he was really mean and that was one of the reasons that I left. I probably deserved to be treated that way in a certain respect. I was just a curious kid who didn't know, and I was probably a pest.

When I went to take classes, again I skipped Charna and went right to Del, what I learned there was the importance of knowing as much as you can know about everything you can know, and the importance of ensemble. I learned about working with people. I learned about not making jokes. Charna kicked me off a team because I was making a joke. I had never been kicked off a team. She kicked me off the team. I was kicked off a team!

I remember the moment, thinking ‘Oh, that was a fucked up thing.’ We were doing a Harold and the topic was Cherry Coke. I found myself on my knees snorting cherry cocaine. I thought ‘Oh man, what the fuck is that?’ Right after that she said ‘I don’t know what happened to you. You used to be really great. Now you’re making jokes out of desperation, so I’m going to kick you off the team.’ I thought ‘Ok, cool. That’s fine,’ then I took a class with a Second City teacher who was teaching at Improv Olympic named Donny DePollo. Donny said ‘If there’s a problem, there’s a solution,’ and worked with me on those things. That was life-changing right there. That class was life-changing.

I pass that on: if there’s a problem there’s a solution. I always look at every student and say ‘I know what your problem is, and I’m here to help you, because I’ve gone through every damn thing that every improviser has gone through. I feel like I’ve gotten through it, and have overcome it.’

Then this guy Martin DeMaat at Second City who was a mentor for Mick and many wonderful improvisers, Susan Messing, so many improvisers and actors and artists. He was just so giving and open and kind. We take that and pass it on. He died about six years ago.

JF: Was it difficult for you to adjust to comedic improv? It sounds like you might have lost some of the footing in drama or acting that you had before.

DR: I never considered myself a comedian. I never considered myself a comedic actor. I knew my family is very funny, and I was told I was funny. I never really had a plan. I just kind of have been going where the wind has been taking me, and it’s seemed to have worked out. Yeah, the drama did get in the way. Well, the drama didn’t get in the way. It was just different.

The difference between dramatic improvisation and comedic improvisation is how far do you take it, how absurd do you take it, how seriously do you take

what's going on, because the more seriously you take it the funnier it's going to be, the deeper it's going to be, the more shocking turns it's going to take. What I got out of that, when I kept heightening and heightening and heightening, I realized 'Oh, that's the difference between dramatic and comedic improvisation.'

I don't think I answered your question. I gave you words, so...

JF: [laughs] Yeah, that's good enough. What were the early shows like at Improv Olympic, and what year did you start performing there?

DR: Lets see, I graduated the Second City Conservatory in 1987, so maybe 1984, 85. I'm thinking in my head that Harolds were forty minutes long. I don't know why I think that, but I think they were a lot longer than they are now. The people who I looked up to were Barron's Barricudas, who were the first Harold team. What was wonderful about them was they really worked with Del extensively, so their reference levels were so high, and they were so confident, and they were really good actors, and they knew who they were. These were young people, twenty-two, twenty-three years old. I'm sure I'm romanticizing it a bit, but there were some shows I remember looking at it and thinking 'I don't know anything!' And I don't mean about improvisation. I mean about life. I mean about history. The shows were really smart.

I believe the difference between people doing Harolds now [and back then] is when I was starting out there weren't many improv schools. So, people were coming out of say theater school, or ...Dave Pasquesi has a degree in philosophy. They had a different background. Their source material for their work was theater. People's source material for their inspiration now is other improvisers or improvisation. So, what used to be grounded in theater, legitimate theater, is now grounded in comedy. Because it's grounded in comedy now, there's a different sensibility. Back then it seemed to be smarter. Whether it was funnier or not, I

don't know. I'm not saying there was a good quality or a bad quality to it. I say it was different.

JF: Do you have a preference between the two? Back then or most of the improv today?

DR: Mmmm, if I see another scene where someone says 'By the way I fucked your wife' just to get a laugh, I'm going to shoot myself. I mean, I'm in the trenches. I teach eighteen hours of class a week, and I see what's going on here. To me, what I appreciate and love, I have a student now who graduated DePaul with a degree in theater, and she's an improviser. She doesn't have to tell me she has a degree in theater. I'm looking at her and she has the synthesis of a funny, smart woman, and a good actor. So, my point is that they're not mutually exclusive. I tell people 'Take a fucking acting class. Learn upstage from downstage. Go to see plays.' I think a lot of improvisers don't go to see plays. They're not connected.

There's a problem. The problem I see right now is that the word improviser is like eh, it's cheap. It's like the difference between Nordstrom's and Walmart. People are looking at it that way, and I don't believe that. If you are an improviser, you are an actor first and an improviser second. You play in a theater. You don't play in an Improvizanium. You know what I'm saying? You don't play in an Improvistory, or whatever the fucking word is. You play in a theater. Because you play in a theater, there is an understanding that goes back thousands of years, that you are a fucking actor. So act! Don't give me phony bullshit, farce-y kind of crap! And I know when you're not telling the truth.

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JF: How do you try to encourage that acting in your classes? Do you do a lot of acting exercises?

DR: No, all I say is 'How do you feel right now?' I stop the scenes. In my class, the scenes don't go too long, unless they're on a roll or I feel I'm working on something with them and they're close to getting the point. I will stop the scene and I will say 'How do you feel about what you just said?' 'Well, I don't know.' 'Then why did you say it!?' We're not going to walk around and do the mirror exercise or any of that bullshit. All my students are past that. What I will say is read a book. The best acting book I've got these days isn't an acting book at all. It's 'Buddhism Plain and Simple' by Steve Hagen. It's all about being in the moment, say what you want to say, be truthful, because I give you permission to be you. I don't want you to go up there and be Jim Carey.

If you're a stand-up, you've got to work a little harder than other people in my class, because stand-ups and writers stand on the outside. And if you're going to be in my class, I'm going to demand, demand that you be truthful and that you be in the moment.

JF: Have you ever kicked anyone out of your class?

DR: For drinking. What else? No. No, I mean people have challenged me, and I welcome the challenge, but there comes a point where I say 'We're not going to talk about this now. We'll talk about it later.' And we will talk about it later. One time when I was teaching at Second City, it was an 11 o'clock in the morning class. I smelled liquor on the guy's breath and I said 'You've got to go, and I don't want you back.'

JF: So, what took you from Improv Olympic to Second City?

DR: I never wanted to work at Second City. I had lived in Chicago my entire life. I would go to see George Wendt play, and Shelly Long. I think I saw Jim Belushi. I know I didn't see John Belushi. I would go with my Temple youth group and go watch a play and go 'Oh my God, these people are hilarious!', but I never thought I would work there.

When I was at Improv Olympic, my father would ask me 'When are going to Second City?' I thought 'When I'm ready. When I'm ready to go.' I auditioned for Second City Conservatory and got in. Mick got in. He was a year ahead of me. I would sit in on every one of his classes. And I loved it. Every day that I was there I ate it up.

Mick and I both auditioned for the Touring Company. He didn't get in and I got into the company. I thought 'This has got to be a mistake. He's so much funnier than I was, than I am.' He's such a fucking personality. He went his way. He wound up directing many shows there and still does.

JF: Did you find a difference between your Second City classes and your class with Del?

DR: Yes, because Second City is not an improv school. It's a sketch school. Its goal is to teach sketch. What they teach you is how to repeat a certain character, how to repeat a certain beat, or how a scene works. At IO, you do a scene and it will never be seen again. At Second City, they teach you how to repeat that. The next time you do that scene you're like 'Ok, the arc needs to be here,' or 'the game needs to start here,' or 'This game is done. We start another game.' You take a look at how the scenes work.

Another difference was Del was not a nice person. He just wasn't nice. I don't think I'm speaking out of school here. I teach at Improv Olympic out here. I've never said anything bad about IO. I love IO, but when I went to Second City, I had teachers like Martin DeMaat, Jeff Machowski, Jane Morris, all these great teachers who loved what they were doing. They were positive and they were young and they were bold. At the time Del was not in the twilight of his career, but he certainly was in the Autumn of it. Is Autumn twilight? I don't know.

Martin DeMaat, again I go back to this guy and say 'This guy was a special teacher. He was a special human being.' When you meet people like that, you go 'Oh, great. You've got so much to offer humanity and that's what I want to do.' I was at IO for two years and the fucker, [Del], never knew my name. He never ever knew my name. I thought 'Ok, fine.' He didn't know many people's names, but he didn't know my name.

JF: I heard there was like a light and dark side to him, that he could definitely tear people apart if he wanted to.

DR: I remember him tearing Mick apart and Mick walking off stage crying.

JF: Really?

DR: Oh my God. He just laid into Mick one day. Next week, I don't know if Del felt bad about it, but Mick could do no wrong. I've seen teachers tear people apart. I've never been torn apart, but I've seen teachers tear people apart and I'm like 'What the fuck am I supposed to do with that?'

JF: Do you remember what happened with Mick? Why was Del so mad?

DR: I don't remember the specifics of the scene, but Del had something up his ass that day and tore into him. He would have a phrase like 'Fuck off turkey! Get off my stage! Get out!' I've seen him kick people out of class. 'Get out!' People wanted a guru, and I didn't need a guru. I didn't want a guru. John Bergman was the closest thing I had to a guru and I didn't need that. And I don't want to be anybody's guru. I don't need to be anybody's guru. All I'm doing is, you know, spreading the word. Ultimately it's this: I'm saying what works for me. That's it. I've been doing it for a while. I'm teaching classes, and I'm performing and I'm doing festivals and I'm still in it. I'm still in it. So, I'm doing what works for me. People are still coming to see me play, and I'm still excited to play with people. I'm working with a woman now named Carrie Clifford. We're doing festivals around the country. She's a student of mine. We work together. I'm still doing it, so, for me, I must be doing something right.

But now I'm an elder statesman, whether I like it or not. I have a feeling that fifteen years from now you'll see Joe Bill, Mark Sutton, Susan Messing, Mick and I sweating in our pants and drooling oatmeal out of our mouths in some improv nursing home.

JF: That'd be great if they had improv nursing homes.

DR: Yeah, everything's new to you if you have Alzheimer's, and that's the way we should look at the scenes anyway. Everything's a revelation.

JF: So, what's the writing process like at Second City when you're working on a Main Stage show or just writing sketches together?

DR: The life of a Main Stage show is typically three to four months. They get a director. They'll work with the actors from say 11 to 4 Tuesday thru Friday. They'll come up with scene ideas. Every director has different ways of coming up

with ideas. People bring in scene ideas or they'll improvise. Mick use to like doing thirty one-minute scenes, just go boom, boom, boom, then he would say 'What do you want to do again? Let's put that up again.' In rehearsal, you'd work on that and put it into the set. A Second City show is three acts. The first two acts are written. The second act is an improvised set, that's where you throw in the stuff you're working on. You videotape the shows. The next day you come in early, watch the tape, or maybe you watch it with the director and the director says 'I like this idea. Keep working on this. Put it back up there.' If it works, great, you keep working on it. Eventually, half or two thirds of the show is new material. You have previews. You set an opening date. Once the show is set in stone, you don't change any of the running order, then you have an opening, the director leaves, and there's your show.

JF: Did you start directing any shows at Second City?

DR: I was the director of the Touring Company, then I came out here [to Los Angeles] and directed a Main Stage show called 'No, Seriously, We're All Gonna Die.' It was 2002 or 2003. They flew me in. I lived downtown. They put me up. I had a cast and I worked with those people.

JF: How did you try to generate material for that show?

DR: We would brainstorm. They would bring stuff in. We would work on stuff. It was a very hard show for me. The cast was there for 9-11, and they were supposed to open up a show on 9-12. These poor people were really toast. It was a really hard process putting together that show. We ended up getting it up.

JF: What was it like working with Steven Colbert, Amy Sedaris and Paul Dinello, who went on to do Exit 57?

DR: Yeah, and Strangers with Candy. They were a trio back then with Mitch Rouse. They thought differently. They worked differently. You never know what Amy's going to do. You never know what Amy's going to bring in. Amy would go to a garage sale, pick up the hoofs of a deer that were mounted on a wall, and take them somewhere so that they moved. They were able to flap around. She would call them 'Deer Paw Girl.' She would bring in dumbass stuff like that. She was just charming and lovely. I get along with everybody, but I know there were a few people there who felt that it was a little [inaudible]. But you work with who you work with. You work with who you enjoy working with. We try to put a cast together that can collaborate. It's all about collaboration. Amy was, you know, had her way of doing things. David Sedaris was there a lot. He had moved there. David and Amy knew how to put a show together, knew how to put characters together. Colbert was very focused on who he was and what he wanted, very smart and very charismatic. They were all very charismatic. If you're on Main Stage, you'd better be charismatic. You'd better connect with the audience. But there was never a lack of ideas, smart ideas, really fun characters. Amy's wonderfully crazy, not that she has to be sent away, but she's wonderfully crazy. Her ideas are really great. I found it all to be tremendously inspiring.

I wish I could give you dirt. I love going back and working there, and if you want to have your own fucked up time, that's your thing, not my thing. If you want to say how you were fucked over by these people, I don't know how you'd feel that way. When I was there, there were a lot of people who were leaving saying 'I got fucked over.' I'm thinking 'How were you fucked over? You got to perform in front of 300 people! A night! Some times 600 people a night on Friday and Saturday.'

JF: They were just angry because they got cut or something?

DR: No! They were onstage. I never understood how they could be bitter, because you bring your own mishigas [sp.] to that shit. Maybe it felt that the producers fucked you. I never let that shit get to me. When I was hired one teacher, Don Depollo, said to me, I said 'Donny, I got hired.' He said 'Great, don't pay any attention to the politics, just do your work.' I just want to say I couldn't believe that I was there. I was like 'Wow, this is amazing.'

JF: How long were you there?

DR: I was there for 7 years and I did 10 shows.

JF: So, from 87 to 94 or something?

DR: Yeah, I left in January of 95. My first show was Valentine's day of 87. I remember I had a girlfriend at the time who said 'I finally have a boyfriend that I like and now he's in the Touring Company.' Second City ruined Valentine's Day for us.

JF: How did you end up performing in the Real Live Brady Bunch?

DR: Faith Soloway was the piano player for Second City. Her sister Jill Soloway went to Indiana University with Mick and Joe and Mark and all these other wonderful people. They said 'We're doing this show.' I said 'I watched the Brady Bunch. I can do it. I think it's fun,' so I did it. I played Davey Jones in a couple of them. I don't know how well you know the Brady Bunch.

JF: I know he was Jan's boyfriend or something.

DR: There's a Prom date scene or something like that. When they took it to New York off-Broadway, they asked me to perform in that. When they took it to what is now the Geffen theater, which is now run by a former Steppenwolf person, I'd fly out whenever they wanted me to do it.

A lot of people would say 'Yes, but is it art?' I would say 'If it's in front of a lot of people, yes. Are people paying for it? Yeah, the line's around the corner.' Huge success.

JF: It seems like there might have been some mixed feelings about the Real Live Brady Bunch among some Annoyance people. It seemed to put Annoyance on the map, but some people felt it wasn't really representative of what they did.

DR: Yeah, that's what was going on back then. People were saying 'Is it exactly what the Annoyance does?' For me, I'd look at it and say 'Yeah, it wasn't exactly what the Annoyance did, but it was representative of the mentality of the space. Anything can go. You can do anything. Yeah, it's stupid, but so what. Do it for fun.' I think the Annoyance was starting to get known for that, when there were other shows go on there as well. Eventually [The Real Live Brady Bunch] left, and at the end of the day The Annoyance isn't really known for that. Do you think it's known for that?

JF: No.

DR: No, it's not known for that. It's known for a specific style of improvisation, a technique, and that's what it's known for. Again, I went in a different direction. I was a Second City, and I would go see all the shows at the shows there. Let's put it this way. It's not Chekhov! Alright? When you've got a show called The Miss Vagina Pageants, which is the real name of a show, or That Darn Anti-Christ, or Manson The Musical, to look at a show and go 'Go, well we can't do The Real Live

Brady Bunch.' You've got a show called Your Butt. That's the name of the show. Y-O-U-R-B-U-T-T. That's the name of the show. 'The what? And you're saying what?' But then again, I wasn't involved with the politics of that. I'm a cousin over there, not a child.

JF: So what was the Real Live Brady Bunch?

DR: They took scripts from The Brady Bunch and just recreated it. They had Faith Soloway on piano. Melanie Hutzle was in it. Jane Lynch who went to do all the Guffman movies. There was a specific kind of affected acting style that they would do for these parts, and it was hilarious! It was just hilarious. 'Marsha, Marsha, Marsha!' To hear Melanie Hutzle say that was ridiculous. Andy Richter played the Dad, Mr. Brady. And to see Andy Richter play something serious with a pipe in his mouth. 'I don't know. Maybe you should go back to school.' It was just an affected style, that we all understood.

They said 'Here's the script. You're going to be doing Davey Jones.' I'm like 'Ok, how?' And they said 'Here's the script. You're going to be doing Davey Jones.' I was like ok, that's direction enough for me.

JF: So what brought you to Los Angeles? And what were you doing in Chicago before you left?

DR: I was on the Main stage in Chicago. I felt that I had done everything I could do at Second City. My friend Kenny Campbell was on a show called Herman's Head. He was making some money out there. That's just where he went. I had a bunch of money from doing a Captain Crunch commercial. I played Captain Crunch's nemesis, Dr. Sog. I had a bunch of money in the bank and thought 'I'll

blow my money faster in New York than L.A.' and I had a free place to stay in L.A., so I went out to L.A.

I got a commercial agent, a theatrical agent pretty quickly. I got a bunch of commercials, which really kept me going. Thankfully, I only had to do catering I think three times. I got married September of 94. I moved out here in January of 95. My wife moved out here in July 96. It was tough for us. It was tough for my wife and I. But I was ready to take the next step, and whatever that next step was I went and did it.

JF: So, did you enjoy it when you moved out there? And what was the artistic climate like out there, especially compared to Chicago?

DR: I was lucky because any Second City person who moves out here from Chicago you've got a community out here right away. I think I got here January 15, 95 and I think January 18, 95 I was improvising long-form improv with all these people who were my heroes from the Main stage: Danny Breen, Jeff Machowski, Jane Morris, Joe Liss. I felt this sense of community.

It would drive me crazy when I was out here, because I thought 'Fuck the weekends. I can't work. There's no work on the weekends.' I got some great advice from a guy named Mark Beltzman, who said 'Get a distraction. Get something to do.' So, I connected with a bunch of Annoyance and Second City people who were out here. I rented spaces and started teaching classes. I connected with some former students who knew who I was and directed their show.

When I came out here, the only sense of community that was out here was the Second City family that I knew. That's what I missed about Chicago. I missed theater. A lot of the shows out here were showcase-y shows. A show that was run over and over again by every fucking little theater was 12 Angry Men because

everybody had a monologue and that was a good show you could invite agents to. There was no sense of community. There was no sense of ensemble, except for the people that I hung out with.

When I got the job as the Artistic Director of Second City, the first thing I said was 'I've got to get a community out here. I've got to get connections with The Groundlings and IO.' IO was just starting out. So, I taught at IO and at this theater Bang. I said 'Let's do shit together. Come on.' [Now,] there are a lot more theater companies that are ensemble-based. There's a lot of Chicago mentality out here. The Chicago mentality is ensemble. It's about the group, not the individual talent. It's about the people that form that group.

At our school, it went from two hundred students when I first got the job to almost five hundred students now at Second City L.A. That's a big ass thing. That's a huge thing. In the past year alone it doubled. I feel like now there's a community. Now there are people who are helping other people. I'm sure there are some people who feel jealous of other people, but Bill Hader's on Saturday Night Live now. He came from our school. This guy Masi Oka was one of my students. He's on an NBC special now called 'Heroes.' Our students are starting to get work. And these are ensemble comedies, ensemble episodes. It's no coincidence that they're getting work in these ensemble pieces. They know what it's like to have to work with other people and make other people look good. That's the difference between us and The Groundlings, which is where Will Ferrell came in and all those type people. They teach you how to be a character, that's what they teach you. Well, we don't teach that. We teach how to connect with each other and it's starting to spread out. And it's really cool.

JF: Do you guys [Second City] want to get a resident company in Los Angeles?

DR: L.A. isn't a city for a resident company. It's too transient. We tried to put two resident companies together and just couldn't get any audience. We don't have a

big enough space. Our space right now at the most we can get about eighty people in the seats. We don't have a liquor license. It's tough to get a theater together if you don't have a liquor license. We don't have a liquor license, and don't have any plans for a resident company out here.

What I wish for my students is get as good as you can be, and leave. Perform with us for a while and leave. Start your own thing. Branch out. Go fly. Get out of here. I say it in a loving way as well.

MONDAY, FEBRUARY 19, 2007

David Razowsky - Part 3 - 2/15/07

JF: How would you like to see improv change in Los Angeles?

DR: I would like there to be more acting in the improvisation and less fucking around. I remember when Andy Dick did something at Improv Olympic back in 86 or 87. He was up on stage and I was looking at him like 'What the fuck are you doing? I don't know what the fuck you're doing up there.' I felt like he was disrespecting the stage. He was just taking advantage of me sitting in the audience watching him. Andy has since found his own voice. We're all happy for him. But as far as what I would like to see change, better acting. That's it. Better acting. Connections. No hot-dogging.

JF: How do you think Second City has changed over the years? And do you think it's become more open to improv, or putting up improv?

DR: Oh my God. The last show I did at Second City was the thirty fifth anniversary show. It was a retrospective. We looked through every scene in the thirty five year history. Now we're at forty seven.

I left. The next show was called 'Pinata Full of Bees,' which was Adam McKay, Scott Adsit, Jon Glaser, Rachel Datch, Jenna Jovoltz, Scott Orman. That show suddenly had the sensibility of a long-form improvisational show. Those people all came from IO. Suddenly, you weren't shackled to a button at the end of a scene. One scene moves into another scene, moves into another scene. There's a fluidity that the shows there have now that they didn't have before. There's also callbacks. They're demanding more of their audience. We watch more TV and movies now than before. There's a sophistication level that wasn't there before. They want to see a character come back. They want to see an arc. They want to be surprised. Audiences don't always want to be surprised, but they want to be

surprised in a way like 'Oh, I forgot about that character.' In that way, the material is smarter. Well, comedy has changed.

One of the things I rail against is men and women not getting along scenes. I don't need to see that anymore. What do I want to see now? I want to see a scene about immigration that makes me feel like 'Oh my God, I need to learn more about what's going on in the world just to get that joke.' See in L.A. people don't even know who the fucking mayor is. They only know who the Governor is because he's a famous actor. That's the only reason. In Chicago, there's a sensibility of knowing who the governor is, knowing who the Lieutenant Governor is, knowing who the mayor is, knowing who the alderman is. People are smarter now. There's more of a global reaction to Kofi Anan.

I believe that Second City has changed in the way that long-form now is the basis for a lot of what we do. Because Improv Olympic is developing such great actors, really great directors, smart people, and we're demanding that from our students now. I'm demanding it. I've got a bully pulpit so I'm able to get up there and go 'How the fuck did this bastard get elected a second time?' I had a student come up to me the other day and say 'I know you're really against Bush. I voted for him twice.' I'm like 'Jenny, no! You didn't. No! Why?' It turns out that she wasn't aware of the facts. You've got to be aware of the what's going on in the world. [inaudible] The audiences are smarter, or they're feeling like they have to be citizens of the world.

JF: So, do you think that's maybe how IO and Second City have helped each other out?

DR: Absolutely. They help each other out. I know there's a competition there, a healthy competition, more in Chicago than out here. There's not really a competition in L.A. I think part of the reason for that is that I'm good friends with James Grace, who's the Artistic Director over there. I was his first coach on his IO

team. Farley was on that team. Pat Finn was on that team. So, there's no competition here, but there's competition in Chicago.

JF: In your opinion, what makes a good improv team?

DR: People supporting each other. People taking care of each other. I'm so tired of with people arguing. I'm tired with people being negative. I'm tired of looking at a scene where the people are yelling at each other at the top of the scene. I'm thinking 'Why are you together?' The husband and wife are yelling at each other at the top of the scene. Why are you together? I don't want to see you.

I think in a good ensemble they like each other. Their characters like each other. They're willing to challenge each other. They're confident in who they are as individuals and who they are as a group. It doesn't matter what level of sophistication you're at, if you're confident and you challenge each other without getting personal, then the only mistake you make in improvisation is casting. That's it. If everybody likes each other and gets along, then your show is going to be great.

JF: What does the term yesand mean to you?

DR: It means accepting whatever comes your way and being courageous enough to say whatever you want to say after that's connected to that, knowing that it will be accepted by your partner.

JF: In your opinion, what makes a good initiation? And do you find there's a pattern to how you initiate typically?

DR: Oh yes, my pattern is always be emotionally connected to your partner the moment that you hit the stage. Check in with your partner. The moment that you see them what does their body language tell you? And how do you feel about what their body language is telling you? A good initiation, the top of the scene, is looking at your partner and assuming that they are at the end of a profound statement, and respond to that statement. Do you understand what I mean?

JF: Um, kind of.

DR: Ok, so you have a look on your face that has one eyebrow up, one eyebrow down. You never intended that. It's just the way you look. I'm going to assume that you said something based upon how you look. I'm going to start in the middle.

What I teach my students is I don't give a fuck about who gets the who, the what, the where out at the beginning of the scene. The minute you talk about the who, the what, the where you're going to continue talking about the who, the what, the where. Then you've got to invent a way to connect emotionally to your partner. If you start emotionally connected to your partner and be aware of your where through activities, your where will come out.

JF: Do you find there's a difference between how you initiate in a two person show, like you're doing now with Carrie Clifford, and maybe a faster show with seven or eight person show?

DR: Absolutely. What I will do in say a five person group scene is I will turn to the first person I see and I will react to her, then I will turn to somebody and say 'Can you believe what Tina just said!? That is just wonderful! That is a wonderful thing to say!' Tina being the character's name. Everybody from that point can say 'I fucking hate Tina. Fuck that cunt. I don't like her,' or 'I agree.'

JF: What do you feel the difference is in how you approach a two person show, on the whole, as opposed to a larger cast show? Do you play slower with the two person show?

DR: I play slow all the time. My new thing is I'm not in a hurry. The audience is sitting there. They're watching. I can be up there and be compelling by saying nothing. If I'm interested, I'll be interesting. The way I look at a two person show is I have one person to focus on, that's it. With a larger cast scene, my approach will be I'll be a party to initiating something between two people, and I'll be aware that I have to exit that scene so the audience can get to know the relationship between these two people. I'll be off stage listening and come in with information later on that I heard from their relationship.

JF: How do you get into character?

DR: My first step onstage informs the way that my body moves. If I find that my first step onstage is a heavy step, my next step is going to be a heavy step. I move up from my feet. I always begin my scene with 'How did I step?' I let that move out from my feet to my ankles to my knees and I adjust my body accordingly. I am always aware of how my feet have hit the stage. With every character I look toward 'What is the energy of this? How does this character turn to the right? And how do they take that step to the right?' Just follow through on that.

JF: So are you basically a blank slate when you walk on stage?

DR: I'm a blank slate before I walk onstage. The moment I hit the stage I'm suddenly being informed.

JF: Do you have any characters that you tend to redo?

DR: When I walk offstage, I think to myself 'What kind of characters did I play? Were they high status or low status?' If I played high status this week, did I play it last week? If I did, I'd better shake it up, because I'm getting in a rut. I think one of the problems improvisers have is they walk offstage. They go to a bar and they drink. What we do is we go offstage. There's a little green room. We sit in there and we go through each scene that we did. I have to connect with what it is that I did, because I'm not doing that scene again. I've got to challenge myself with the characters I do.

JF: What does the term 'the game of the scene' mean to you, and how much of a role does it play in your improv?

DR: A lot. The game of the scene is the rules of engagement that two people perform. It's the understanding that we are living in the same universe. Each scene is its own universe. Each universe has the accepted rules of behavior in that particular universe. The first thing that somebody says I'm thinking 'Alright, how does this work? Ok, how can I create a game with this scene.' By now it's just rote. It's just natural now. What's important for an improviser is to remember what a pattern is. When a pattern ends and when a pattern begins, or when a piece of a pattern begins and when a piece of the pattern ends. And how can I repeat that. I tend to get kind of esoteric about this stuff. If you don't understand please tell me. Unfortunately, I've spent a lot of time thinking about this shit.

JF: Oh, I've been doing it three years and I've spent a lot of time during those three years thinking about it. So, although I haven't been doing it as long as you have, I've probably spent too much time thinking about it as well.

DR: Absolutely. What I love about it, what I love about teaching is I say to my students regularly 'Can you fucking believe this stuff!?' Can you believe how deep this is!?' Because it has to do with your psyche. It's got to do with who you are. This is changing your life because you have to think differently and get the fuck out of your head. And go 'Oh, there's a pattern here? Oh, ok.'" I teach six classes. Four of them are grad students from our conservatory, and two are called advanced improv. It's with people in the conservatory. It's basically whatever the fuck I want to teach that day. If I see an apple falling from a tree, we'll do scenes about gravity. Whatever I feel like doing. So, I'm always coming up with new exercises and it blows me away with how profound this shit is.

JF: How do you balance playing the game and being real and going moment to moment? Is it ever difficult for you to do that?

DR: No, it may sound weird, but nothing's difficult now. And nothing's difficult anymore for one reason: I walked offstage one night and I thought 'That was a good show. I don't feel badly about it. Why do I feel that way?' Then it occurred to me, I don't care. I suddenly don't care anymore.

JF: How long did that take?

DR: I don't know, at least five years. Everybody gets to that point on their own. What happens at that moment is you remove self. The moment that self is gone your ego's gone. When your ego's gone, you get to play and there are many psychic ramifications of whatever it is you do onstage. Once self is gone, and this is why that book 'Buddhism Plain and Simple' is so important, you become awakened. You're enlightened. I've had scenes where I was me and I was totally awake and connected to everything, and that's because I wasn't holding onto self. I don't mean to get Buddhist, but the shit is plain and simply Buddhism. That's it.

JF: In your opinion, what makes a good coach or teacher?

DR: Patience. Patience, lack of ego and someone who's in the trenches with you. They know when to give you a note that's harsh, and is able to give a harsh note without making it personal. Knowing how to give a note and treating each actor differently in terms of how to give that note.

JF: Was it ever difficult for you to be that patient or to get to the place where you thought you were a good director or teacher?

DR: My frustration lies when people don't listen to my notes and I have to give them the same note again. My impatience comes from that. Listen to me, because I'm really, really trying to help you here. I'm a patient director and teacher, because if I become impatient with the actors I'm just impatient with myself.

Really the important thing is listening, listening to every fucking thing that goes on up there and missing nothing. My slogan is 'Everything matters.' Every move you make onstage matters. If you're missing out on those moments, point it out to the student, because they have to know that the world is opening up and that everything is material.

JF: How has improv changed your life and changed your personality if at all?

DR: It's changed me tremendously. It's given me permission to talk to people. It's made me very curious about the world. That was one of Del's things, just be curious about the world. Al Gore was on Terry Gross's show 'Fresh Air,' and she asked what he thought about George W. Bush. He said '[Bush is] incurious about the world. He's not curious about people.' For me, I'm curious about everybody.

It's taught me how to listen to people. It's taught me how to talk to people. It's emboldened me to ask questions and make assumptions, and to have a point of view about people. It's taught me how to talk to women and put my arms around men and not feel like they may think that I'm hitting on them. I've gotten more intimate with people in a non-physical way.

I'm very blessed, Josh. I'm very blessed. I feel like every day I have somebody come up to me and tells me how I've changed their life, and it makes me cry. It just breaks me down and makes me cry. It's given me purpose. I've created my own life out here. No one I know does what it is that I do. No one. No one. No one has the opportunity to change other people's lives, and no one that I know appreciates it as much as I appreciate what it is my students give to me and what the artform gives to me and what the art gives to me. I am an artist, and that's what it gave me. It gave me purpose. I'm also lucky in that I am very supported by all the other teachers. They look up to me. I am able to say 'I don't know,' and not feel like I have to know everything. I feel more connected, and I think that's what improvisation is about. Again, I go back to this! It's about feeling connected, not feeling alone in the world, knowing that you make an offer and somebody has to accept it. You get up onstage and somebody has to say yes! You can take advantage of people without the risk of a Sexually Transmitted Disease.

JF: [*laughs*] That's the best part.

DR: Yeah! What other occupation can you think of where you get to take advantage of people and don't get charged for statutory rape or stalking? This is it! Then you walk offstage and the woman... There's a woman named Isabella Hoffman, who's a wonderful actress. I remember when she was on Main stage. She came to visit us. She had done a lot of TV shows and she's a beautiful woman. I looked at her and thought 'I want to kiss her. I want to kiss her. She's beautiful.' Sure enough, I worked it out, it's always good to have a want, Josh, I worked it

out so we would be able to have this really lovely kiss. This was in 1994 or 93. I saw her for the first time since then a month and a half ago. I said 'Isabella Hoffman, I'm David Razowsky. I kissed you onstage. We had a wonderful passionate kiss.' She said 'I don't remember.'

JF: What?

DR: I didn't go 'Aw.' I went 'Yea!' Because that means we were both acting.

JF: That's good, I guess.

DR: It is. I didn't need for her to say 'I remember it and I've dwelled on it for many years.' All I thought 'I was acting. You were acting. I didn't see anything in it other than we're acting.' The fact that there's no ramifications of anything that happens on stage, as long as it's good touch and not bad touch, then you win. I get to flirt with women, and they have to take it! Ha, ha! We win.

JF: Do you have anything that you would like to say to the improv community that we didn't get out in the interview?

DR: Take care of each other. Be nice to each other. Start out the scene liking each other, because the moment the audience sees that you like each other there's something at stake and what's at stake is the relationship. It's simple.