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THE HAMBOOK



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FOREWARD

LEE BENZAQUIN

Welcome Back

It's been a while. The first *Hambook* came out in March of 2016, and it assured readers that its reappearance would be quarterly; every three months. It has now been ten months, and here we are with issue two.

It's been a hell of a year, right? I had some stuff I had to take care of in my personal life, so this project went on the back burner. I took a break from it to focus on getting my brain back on a normal track. I was positive I would come back to it, though—maybe not on a quarterly schedule, but at the very least on a “whenever I can” plan. Look; honestly, this thing is a pain in the ass to put together by myself, and making it eats up a lot of my free time. And maintaining a website costs, like, a very annoying amount of money. I keep thinking, “there's probably a way to do this cheaper,” but then I remember that don't have a clue what I'm doing.

Thomas Kelly, who wrote for the first *Hambook*, finally sat me down in a coffee shop and made a plan for me. He gave me due dates and checked in constantly, and quickly became an official member of the *Hambook Administrative Team*, which as of right now consists of Thomas and myself. We got the project back in motion, and it felt good.

Then November 8th hit, and a bunch of shocking stuff started happening on a pretty global scale. For a moment I felt that improvisation was a meaningless and selfish pursuit; that laughter and expression were wastes of time and what I should really be doing is devoting all of my time to protests and making changes instead of fleeting moments of insignificant comedy.

One week later I saw an independent improv team here in Chicago called Matt Damon Improv. Here's how they describe themselves, pulled from their Facebook page: "Women of Color slaying improv w/ a special guest white guy (Matt Damon), who can only speak by repeating things that we have already said in the show." Throughout their set the performers spoke about how they'd been feeling the past few days. It wasn't forced, it just came up naturally, and the topics they addressed and made light of were wonderfully insightful and important for me (a thin, white, heterosexual, cisgendered, middle-class male) to hear.

I realized after that show that improvisation isn't planned, and therein lies its importance. Because when we acknowledge that improv is unplanned, we must also acknowledge that it will always be influenced by the recent experiences of its performers. If I go through a breakup, I tend to play a lot of characters that feel worthless. If I'm wearing a comfy shirt, I play relaxed characters. In the summer I initiate beach scenes and in the winter I stand beside imaginary fireplaces. And I'm just guessing here, but I'm inclined to believe that if I'm a person living in fear of losing basic human rights, I'll probably let that show in my improvisation.

If that is not enough to convince someone that improvisation is important, I don't know what is.

Moving Forward

The following issue contains essays about the art and craft of improvisation. **Steve Nelson** writes a wonderful piece about when to say “yes, and,” and when to just say “no”. **Laurel Krabacher** shares lessons she has learned for building a fully realized character in a scene. **Jonald Reyes** speaks to minorities and provides tips on how to handle bigoted scenarios in improv. **Peter Kim** tells his personal story of performing comedy in front of, with, and against audiences. And, something I'm very excited about; a collection of small essays by different performers regarding what improvisers should say to our audience at the start of our shows.

As always, I encourage you to read slowly. Put the magazine down between essays, ruminate, and discuss your thoughts with your peers before moving on to the next essay. And please, go see shows. See shows you've never heard of, by improvisers you've never met. Introduce yourself afterwards, thank them, and talk.

Fall 2016

P.S. A brief and entirely unrelated note about mental health: Poor mental health is never something to be embarrassed about. If you find yourself in a tough situation, please talk to someone. I'm here, your friends are there, and the great people at Hope for the Day are always around.

THAT'S RACIST

JONALD REYES

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 dis-

cern 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 visu-

ally 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 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 speak-

ing 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?

MY APPROACH

LAUREL KRABACHER

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. In-

stead 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.

WATCH ME

PETER KIM

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 horseshit; 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 tim-

bre 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 inappro-

priate 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 shuttered 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, 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.

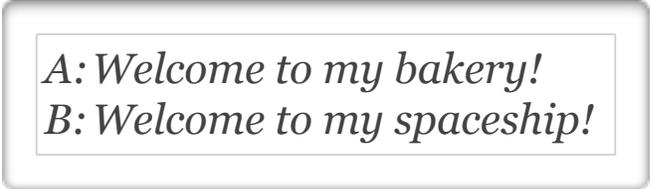
Comedy, as an art form, is unique in that it solely exists to elicit an instant response from our audience. And whoever says “I’m not a comedian, I’m an improviser” is full of shit. Because let’s face it - even if you are doing the most grounded, longest form of improv, and you are the most dedicated 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.

THE DEGENERATIVE NATURE OF ‘YES, AND’

The Power of ‘No’

STEVE NELSON



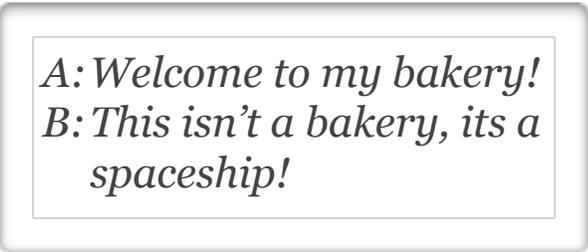
A: Welcome to my bakery!
B: Welcome to my spaceship!

Fig. 1

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 (Fig. 1) or straight up negates (Fig. 2) their scene partner



A: Welcome to my bakery!
B: This isn't a bakery, its a spaceship!

Fig. 2

and the teacher calls this out and explains it.

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 (Fig. 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 TPS¹ reports.

B: I’ll get to those as soon as I get to my desk. This won’t happen again, I’ve had stuff² going on.

A: We all have stuff going on. This is your final warning.

1. *Dated reference*

2. *Unspecified*

Fig. 3

The scene goes nowhere because it has nothing, no actual choice, to feed on.

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 lightning 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 (Fig. 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.

Fig. 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 (Fig. 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 cuddling 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!?

Fig. 5

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,

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.

Fig. 6

yes, for the novice improviser conflict can be problematic if not totally untenable (Fig. 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 fir-

ing, 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.

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.

Fig. 7

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 (Fig. 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 (Fig. 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)

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 sidelined or infantilized, you

Fig. 8

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 edit-

ing 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.

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 ulti-

mately 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 blanketly 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 sug-

gestion, 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.

ALLOW ME TO REINTRODUCE MY SHOW

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.**

MICK NAPIER

The following is taken with permission from Mick's book *Behind the Scenes: Improvising Long Form* (Meriwether Publishing, 2015).

I want to sell you on the value of rehearsing introductions. Many, many, people don't know how to be themselves in front of an audience. They only know how to perform with the protection of the improv scene, the character, or point of view they are portraying. Being yourself onstage--addressing the audience as yourself-- is another skill set entirely. It is a facet to your performance that is often ignored or dismissed as a given or as good enough. The ability to portray one's self onstage can either sink or propel performers in improvisation and sketch comedy. It's part of the deal. It's an important to an evening of improvisation, unlike traditional theatre. If you were acting in a production of *Long Day's Journey into Night*, for example, you probably wouldn't ever have to stand in front of the audience as yourself. Lights up, and the play begins. The only glimpse of "you" that the audience might glean is your reaction to the applause of the curtain call. And that's possibly rehearsed, as well.

With improvisation, though, being yourself is a tangible part of the performance that is all too often taken for granted or not acknowledged.

Rehearse.

Rehearse your introductions to everything. Practice being in front of an audience and introduce a game, a long form, the next group, the next act, or an entire evening. Practice doing outros

(the curtain speech at the end of a show or at the end of an evening). Know what you are saying. Know the content inside and out, no matter what it is. Iron out your speech to get rid of filler words and stutters. Package your intros so that they are engaging, present, slick, and fast, yet clear enough to understand. Get them down cold. Be a professional. This aspect of improvisation is far too often overlooked. When executed well, your rehearsed intro creates a truly professional experience, but when disregarded, creates confusions and sets an indifferent tone. Sloppy and unpolished does not equal fun and casual.

Finally, eliminate amateur elements that are the earmarks of an introduction that is unrehearsed:

1. Starting with “How are you guys doing?” The audience is thinking, “I’m doing as well as I was when those other four people asked me that from the stage over the last hour.”
2. Saying “This is going to be fun” or “You’re really going to like this.” This intro automatically prepares the audience to be judgemental and makes them think, “I’ll determine that, thanks,” or “It better be.” This is also a fear-based move that in essence is saying, “I’m scared. I hope this will be fun.”
3. Using filler words, including “uh” and “like”. It’s hard, but get rid of your “uhs” and stutters. When practicing an intro, try putting a pause where an “uh” is instead. Pauses are a thoughtful, welcome presence in introductions. Filler words are not.

4. Glancing at the floor, off into space, or at the ensemble members onstage. Instead, look at the audience and seek eye contact with individuals as you are doing an introduction. Look at people one at a time and actually explain to them what is going on. Definitely avoid looking at the other players. This looks weak to the audience, almost as if you are seeking affirmation from your fellow improvisers.
5. Speaking quietly or fidgeting. Be loud and be present with your voice and body. An introduction to anything in improvisation IS a performance. You are performing as yourself in front of an audience.

Practicing your stage persona is essential. You will excel if you do and falter if you don't. It's an important edge to have as a sketch comedy or improvisational performer and is neglected all too often.

Tight, professional, accessible introductions that set the tone invite the audience to the party and entertain them along the way. Proper introductions prepare, excite, and engage the audience for the experience that follows, creating the perfect atmosphere for successful long form improvisation.

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*.

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? WHYYYYY???

[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 Dad-dieszsz!!!!!!!!!!

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 feeeeeeling 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...)

Tibula! Majority Rules!, and finally: Papa Legba!

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: TIBULA!!!

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-ex-

plain 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!

