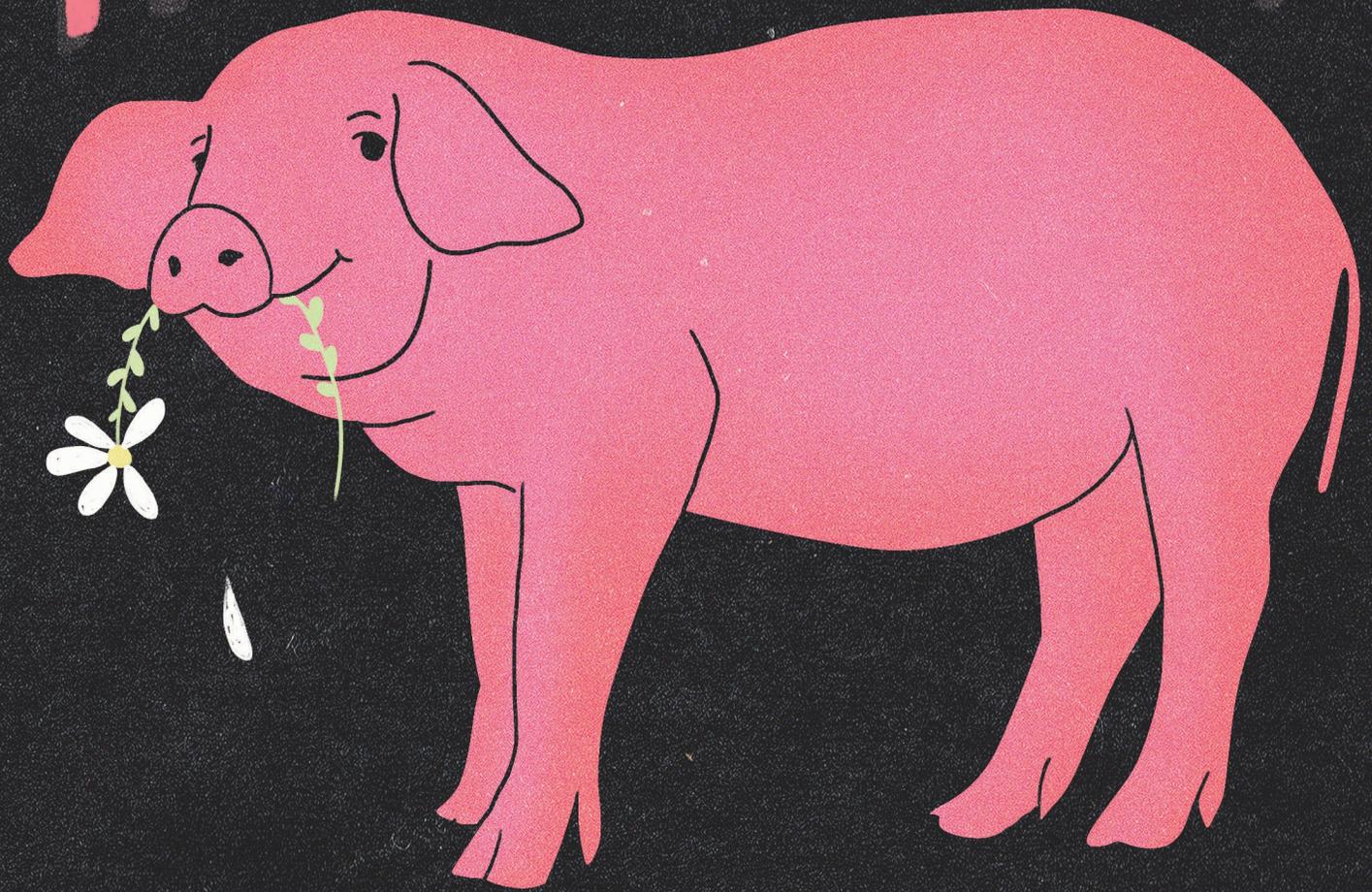


the

HAMBOOK



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FOREWORD

THE HAMBOOK EDITORS

AMY DO

Hello! Welcome to the last issue of *The Hambook*.

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

- Head curator of Camp Ham, Lee makes really good bread. He has a strong backbone of values and morals, and takes his own passions and voice seriously. He uses words deliberately, pausing to make sure that language is doing what he needs it to do. I value how much weight he gives to his own opinions, and how much he loves BigAssMessage.com. He has an incredible collection of jazz records.
- The owner of the Hamtorium, Sarah exudes compassion, wisdom, kindness, and empathy like no other human I've ever met. Her aura is palpable, and the way she can go from razor-sharp intellectual analysis to geeking out over crushes is incredible. I remember watching her funnel oreos into her mouth fully horizontal while whispering to herself in a witchy voice about something, and thinking, "That is me. I do that. But usually not in front of people." She likes "Super Chunk" peanut butter and unsweetened vanilla almond milk.

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

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

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

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

SARAH WAGENER

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

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

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

Thomas: thank you for seeing abilities in me as an editor and person that I do not always see in myself. You champion others in ways that are sincere and encouraging. Your organizational skills

have kept this ship from sinking, and your keen listening ear and positive attitude have made this a cozy, most pleasant journey.

Amy: thank you for being bold and being authentically you. You are wise beyond your years, and I am deeply in awe of all that you are and all that you are becoming as a person and artist. I have learned so much from you about editing and existing, and hope our creative paths cross again soon.

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

On to the next adventure!

THOMAS KELLY

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

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

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

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

know anyone else at the party and I was excited, excited about improv (that friend was Mike Brunlieb, one of my oldest friends and a consistent collaborator!). I was really excited to talk about, to be inspired by, and to have hope and ambition for improv! I was young and I knew everything. I was just beginning to explore a medium that was limitless.

I wasn't at the beginning of *The Hambook*, or rather, I wasn't on the administrative side putting input in a mission statement. Lee asked me to write an article about some improv experiments I had done, but I really liked the idea of place where ideas about improv could grow and develop! All the books on improv are just ok to kind of bad. The good books are filled with these mile markers of big takeaways from someone's career in and with improv. The bedrock thoughts that are strong enough to endure scrutiny and wise enough inspire something in someone else. Those are great but there's also a lot more around and in between these points that's harder to quantify. Improv makes little things funny. Things that, once you try to repeat them in a written context, have already lost their glimmer, or if you try to explain them, they fall so flat that you have to assure your listener that in their moment they were wonderful. I think that's true of the books too, that when you're writing and editing your book, you keep the chapter on "yes and" and leave out the chapter on how to enter through a door in a funny way. So when I attached myself to *The Hambook*, I wanted it to chronicle the larval and the bedrock, to lift the small things and evolve the big things to be an explosion of thought and exploration.

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

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

I took breaks and found some stability in my life. In the calm, I heard some whispers of things I'd forgotten. I began to identify the obstacles that were in my way so I could clear them out. I would go see shows where people were having fun and I would think, "Wait a minute! I know how to do that! Why am I not doing that?!" Now, it's beginning to be fun again. It's beginning to be silly again! I wonder at the root of it all if it's a tale of two Del Closes, the one who's excited, inspired, and innovating and the

one who's stuck, stifling, and forcing the new to play like the old. Very funny and smart people point to Del as this guru, this genius who inspired them and helped them discover their greatest selves. And very funny and smart people point to Del as a villain. The authoritarian teacher who crushed a sense of joy in them, who made it hard for them to have fun in a free and open art form. I think for me, it's easier to point to external forces like gurus, teachers and theaters as what is "wrong" and feel blameless and righteous than it is to recognize my old ways of thinking that are stifling new paths that might inspire me to have fun, learn, and create. So I'm trying to be sympathetic to my past, my successes, and failures as I move away from them and on to the next thing!

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

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

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

Thank you to my fellow editors and administrators! There's a lot that goes into making this magazine happen and I am so thankful

for your diligence and skills. So often, I would hit a brick wall with something and someone else was able to help or take it on so we could get these issues out. It was wonderful to meet and laugh and make this magazine that I'm very proud of with you.

Thank you to the readers! I hope you found something that inspired you, or exposed you to new way of thinking, or affirmed that who you are is great and other people think that way too! I hope this art form and this community can continue to inspire and grow into a new and greater version of itself!

LEE BENZAQUIN

How to Make an Improv Magazine

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

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

Ask for donations as soon as possible, because it costs a lot of money to make a magazine, whether you want it to look nice or not. It costs a couple hundred bucks a year to host a website, it costs money to print advertisements or promote your social media posts; it just costs money to spread word. Find artists willing to donate cover designs and illustrations. Seek out theater owners willing to donate space because they believe in your cause, kind readers willing to donate money every time a new issue is published, and friends who work at coffee shops who will give you a free cup while you sit for hours and hog their free wifi. I have no clue where you can find people like this; I just got very, very lucky.

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

Just do it, and have a good time doing it. Look forward to going to your friends' places every week and working quietly for an hour or two. Don't get stressed when you have to push your publication date back a month or two; readers forget about that stuff, anyway. Do it because you care about it. Do it because, as it turns out, there really *are* other people out there who think about it as

much as you do. Do it because, when you publish ideas, you get to trace the history of the art form more seriously; you can point to exact essays when someone first formally laid down a concept or idiom, and you can more accurately track progress and give credit where credit is due. Do it because, if you don't do it, maybe nobody else will.

And when it's done, when you've done as much as you can do, encourage someone else to do it. Because a project like this might be the *only* way to encourage growth in an art form that is plagued by the notion that liking it "too much" makes you super uncool. Tell everyone how much fun you had, how grateful you were, and how rewarding it was, and hope that someone out there will carry the torch on through new generations, and do things you never even considered possible.

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

USE IT

STEVE NELSON

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

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

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

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

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

lol that was bad

LIZ FITZGERALD

okay so i started doing improv when i was 26 and now i'm 30. i don't mention age to be like...a thing. it's just to show the passage of time, like when a woman gets bangs in a movie.

so when i was 28, i remember how i improvised. i was super bold and loud and i would embarrass myself all the goddamn time. but then sometimes things would click and all be great and yada we know how improv works.

but like...am i bad now?

i mean i'm not but something keeps happening to me.

okay so it's not happening "to me" so much as i'm the one "making it happen" but enough semantics, let's get into it.

the other night i saw someone that really intimidates me in the audience of a show, someone who i think is an incredibly talented improviser, someone who literally does not know me, and someone who is a man. i feel like mayyyyyybe two years ago this person said "good show" to me and welp, i've been hanging onto that compliment for give or take 24 months.

so yeah i saw this guy and i literally stopped improvising. i walked to the back wall and did not speak in great fear that he would not approve of me.

and if this hasn't happened to you (bc it's happened to me like three times in the last month with three different people), i've included a guide below so you can hop right into my shoes, which in case you haven't seen me around are usually very cute ankle booties.

step 1. see someone. anyone. a peer. an authority. a server. a student. anyone.

step 2. acknowledge this person as male (daddy issues) & award him king of your feelings.

step 3. decide that it doesn't matter what happens in the show, as long as daddy oops i mean this person approves of your performance and says good job liz, consider it to be a great success.

step 4. (daddy?) enter a scene.

step 5. don't improvise at all, not even an ounce. adhere yourself to the back wall and definitely hold onto a chair. stay frozen as part of your master strategy to get approval from the wrong people in the wrong ways.

step 6. repeat!

now, did i recently explain this phenomenon to a woman i paid to both heal and clear my energy? yes, yes i did.

she said i was dimming my light and i venmo'ed her an amount of money i would rather not say out loud. (my energy feels eerily similar to how it did before...but after the session a dear friend asked me if got a haircut so it's safe to say a shift happened somewhere.)

okay but like...she's right. i am dimming my light. i am literally creating a world in which i am afraid to be great because a few years ago someone thought i was good and now i've convinced myself that i can never be less than excellent.

my fear of doing poorly is rapidly eclipsing my ability to do anything at all. i've wisely determined that if i can't achieve the level of my BeSt ~SCENE~ eVER, it's not worth it (!!) lest the PEOPLE of the GREATER CHICAGO IMPROV COMMUNITY will shout via text "eh she's not that good of an improviser???" not trying to be petty but like, why do people like her???" she's not that talented???"

and i find that there is a sort of pressure out there to not admit all of this but dude. am i supposed to say that people don't intimidate me? that's ridiculous. they do. motherfucking constantly. and i react, most times and especially the *longer* i improvise, verrrry unhealthily.

i get very intimidated very easily and i make myself small so i don't fuck up in front of people i respect.

and look. i very much don't want to be doing that.

but i am. and according to my therapist heidi, who i'm sure doesn't approve of my infidelity with the aforementioned energy healer....it all works the opposite way of how i want it to work.

i actually do become worse. in fact, i dim my light so much and so often that one day, and i'm sure of it...it's gonna go out entirely.

this is the part where i'm supposed to say but i'm not gonna let that happen, and listen i hope i don't. i hope i don't lose my ability to perform or be funny or write or whatever. but i might if i keep swimming around in my obsessions, because one day i'll tire and drown.

it's a special thing to me, to improvise. to have fun and to laugh and to make other people laugh. to move around like a kid and be joyful and try.

and right before the lights come back on, right after it's over, to find someone's hand in the dark.

so we'll see.

A RACE TO THE MIDDLE

How Improv's Conventions Turn Poets & Geniuses into Anxious Automaton

CHANDLER GOODMAN

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

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

Climbing the Gallery stairs, I'm terrified. Like cooking for Charlie Trotter, the prospect of improvising in front of T.J. is intimidating. Not only is T.J. widely considered the best improviser in the world, but his reputation is based on his ease and naturalism as an actor and his seemingly effortless ability to mine ex-

traordinary comedy out of ordinary situations. This is—to put it mildly—not my gift.

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

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

- We’re instructed that the best improv occurs when characters love each other and make positive emotional choices. As such, I continue to do scenes where I try playing Dads lovingly encouraging their daughters to go to prom. These scenes got exactly zero laughs, felt interminable, and ended with me wondering if it’s too late to go to business school.
- We’re instructed that when you “tag in” to a scene, you shouldn’t make a choice that advances the plot, but instead explores a character’s feelings in a different context. As such, I

keep tagging in as the “best friends catching up over beers”, where I immediately turn characters who were 30 seconds ago getting laughs and make them unwatchably boring. These scenes got exactly zero laughs, felt interminable, and ended with me wondering if it’s too late to go to business school.

- We’re instructed to “make things important”. As such, when scene partners would ask me innocuous questions like, “*do you want a Coke?*”, I would invariably scream back, “*YOU MEAN THE BEVERAGE THAT REMINDS ME OF THE NIGHT I LOST MY VIRGINITY!*” These scenes got exactly zero laughs, felt interminable, and ended with me wondering if it’s too late to go to business school.

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

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

We did a series of introductory exercises before getting to the main course. TJ asked two people to take the stage and Kyle and Carmen volunteered. TJ then told us that there’d be no big wrin-

kle to what we'd do next: We would just do a basic improv scene, the only lay on being that every time he felt an improviser imposing an invention on to the scene that didn't correspond authentically to the circumstances of the scene, he'd stop the exercise and have them start again from the beginning. What happened next is etched into my brain.

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

Nope. T.J. stopped them right there.

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

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

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

of unstructured data that we quickly, collaboratively and brilliantly bring into coherent vision.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

On that Saturday morning five years ago, as we flailed at T.J.’s exercise, trying futilely to resist our trained impulse to apply positive emotions to situations where they made no sense, and mak-

ing things important that registered as abjectly false, he told us something that has stuck with me. To paraphrase, he told us, “the further along you get, you have to trust that you’ve retained whatever wisdom there is in the rules. From here on out, unlearn everything.”

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

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

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

ARE YOU HAVING FUN YET?

NATHALIE GALDE

Sooo you had a bad show...

Must be time to quit. You're in a slump. You've been in a slump for months. Why do you even DO improv anymore? It's not fun for you. It sucks when people play over the top characters and don't really connect with what you're doing on stage. No one ever shows up to the shows anyway. You don't even like half of your teammates, and the other half are just delusional hobbyists who think they're hot shit now that they're in the Second City Conservatory program. Is anyone even editing or is it just you? It seems like nobody knows the rules except you. Even your friends tell you that they really enjoyed watching you perform, but they tolerated your castmates because they're clearly not as talented as you. Now that there's so many new people, you're the only one who gets what the show is *supposed* to look like. When even was the last time that you had a rehearsal with everyone in attendance? When was the last time you had a rehearsal that everyone was on time? I mean, you've been late a couple of times, but you had a *real* excuse. Clearly the group dynamic is affected because everyone *else* isn't pulling their weight.

If you've never thought a single one of these things, especially after a mediocre performance, then congratulations, you're perfect. Also, you don't exist. There's no such thing as a perfect improviser, no matter how flawless TJ & Dave seem to be. There's also no

such thing as a bad show. There are no bad shows, only bad improvisers. By bad, I mean improvisers who aren't having fun.

“Don't forget to have fun.” It's a mantra that, as a teammate/coach/teacher, I find myself delivering often. I haven't kept track of how many eye-rolls and sarcastic “Thank yous” I've received after saying it. It's uttered so often that it's lost its core sentiment—*enjoy yourself and what you'll create together*. “Yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, yeah, ‘have fun,’ thanks coach.” It's just words to many improvisers these days. For real though, *have fun*. Don't forget that at the end of the day, you've been playing pretend all along. You know who else likes to play pretend and take it very seriously? Kids. Except when pretend time is over, kids don't walk away beating themselves up—“Next time, I'll make sure to filter my thoughts and make better choices about my pretend and remember to have fun”—said no kid, *ever*. When pretend time is over, kids just move on to the next thing, at most thinking of what they'd like to do the next chance they get to play. That's how you should feel about your improv. Only give your self-diagnosed mediocre performance as many brain cells as minutes that it lasted and then move on.

Even new improvisers seem to have a better grasp on the concept of having fun than their “veteran” counterparts. They don't have the years of cynicism and perceived failures to filter their improv through. Sure, their scenes are rich with cliché moves and tired gimmicks, or pop culture references that don't serve the scenes, instead serving a punch line—but look at their faces. Look at them having so much goddamn fun. Because they've just discov-

ered something so empowering and liberating and they can't help but just be in that moment and enjoy the ride.

The second they take their first improv class, it's over. Once you know something you didn't know before, you become conscious of it, and then you can't unknow it. Oftentimes, developing the consciousness of "how to improvise" results in forgetting what attracted you to it in the first place - all that fucking fun you seemed to be having. The classic double-edged sword: once you learn improv, you lose the fun - the only way to keep having fun is to know nothing Jon Snow. Yet, while there are several successful improvisers who've never taken a class, there isn't a single one I've met who hasn't felt like garbage at some point after a show. But, it's not lack of improv knowledge that keeps you from having fun, and it's not never growing up. It's you. You're the only person who's ruining the show for yourself and for everyone around you.

Somehow, in the process of writing this, holistic forces allowed for me to be in the same room when Jimmy Pennington of Sight Unseen said this: "When you finish a good show, you're frustrated about all the things you wanted to do, and all the moves you didn't get to make and play with. When you finish a bad show, you just think about how much you hated the things you did." Every bad show you've experienced has its roots in fear. Being stuck in a slump, low performer/audience attendance, being green, being steamrolled—it's all of these fears that narrow your sense of play and disallow you from engaging faithfully with your scene partners. You're not onstage playing; you're having an out-

of-body experience and you're actually just watching yourself and the rest of the cast bomb. You're so concerned with so many things that are out of your control that, without even realizing it, you're trying to control those very things, and your failure to maintain this "control" is manifesting negative thinking that results in no fun for anyone.

ImproviSEXation is a show that's near and dear to my heart. We've run on and off at the Annoyance with a sex-positive and body-positive premise. My inspiration for it was a show called Ruuudy's Fun Fest in Miami. It's an in-your-face performance, and Ruuudy challenges the audience to embrace love and just love life. I wanted to capture that love and apply it to my love of improv. I wanted improv to be everything it advertises: funny and fun. For three years, I've been able to walk away from every Sexation performance with nothing less than a beaming smile. This show encourages anything to happen, which would include the biggest fears of any improviser. All of these things have happened at any one performance, and all of these things have resulted in some of the most genuine and jovial moments my castmates and I have had the pleasure of drenching ourselves in.

We root the show in sex and body-positivity and we encourage Murphy's Law to take full effect. It's a show that is bereft of control, and I feel absolutely in control when I portray Määääääärk with seven umlauts. Being in the skin of that character has allowed me to practice letting go of the things that are beyond my preparation and expectations. I've only prepared myself for the possibility that anything that can happen will, and it's just my job

to enjoy the ride and apply what I know when the situation calls for it. I don't plan for the drunk heckler; I encourage them to make themselves known. I don't agonize over the capabilities of my cast members; they auditioned and were cast because they killed it in the audition and they've put in the work at rehearsals. The format of the show itself is a huge safety net—our characters never remember the set list, and which invites a balanced contrast of insane audience interaction and grounded improv, making for an inherently textured show.

I trust that improvisation will prove itself useful in a show where anything can happen. This show isn't unique by applying these notions.

Be sure to trust and love your improv on and offstage. The only people who know that your castmate was late to call time are you and your castmates. The audience is otherwise oblivious to that information. So why hold it against them on stage? The amount of rehearsals that you or your castmates have attended is irrelevant to the show you are currently performing in front of a paying audience. In the famously obnoxious words of Elsa, fucking let it go. How is that noise at all beneficial to a show? Come to terms with what is, not what it should or could be. It doesn't mean that what is is what's right. It just means that you understand the task at hand when you release yourself of everything you're anticipating.

None of this is to say that objectively bad shows don't happen; they do. Every bad show had the potential to be amazing until you drenched it with your urine-soaked pants of fear. But know-

ing that you have universal fears should be a freeing notion. There is no secret to a good show. More than anything, I can only hope to achieve awakening your consciousness of this fear that drives you directly into bad shows. Because your bad show is someone else's best show in days/weeks/months/years. It's probably the first improv show an audience member has ever seen, and they liked it. It's all in your head and you should liberate yourself.

Fear is a you problem. We're all a bunch of little narcissists striving for perfection or coming close, resulting in our fear of failure. I don't necessarily subscribe to the tenets of "zen-prov," but I do believe that our energies affect each other. Unchecked negative energy can saturate a team before they hit the stage and affect the players without them even noticing. Fear is a negative energy. It's why you hear time and time again to leave your shit at the door. Because that's where it belongs. Your shit has no business in a performance/rehearsal space. It's not to say you can't explore your shit and that you should pretend everything is ok all the time. It means, don't let your bad day become everyone else's bad show. Getting to play is an opportunity to work on something that should remove you from your shit, so when you walk back out that door you might even have the mindset to process your shit in ways you couldn't see before.

Knowing this (if you didn't already), you're going to be overly conscious of it. You're going to think about it more often before you hit the stage. It's going to affect your performance. Good.

Embrace that fear and release it from your tense shoulders, and don't forget to have fun.

WHY YOU DON'T LIKE THE HAROLD

*Well, Why I Don't Like The Harold. But I
Can Only Imagine Our Reasons Are Similar.*

NICK DIMASO

It feels like most improvisers don't like the Harold.

I think this because a lot of improvisers have told me, "I don't like the Harold." And other clues like, "fuck the Harold!" And I would say, "What a blasphemous and crazy thought! Probably just a *bit*. I love the Harold."

And then one day, as I was performing a Harold, it hit me: I also hated it. And slowly, it wasn't just the Harold anymore: my friends and I seemed to be distancing ourselves from performing and watching improv *altogether*. It all started to feel inconsequential and unfun.

I wanted to know what happened.

INT. COLLEGE CLASSROOM - NIGHT - EIGHT YEARS AGO
Before all of our shows, you could find my college improv team, *The Queen's Tears*, scattered around the perimeter of a giant classroom in covert poses. And then, like porch chimes before a storm, *slowly*, you'd hear a murmur:

"Shit damn motherfucker motherfucker damn."

Our eyes darted around the room, as if we each had an order to kill the person next to us.

“Some dumb bitch done stole my man. I’mma find another fucker better than that motherfucker; shit damn motherfucker motherfucker damn.”

We carefully peeled off the walls and crept toward the center of the room, toward each other.

“Shit damn motherfucker motherfucker damn. Some dumb bitch done stole my man.”

The chant would grow in volume and speed. People pantomimed smacking a bat in their hand, polishing a pistol, extending Wolverine claws¹—all while glaring at each other.

“I’MMA FIND ANOTHER FUCKER
BETTER THAN THAT
MOTHERFUCKER SHIT
DAMN MOTHER-
FUCKER MOTHER-
FUCKER DAMN!”

¹ Some of us liked to twist patterns. That someone was usually my friend, Nick Lehmann.

We would end nose-to-nose with a release of energy that could power a jet plane. And then we would rush into the theatre riding this fire to bring the house down.

CUT TO:

INT. ANY THEATER GREENROOM - NIGHT - PRESENT DAY
I am seated drinking a Schlitz with a few of my teammates. We're still waiting on a few friends to arrive when someone asks the fateful question:

“What do we want to do tonight?”

Responses include:

“Eh, let's just do a montage. We'll figure it out.”

“How about a Harold? LOL JK fuck that.”

“Let's just have fun. Who cares?”

“Fuck the audience.”

We never really “settle” on something—I guess we'll do a montage?—and then we perform a show that is more often than not, uninspired and uninspiring.

EXT. MY APARTMENT - NIGHT - LATER

I'm thumbing through my copy of *Truth In Comedy*² to reacquaint myself with the Harold. I'm rereading that, with a Harold, “the first rule is: there are no rules,” and that if someone believes that they *can't* do something in a Harold, they are doing a Harold

² In Nick Lehmann's book, Charna wrote “Welcome to the family, Nick!” In my book, she wrote, “Welcome to the fold.” Why is he in the family, and I'm just in the fold? We have the same name! Later that night, I would look in the mirror and wonder if I were just simply a forgettable person.

wrong. And that's when I realized why I didn't like the Harold anymore.

There *are* rules to a Harold.

In fact, those rules feel like they make unintentional, creative choices for me and the group. More often than not, it feels like the form is in control of the show when we should be.

This frustration with form isn't singular to the Harold: because we feel less control over the show when following a form, we probably don't feel like the show fully reflects us as artists.

For example: Imagine we're in the first beat of a Harold, and Olivia plays a character who won't admit they are wrong. I think it would be fun to see this character caught in the act of shoplifting. The form suggests that we pocket Olivia's character until the relevant slot in the second beat of the Harold. This patience can pay dividends later in the show (e.g., by later connecting seemingly disparate people and events, we impress the audience), but it can also fall flat. Or, my impulse could never happen at all: we might go with another pull for that scene or run out of time, and now that organic chance is lost.

This isn't to say that *always* acting on an impulse is the right option. Sometimes patience is the right answer, like paying off a character's want later in the show. But with a form, we don't feel comfortable enough to be able to make the choice between the two.

Strictly following an established form is antithetical to performing improv. We will sometimes “make” moves in a form out of obligation, rather than making intentional or creative decisions.

And I think that’s what Del Close was trying to say, and we’ve³ just gotten away from it.

FORM AND CONTENT

Currently, improvisation is one of the only artforms I can think of where we begin with form instead of content. We wonder first *how* we want to say something instead of *what* we want to say.

It’d be weird if an artist, instead of thinking, “I am in love and wish to write about it, so I shall write a poem,” thought, “I shall write a poem, so as to discover what I want to write about.”

Instead, these artists, after their own experimentation, settle on something they are trying to say and work *with* a form to tell it in the most effective, thought-provoking way.

Ideally, what we want to *say*—specifically when doing improv—is discovered through our performance. On the surface, then, this might appear to be a rational argument for our current state: *form before content*.

Take *The Improvised Shakespeare Company* at iO: this is arguably one of the most successful improv groups in the world. And their shows are Harolds: each show *opens* with a prologue in rhyming couplets that conveys, generally, *what we are about to see*; they then establish the *protagonist*, the *antagonist*, and ei-

³ *Me. Mainly, me. But keep reading, because (spoiler alert)—I come back around!*

ther the love interest, an oracle, or an eccentric(s) who will make their way into the main storyline in the first beat scenes; there's generally a group game scene to change the pace; repeat repeat repeat, and then they cleverly end at the beginning with a closing monologue/epilogue in rhyming couplets that ends with the title of the play. A form can flourish and elevate our improv when we consciously choose them for their strengths.

The Improvised Shakespeare Company consciously chose and embraced the Harold: they know it is a killer form for narrative⁴, and that *directly serves what they are trying to do*. They want to create stakes and cue the audience into hidden character motivations so that the audience becomes giddy when characters finally meet at the end. Their show would not work *nearly as well* as a Deconstruction, or a BeerSharkMice, or anything else. Their show is proudly a Harold.

Now, let's consider that our improv group decides to perform a Deconstruction and in the process learn what our show is about.

What if, during the first scene of our Deconstruction, we realize that this show would work much better as a LaRonde due to the number of characters and relationships that are referenced in the opening "spine" scene? Since our group chose a form, we now need to bend what we are inspired to say and explore to fit into

⁴There's a reason that so many teachers also call the Harold the "Sitcom" form: it's what *Seinfeld* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *30 Rock* and most other television comedies use to organize their stories. We set up an A-plot, a B-plot, and a C-plot, and throughout the episode we weave them together in a satisfying way that gives us short-term, immediate pleasure and long-term, delayed gratification when everything resolves in the end.

the mold of a Deconstruction. Otherwise, we'll feel like we did the form "wrong."

So, I think what Del was trying to say was:

"Start with a form, and then bend away as necessary to follow what your show ultimately becomes."

So then,

If, unlike *The Improvised Shakespeare Company*, we plan to discover what we are trying to say in the process of saying it, then we must be able to adapt and make structural and content choices that create the best version of that show as possible.

If we can discover what we are trying to say in the process of saying it, then we can adapt and make structural and content choices that create the best version of that show as possible. We need to improvise to figure out why we're improvising that night.

We have learned (and intuitively know) what makes improv shows enjoyable: specific characters with clear wants; obstacles that get in people's way; a clear beginning-middle-and-end, varying scene lengths and energies, dynamic scene pictures; varying number of people in a given scene or game; goofy, goofy bits; and the fact that what we're doing is live and spontaneous.

Forms, for the most part, try to package and arrange these "enjoyable" elements for us. Instead, I propose that ensembles practice these elements—as well as learn and practice "moves"—to establish a group vocabulary so we can best tell our own stories. If we practice and deconstruct forms in rehearsal, we'll start to un-

derstand what makes those forms successful. And then we can apply that understanding to any improv show, and we can borrow structural and editing elements to help us create great art. This shared “performance” vocabulary opens doors to choices. And then, together, we can make choices to create the shows we want to create and say the things we want to say in a way that feels more unique and genuine.⁵

Let’s imagine a scene where Martha is explaining to her sister, Joan, that she is having second thoughts about the wedding, and let’s say that we’re going to follow our impulse to see *why* she’s having second thoughts. We do a “tag run” of lost loves and people warning Martha of marriage before Joan tags back in. As an audience member, I see the moves happening and assume this is a montage of previous interactions.

Now let’s say that, instead of a “tag run,” our performers do a “revolving door” of lost loves and people warning Martha of marriage before Joan swings back into the scene. Though it’s the same content, the revolving door move creates this daydream-like feeling where Martha is literally turning side to side to interact with these memories before Joan steps back in. It’s the difference between a hard cut and a soft fade in film; it creates a depth of tone.

⁵ *I feel that it’s worth mentioning that I am suggesting ways to make improv more “theatrical” or “artistic,” when other people may see improv as a means to a comedic end. This is something that has come up when I have had late night conversations with my friends about improv, and I don’t think these camps are mutually exclusive: shows can be hilarious and artistic. Improv lends itself to both. And, I would argue, that if you have more tools in your toolbelt to make funnier moves, or weave together more interesting plots, or vary the energy, or whatever it is that the show needs, you can produce even funnier shows.*

As a performer, *I* made a creative choice to introduce a revolving door because I wasn't thinking through the lens of a form.⁶ As a result, the show feels more like a part of me, and the result was more specific: I heightened Martha's fears and second guessing. The move was more intentional instead of just a quick short-hand for "a run of scenes."

Practicing and creating moves and structures as a team further develops a unique group identity and point of view. How often have we felt like we are just "another improv team"? Or that we're sitting through just another show? We can feel this way sometimes with mash-up teams because we generally stick to the "basics" that everyone knows.⁷ If we instead had our own moves, our own vocabulary, our own interpretation of how scenes and stories could thread together, then we would feel more of a relationship with the artform. We would feel empowered, because our shows reflected us as individuals and as an ensemble.

As an audience member watching the revolving door, I might wonder if those interactions were made up as a result of her neuroses or from her past. I get a heightened feeling of Martha's disorientation and second guessing. The content, though the same, was strengthened by the move.

⁶ *In this case, it's a historical lens: "In this form, we do tag runs to play out a game, theme, or idea." Admittedly, some coaches and teachers will teach moves like the revolving door and others in rehearsal. And if moves are practiced and become part of the typical vocabulary, then those choices can be made. Otherwise, the habits we've developed in watching and performing the "standard" moves with a form will usually take over. And we can feel more like "just another improv team."*

⁷ *Sweep edits, tag-outs, asides, walk-ons, and group games. Forms like the Harold, Living Room, LaRonde, or a Montage.*

And perhaps this leads to what we are trying to say with this show: that big decisions come with a lot of second guessing and disorientation. Or, maybe the content led us to this form utilizing revolving doors (and possibly asides to show underlying intentions, personification to bring to life fears and neuroses, repeating scenes with new choices to see how it could have been, etc.). Ideally, form and content are interdependent.

I Think I Know What Happened (To Me, At Least)

INT. COLLEGE THEATRE - NIGHT - CONTINUOUS

The Queen's Tears^{8,9} rushed the stage each night to perform to over 300 friends and family. On this particular Friday night, we were going to attempt a Harold.

This was our favorite form because it also felt like the “professional” form: it’s what the “adults” were doing.

But after a couple of minutes into our first beat scene, we realized something: The two performers in the scene were hitmen. And they were sent to kill one another.

⁸ *Not an exaggeration: the improv audiences at Northwestern University were usually huge and stupidly supportive. This definitely contributed to taking risks and creating a form alongside an audience.*

⁹ *Also, people had heard that Nick Lehmann was part of the “iO family.” He was incredibly popular and had many friends.*

On the sides, the rest of us started darting our eyes at one another.¹⁰ This felt familiar.¹¹ We suddenly realized that we all had been sent to kill one another.¹²

We scattered around the perimeter of the packed theater and stood in covert poses. One by one, we would slowly walk to the center of the theater toward each other—brandishing weapons like a pistol, a bat, or wolverine claws¹³—and tell the story about who we were and why we were sent there.

We ended up staying in this one scene for the rest of the show. And that decision worked for us in the end because it heightened the stakes that anyone could make a move at any moment.

We started with a Harold and (in this case, very quickly) bent away from it to follow the story that night about hitmen who had all been sent to kill one another, but who eventually realized that they were more alike than different.

Turns out, their *bosses* were the real motherfuckers.

I hated the Harold because I didn't feel empowered when performing that form. That's because I felt like I had to play by the seemingly arbitrary rules of the Harold.

¹⁰ *Shit.*

¹¹ *Damn.*

¹² *Motherfucker.*

¹³ *Guess who. Yep. Nick Lehmann.*

In reality, my frustration stemmed from my unwillingness to bend away from the form when it was no longer serving me, the group, or the piece. It also came from my unwillingness to lean into all the things that make a Harold (or any form) great.¹⁴

Coincidentally, just doing a “montage” doesn’t feel great, either. Or making a different move “just for the hell of it.” If we start to see our form and our content as interdependent—that, with improv, what we want to say is inextricably tied up in the way we’re saying it—then maybe we can get back to that original magical feeling improv first had on us.

¹⁴ I’m not sure I know why things changed—maybe I felt the pressure of being on a professional comedy stage. But I do know that I never really talked about it with my after-college teams. *The Queen’s Tears* “nailed” our “Harold” because we had talked in rehearsal about bending away from forms if it felt right and in service of the show. We talked about observing the interplay between content and form as it unraveled and see the structure that was presenting itself, and to capitalize on it. I think, *maybe*, if my teams had talked about this healthy kind of relationship with form, all this frustration with form would have never happened.

ON IMPROV, ANXIETY, AND SAYING GOODBYE

ZACK MAST

You moved to Chicago with a five-year plan. First, you were going to study improv, here in the city where improv became an artform, where every stage bears the molted brilliance of Tina and Stephen and Chris and Cecily and Stephnie and Bob. Where one can truly focus on the *craft*. Where one has the freedom to be bad.

In Years Two Through Four, you'd use that freedom to get good — so good, in fact, that you could finally break free. In Year Five, you would move on to bigger and better things: writing for TV, or acting on TV, or getting someone to adapt your webseries to TV. Whatever the case, you'd leave Chicago, pack up your new (used) Prius, say, "*Sayonara, Charna,*" and ride off west into the sunset.

That was the plan, anyway.

The problem with the five-year plan, at least in my case, and maybe even in yours, is that improv isn't for everyone. That might be obvious to anyone reading this, but then again most of the wisdom we acquire in life should have been obvious at first. For me, it took a while to learn. For me, the five-year plan to forge a career through improv was more like a five-year odyssey to overcome my own anxiety. To find the courage to quit.

My first year was pretty typical. I started classes at iO and made it my mission to get good. Like almost everyone, I was bad. When we first start out, none of us are equipped to understand exactly what makes

bad improv bad. I started an indie team with some friends, and we insisted we didn't need a coach (we did). I performed upstairs at Mullen's and downstairs at Underground Lounge and coveted a slot at Upstairs Gallery. I joined the casts of Improvised Whatever's. I even took notes in class! Can you imagine?

In year two, I finished 5Bs, and when I didn't make a Harold team, I cried on my girlfriend's shoulder for ten minutes. It's always heart-breaking to hear you aren't good enough, but now I had to face an even more devastating truth: things were not going to go according to plan.

At 24, I was wise enough to know that the right thing to do was pick myself up, move forward, and adjust my plan. But at 24, I was also foolish enough to believe that I must have been wronged. If I was going to get my plan back on track, I had to know what went wrong — and who was responsible for it.

I've never told anyone this, but somewhere along the line I had discovered the hidden URL to the teachers' portal on the iO website. Which meant I could get in and view my feedback, level by level, class by class — if only I could hack in and look at my record. It was, of course, an idiotic operation, a fool's errand rooted in my arrogance and insecurity, but I was desperate for any intelligence on why I had failed, and the only thing standing between me and the truth was a simple login screen. I spent a week trying to guess teachers' passwords:

brett@ioimprov.com | level2teacher
craig@ioimprov.com | late90scoach
charna@ioimprov.com | mustlovedogs

Nothing.

With no other shortcuts, I resigned to find out my shortcomings the old-fashioned way: asking a panel deliberately designed to judge your shortcomings. When my notes from the Harold Commission came back, they felt, at the time, like a punch in the gut:

Hi Zach,

We don't share teacher notes with students¹, but we do share your 5b show notes. So I'll share those with you now...

We found you to be a smart and often funny player. You work hard and always seemed articulate and high in reference.

Our notes going forward would be to work on listening a bit more actively and live the scene more and analyze it less, if that makes sense. Also, right now you can sometimes be an active player but with too much behind your efforts, which can make you come off as an over-the-top player, even if funny. So give that area some focus as well.

Reading these notes now, it's clear that they're rather kind, smoothed out with encouraging words and focused on my most glaring tendencies — both common pitfalls for young improvisers — with some helpful direction on how to fix them. But as I pull them up in my inbox, I see that I had immediately forwarded these notes to my friend with the comment, "WOW. Your notes are MUCH more positive!" They were tough to swallow then, but in the years to follow, these notes would haunt me in the back of my anxious brain.

You work hard...

I'm only "often" funny — I need to be funny more often.

Work on listening a bit more actively...

"High in reference"? Like that's a bad thing?

¹ Figuring diplomacy might work where espionage had failed, I had politely requested my teacher notes. No dice.

Live the scene more and analyze it less...

I'm too active — I need to calm down.

...if that makes sense.

No, always funny. That's what I need to be.

Over the next two years, things began to take shape: I started classes at Annoyance, where I met the friends that would come to form my indie team, Law Dog. I made an incubator team at The Playground. I went back through iO and finally made a Harold team. When I auditioned at CIC, which I believed had the best improv in the city, I stood outside and whispered to myself, "You can do this. You belong here." It worked—I made a team. The plan was back on track.

As I started to perform regularly, my skill as an improviser sharpened, but so did my identity as an improviser. My creative pursuits became my life. I remember hearing a friend saying, "I do comedy in my free time," and thinking: *Wait, "free time"?* It didn't feel like improv was what I did for pleasure; rather, it was the thing I needed to do, the center of my identity, and paying attention to the other priorities of life—my relationship, my job, my personal well-being—as the hobby.

It also made me miserable. No matter how well a show might go, I'd come off stage believing I had done everything wrong. People would say, "Great show!" and I would think, *Thanks, but I know you're just being nice.* During notes, I would listen with dread, anticipating the moment the coach would point out some mistake I'd made. At CIC, I put pressure on myself to live up to what I saw as the standards of the theatre, and as a result, I entered every show feeling like I didn't belong, like they had a mistake in casting me in the first place. While

I've never been uncomfortable on stage in general, I was uncomfortable being on *that* stage, terrified of being exposed as a fraud.

I'd confide in my friends and teammates about how I felt like I wasn't good enough. "Why do you say those things? You're the only one who thinks that. You're great." That might have been true, but the voice of those who loved me was no match for the voice inside that hated me. "I don't know," I'd say. "I don't know why I say it."

I should be clear that none of this is the fault of the 5B notes. It wasn't the notes themselves that bothered me. The notes were a convenient stand-in for my own anxiety, something which my spiraling self-criticism could latch onto and fester. The exact words didn't matter, other than that they gave me a way to articulate my self-hatred.

In Year 4, things fell apart. I went through a bad breakup, driven in part by the strain that improv had put on the relationship. I got cut from both iO and CIC (where I was told, "You seem uncomfortable up there"). My Playground team went its separate ways.

In response, I focused on Law Dog, and on our weekly show at CIC, where we hosted a showcase of other independent teams. It brought me genuine joy to play with Law Dog, maybe because it was a group of my best friends. But it was also a chance for me to take the pressure away from my own improv, to focus instead on having fun with my friends and watching a newer generation of improvisers find their voices. It didn't matter anymore whether I was good enough.

When Year 5 began, a friend convinced me to audition again at iO. I went into the audition just trying to have fun, and I shined. The team that formed, Gideon, was full of bright veterans, many of whom I'd known from my first classes at iO. I was excited for a second chance

at iO, to just enjoy performing at the theatre without the pressure of proving myself.

One night, I had a Harold show at 8:30 on a Thursday. When I got backstage, I began suffering what can only be described as a full-blown panic attack. As my teammates patted my shoulders and said, “Got your back,” I only wished someone would strangle me so I wouldn’t have to step on stage. As the lights dimmed, I closed my eyes and mustered the strength to open the fake door, slide out onto the stage, give the audience a twirl, and smile. The show itself was a blur. During notes, all I could think about was that I’d let my teammates down.

Afterward, I headed to CIC for my indie show. When I got there, the anxiety lifted. I had fun. I could breathe again.

Why did that show at iO fill me with such dread? It wasn’t the people; the team was stacked with folks as friendly as they were funny. It wasn’t that I hated doing the Harold. Maybe it was that I felt conflicted about iO itself — but this is not an essay about systemic issues in our comedy institutions.

To find the answer, let’s go back to my inbox. Here’s what I wrote to my coach when I was considering whether to step down from iO:

I think it's fair to say that sometimes the Harold doesn't seem right for me. My brain doesn't quite gel with the relaxed groupwork that a 10-person piece requires. I think too much. I get nervous about making moves. Sometimes I'm too aggressive...

It breaks my heart to read this now. Four years after I’d first internalized The Notes, I still told myself that being an active player was a bad thing, that it made me “over the top.” This time, The Notes really

did make for a convenient excuse — a way to justify to myself that there was a better reason for quitting than the simple truth, which was that improv made me deeply unhappy. I hated it. I hated the pressure I put on myself to do it well. And most of all, I hated what would run through my brain after a show, the voice telling me “that wasn’t good enough.”

Live the scene more and analyze it less...

When I first started studying improv, I would often say something idealistic and smug like, “I want to study improv because I’m afraid of it.” This was bullshit. I was afraid of improv, but not for the reasons I thought. When we hear the mantra “*Follow the Fear*,” I think we’re supposed to subscribe to the Fear of the Unknown: improv is scary because we don’t know what’s going to happen. The mantra always seemed off to me, because that’s what was actually *exciting* about improv. I liked venturing into the unknown. I liked making something from scratch, surprising myself with my own ideas and delighting in the moves of my teammates. On the contrary, what I felt was the Fear of the Known — the prospect that any given improv show would expose the things that only I seemed to know: that I’m not funny enough, that I’m never going to be as good as I want to be, that I don’t deserve to be here.

But was that really unique to me? We all suffer from Imposter Syndrome sometimes. In the beginning of this essay, I said that improv isn’t for everyone, but it’s true, too, that, for lots of people, improv is the jam. In these very pages, we’ve read personal accounts of people finding themselves through improv. It’s led people to find a sense of belonging, or to find new forms of self-expression, or to lift up others who might also be struggling to find their place. We’ve seen the ways

improv inspires people to sort through important issues of creativity and representation and the purpose of art in our lives. Improv can be good, and fun, and cathartic. And sure, it can hone the skills that lead to a successful career in the arts. For some people.

But it's not for me. I couldn't overcome the central challenge, at least in my experience, of improv as a creative pursuit: in seeking validation of myself as a performer, I ended up seeking validation of myself as a human being. If my improv was bad, then I was a bad person. And because I was so hard on myself, no improv show was ever going to feel good enough. I was never going to feel good enough.

...if that makes sense.

In shaping my five-year plan, I had set the stakes impossibly high. I had made succeeding at improv into a non-negotiable goal. When I enrolled in that first class at iO, I wasn't just signing up for a class. I was locking myself into a creative identity for the next five years. And it took nearly five years for me to realize that Chicago Improviser was not the right identity for me.

Around the time I was pondering leaving the Harold for good, I read a piece on [Vulture](#) by Liz Meriwether, the creator of *New Girl*. The piece is a fun, breezy reflection on how Meriwether's discomfort of living in LA ended up fueling her creative engine, but it's this passage that stuck out to me then:

In New York, I was going to every stand-up performance and improv night I could go to. I actually saw David Cross live when he dropped in unannounced at a show on the Lower East Side. Comedy in New York was dirty, absurd, subversive, alive. I don't know, man, I just really loved it. But I wasn't a stand-up, and I wasn't enough of a joke writer to

work in late night, and I blew my 30 Rock meeting by talking for 45 minutes about robots — in New York, the options were limited.

The thing that resonated with me, specifically, is that small, self-assured aside: *“But I wasn’t a stand-up, and I wasn’t enough of a joke writer to work in late night².”* Although she recognized that New York was a thrilling place to be doing comedy, Meriwether had the confidence — and the mental clarity — to discern what was really, truly not for her.

It’s been almost two years since I quit improv. Since then, I’ve focused on independent projects that make me feel confident in my voice. Heck, it’s a good thing that I’m only “often funny,” as that just means my life has some balance. What’s more, I have a much healthier relationship with creativity now that I don’t feel like I need to compete to prove I belong. When I do dabble in improv, I’ve enjoyed doing things like The Co-op at The Crowd, where there’s no pressure to do anything other than to have fun and support a community.

I’m always going to be a creative person. But when I set out to enact my five-year plan, I made “creative person” my whole identity. It wasn’t until I separated my creative pursuits from my sense of self that I began to feel good about either.

As I write this, I’m in the midst of a run of a play that my friends wrote. It’s a comedy, but it’s not part of the Chicago comedy scene. There are no stakes involved other than to enjoy performing, to make stuff just for the sake of making stuff.

² *This was also a small comfort to me when I got rejected from The Onion. Jokes are hard!*

A few weeks ago, I said to my girlfriend, who's not a performer, "I haven't done a project since October. I need to do something creative. I'm getting restless!"

She stared at me. "What are you talking about? You've been rehearsing a show for two months."

"Oh, no," I laughed. "That doesn't count. That's fun!"

It's been eight years since I moved to Chicago. Somewhere in Year Three or Four, I had trained myself to believe that I wasn't doing anything creative unless I hated every second of it. I'm now in Year Eight of my five-year plan, and I'm only just beginning to break free. L.A. may be where my sun will set, but Chicago, right now, is where it will shine.

GOOD SHOW!

LUCIA RIEUR

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

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

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

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

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

Out in the world, the social norm of compliments is mostly harmless (albeit annoying and momentarily anxiety-inducing). In improv, it’s

convoluted. I'm not asking you to give in-depth notes about what the performer or team could have done better. While constructive criticism is important, that's not the role of an audience member. But "Good show!" has become a tired phrase.

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

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

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

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

So your team is talking about your show!

Maybe it sounds a little something like this:

Coach: How'd you feel?

Teammate: Good show, I had fun!

C: Why'd you feel good?

T: Huh, uh, well, it was a fun show.

C: What was fun about it?

T: I like playing with my team!

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

Perhaps having fun is the end goal either for the individual performer or for the team, but that needs to be communicated before it becomes the metric for a show's success. "Fun show!" is just as easy a trap to fall into as "Good show!" One person's fun show may not be another's. That's okay.



art by Kat Wertzler

Maybe your teammate gets off from a batshit, bananas tag-run! Or they're hot for being edited into solo-scenes! Or they're absolutely gaga for absurdity! A team needs varying definitions of fun to produce an interesting show from varying creative sensibilities. This is where team communication comes into play.

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

As a firm believer in practicing what you preach, I've been actively trying to combat this from within my own teams. The result can be a little ugly. While my teammates were talking about the scenes they enjoyed and how the show was *good* and *fun*, I abrasively blurted out, "I didn't like that show, I don't think it was good." I was met with defensive examples of what we did well. And it's true—we did have se-

lect moments of doing well! But from my perspective, it also wasn't a good show! Nothing was connected, scenes lacked clarity, and we were all flopping around looking for common ground.

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

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

So you just did a show!

You feel okay about it and aren't going to use it as a reason to quit improvising anytime soon, but it certainly wasn't very good. Maybe the house was quiet, maybe you got in your head about something

you or a teammate said, or maybe you're having a bad day. Whatever the reason is- we know when we don't have good shows. I'll be the first to admit when I'm being too hard on myself. I'll also be the first to admit that a lot of shows aren't going to be that good or memorable. That is not a bad thing! I can't remember every peanut butter sandwich I've ever had, but I still love eating peanut butter sandwiches.

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

While it's important to assume best intent when someone says, "Good show!" that doesn't change the fact that hearing "Good show!" often blows. During an extended run a team of mine was on, someone on the team we were paired with would tell me, "Good show!" every week. It was weird! It was also not true! My team and I would talk and acknowledge that while it wasn't a good show, there were merits. My "Good show!"-giving friend was not being mean, but it's frustrating to feel as if you have to silence your thoughts and say, "Thank

you,” so as to not come across ungracious. So don’t! Still say “Thank you,” because you do have a heart, but then share your thoughts on the show.

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

Them: Good show, You!

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

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

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

So you just saw a show!

You have some peers who performed and you had a fine time overall, but for whatever reason, the show was ultimately just another drop in the bucket. It was fine. You certainly don’t regret coming but it’s

nothing to write home about. You see your peer, you have the urge to say, “Good show!” DON’T! “Good show!” is ultimately a disservice to the performer and a cop-out by the giver. I know what you’re thinking: “Lucia! I went to the show to watch and enjoy it, not to give notes on it or, I don’t know, write an essay on improv theory!”

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

Can you genuinely not remember one part of the show that you enjoyed? If you can’t, “Good show!” is only giving you comfort. It’s not altruistic. It doesn’t promote growth. It’s not supportive. It is lying. No one expects to be told, “Good show!” Question why you feel the need to say it. Imagine how you’d reply if your peer responded with, “Thanks so much! What made you think that?” If you really can’t think of anything and feel the need to speak, tell your peer, “I love watching you play!” or maybe throw an “I’m glad I got to come tonight!” out there. Or, don’t say anything at all, sweet pea. Remember: you were there to watch, not talk.

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

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

THE SMARTFORM

GOOD LONGFORM RULES

LEE BENZAQUIN

It's been said that an improviser who is thinking about anything besides what's happening in the moment is an improviser who is not improvising. Variations of this maxim have been written in just about every improv book, blog, green room, light booth and toilet stall I've encountered. There seems to be a unanimous agreement that, as soon as you stop yourself from thinking, the best possible improvisation will surface. And the opposite—the “*getting in your head*,” the preoccupation with deciding what scene to start next, when to walk on, how to connect previous scenes—is said to be a dam to the free flow of pure, perfect improvisation.

I don't disagree with this belief, not one bit, in fact I agree with it specifically because of its proven success rate in my own practice; it took a few years, but when I could finally focus only on the present, I started to improvise in a way that was uniquely me. I absolutely support teaching new improvisers to stop thinking, but the problem is most institutions that preach the “don't think” mantra also give their students lots to think about during performance. They insist that you must give names, remember locations, invent relationships, avoid arguments, uncover game... and all of these things pull a performer out of the present moment and place them into a stressful control room of buttons and

switches to be pressed and flipped at precisely the right times, while also stocking and referring back to a filing-cabinetsworth of information collected throughout the show. It's no wonder most new improvisers look robotic; they're stuck inside bulky mech suits they barely know how to control, hitting buttons frantically and shouting names and locations before the system overheats; "But *Mom!* You said I could go to *Kelly's party!* I *hate*—Wait... I mean, *nevermind*, you're my smart Mom who's always *right*...?"

The truth is, there's a lot that improvisers *should* be thinking about besides what's going on in front of them. Names, locations, relationships and the ilk all add texture and depth to scenes, and the faster they're all established, the more time performers can spend focusing on that "present moment" stuff. Learning to get it all out of the way quickly is just a habit that can be developed like any other. Naming characters, stating relationships clearly, all this becomes second-nature the more it's done, and once it's second nature, it can happen in milliseconds without active thought ever getting involved. That's the most compelling reason for consistent performance practice; just like you can build a morning routine by training yourself to switch off your alarm clock and immediately do breakfast and a shower, you can train your brain to respond to first lines with names, explicitly state relationships, etc. After a short while, it becomes habit and will occur without work at all. Your instincts will take over and do it for you, and you can observe your own actions and react accordingly (and now we're back to focusing purely on what's in front of you).

All of these things are skills specific to the individual performer, and can be built on one's own. Go to classes, attend improv jams, and just be mindful enough to work on it during every opportunity available.¹

There's one skill that cannot be practiced on your own. There's one thing that's bound to pull improvisers out of their "paying attention" brain and put them into a brain full of overthinking, and it's something that has to be worked out within a team, *and* it's a skill that resets to square one every time a new team is formed. Even worse, it's a skill that most individuals and teams don't have time to develop. Furthermore, this skill is the only one that, when developed and applied properly, will set improv teams apart from one another, establish artistry, and build a fanbase. The skill I'm referring to is the ability to operate *within* a long form.

The Hard Part

Making "moves" is the hardest part of longform improv. Deciding where the show will go next means a move must be generated on the sides, conveyed deftly with performance, and understood and carried immediately by a teammate. The infinite landscape of possibilities puts most improvisers "in their heads" and it guarantees that performers within a team are generating vastly different ideas for what the next scene should be. In order for a performer to fully devote oneself to the *performance* of improvisation and

¹ *Even do it in your daily life; give your friend a made-up nickname and call them that for the hour, then change it every hour. Boom, you can invent and remember names now. You're more annoying to be around, sure, but you have more improv skills, and dammit if that isn't the trajectory of all improvisers.*

to save oneself from focusing on “move” decisions, we rely on forms that predetermine moves.

You see, for a long time it was in vogue to use long, heavily structured forms that demanded memorization of preselected scene “types” in a very specific order, the Harold being our most famous example, which includes *at least twelve scenes*. You reading that? Twelve scenes at least, and in a very specific order decided by some folks in the 1960s, forms the *most popular form* for beginning improvisers. Other fully-structured forms include The Deconstruction, La Ronde, and Close Quarters, but these are rarely seen anymore, at least in Chicago. And it’s completely understandable; it takes a heck of a lot of work for a team to achieve mastery of a fully-structured form. It takes memorization, frequent rehearsal, and consistent performance; three things that most of today’s improvisers in Chicago lack the time for.

Anyone can improvise a scene. Most of them will look exactly the same. Two people talking to each other will *always* be fun to watch, provided that the people involved have a sense of humor and timing. That’s why talk shows exist; heck, that’s why friendship exists. But it’s not high art, and there’s no compelling reason to come back and see it again. That’s why structure exists in storytelling; a good story is a collection of scenes, and the collection gives those small scenes a greater context. And in improv, structure can define a team; it’s the only constant, so it’s the only thing a team can guarantee (for better or worse).

So, when lacking the abilities to tackle a complex and structured form, what do we do instead? Most teams turn to one of two op-

tions; a monoscene (one unbroken scene for the duration of the show, usually with no inner structure) or a montage (an unlimited number of scenes, usually with no rules or plan). Monoscenes work best for teams with fewer performers; any more than three, and players must be able to perform on stage without taking focus or just leave a scene when they're not needed, two skills which most improvisers lack. Monoscenes also rarely explore all that the artform of improv has to offer; most will fall into the "realism" category and mimic traditional theater (at best) or talk radio (at worst), never exploring every facet of improv's capacity for in-the-moment invention. Similarly, most montages² end up looking like a frenetic play or television show.

The Solution

For a long time, improvisation has been used to mimic other forms of entertainment, with the assumption that the sheer fact that it's being made up on the spot is enough to give it value. But that's not as clever as we think it is, just as it is not especially clever to transcribe a movie into novel format, or serve breakfast for dinner. In order to fully explore improvisation, we must look

² When I say "montage," I am including its current bizarrely popular variation; one (typically abstract) "opener" followed by three unrelated scenes, followed by a montage. It's often chosen by teams that are still trying to "find their form." Look; a montage is the most difficult form to pull off. It has no rules, no direction, and nine times out of ten I watch performers hyperventilate on the sidelines at the pressure of an infinite number of choices. It doesn't even have a clear way to end it. Why has it become our go-to "lazy" form? When has anyone ever said, "I'm so tired, I barely have the energy to cook... I'll just whip up an improvised dish from all the different things I have in the fridge and whatever is in the cabinets"? Why would you ever give yourself such a huge challenge when you don't know what you're doing yet?

at the aspects of the artform that it does *not* share in common with any other artform, and highlight those.

How is improvisational theater different from absolutely all other artforms? The obvious answer is “it’s made up in the moment,” but consider what that *actually* means. It means that it’s reactive; performers respond to stimuli present in the room. *Anything* present in the room can affect an improv performance, and sometimes even things outside the room.³ Furthermore, “it’s made up in the moment” means that audience and performer alike are experiencing the continuing discovery of the show *at the same time*. Some performers pride themselves in getting audience feedback like, “You must have planned that,” or “Who wrote it?” But comments like these mean that the audience wasn’t aware that they were experiencing discovery *with* the performers. They might as well have seen plain old theater, because they *thought* they did. Put another way, if a magician changed a small red ball into an entirely different but 100% identical small red ball, what does it matter to you? Your experience was that the ball stayed the same,

³ How many times have you seen a performer comment on a car horn honking outside? I hope the answer is “many times,” because it’s a solid joke with a proven success rate, and ignoring the horn would suggest that the performer isn’t open to all present stimuli. When something takes the audience’s focus away from an improvised performance, the improvisation fails. The real “magic” of improv is that the simple act of existing in the room can be the show. When something takes focus away from the show, like a horn honking, the suspension of disbelief falls apart. But if the stimuli is folded back into the show, it becomes texture, and the illusion of the show holds strong.

so why did the magician put in the effort?⁴ If the audience is just going to think we planned it out beforehand, *then we might as well*, because it would definitely be better than anything we come up with in the moment.⁵

So, good long-form improv needs to be reactive and the audience needs to be aware of its in-the-moment genesis. How do we do this and still produce good content? Well, the obvious answer is, “We must rehearse, as a team, for months on end. We must set and discuss goals, check in constantly, know each other well, and be critical of our own work.” This is exactly how theater groups, bands, and all organizations operate, but my experience tells me that it can’t happen in today’s improv scene. People are typically a part of two to four teams, and for obvious reasons regular and rigid rehearsal is a hard ask. Most improvisers I know have so little free time that they look at the performance of improv as their free time, and the idea of being critical during one’s free time is obviously unappealing. I don’t fault anyone for saying, “I only get to do this with these people once every other week, and I don’t want to overthink this.”

So, instead of settling on a montage or a monoscene, let’s look for something else. There must be something that takes advantage of given stimuli and keeps the audience present with the discovery,

⁴ *This is why most a cappella has always confused me. If you’re going to do all the instrument noises with your mouth, and try to fool us into thinking we’re hearing a band, why not just put in the effort and learn to play the real instruments? Because, you know what does the best impression of a guitar? An actual guitar. If you’re going to insist on only using your voices, why not make noises you can only make with your voice? Show me the awesome, untapped power of a cappella, baby!*

⁵ *I was first introduced to this line of thinking through Jared Jeffries.*

but is easy enough that it can be performed with no prior rehearsal.

I'm here to tell you that there *is* something else. I invented it for you, the busy improviser whose teams want to create unique work but just don't have the time to commit to rehearsing a structured form. Welcome to a brand new field of improv forms; the artificially intelligent long form. I call it the SmartForm, for short.

What is it?

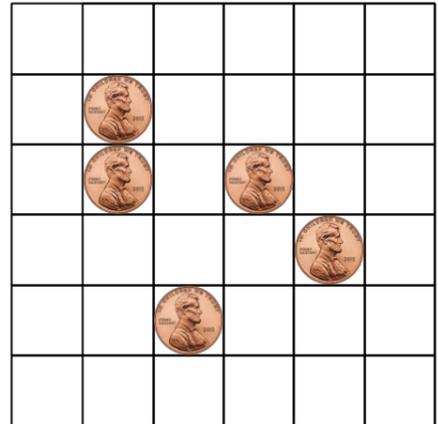
A smartform is one that makes moment-to-moment decisions as to where it will take its performers next. It lives on its own, lurching forward and making choices *for* us, so we only have to react.

For inspiration, we look to the field of study known as artificial life, something I barely understand but am fascinated by. At its most basic, it's the study of systems that simulate life based on simple rules. I first got acquainted with artificial life when I learned about John Conway's *Game of Life*. It's a zero-player game enacted on a two-dimensional grid. Points are plotted on the grid to form a basic design, and then a few simple rules dictate how the design changes, sometimes growing and moving and sometimes shriveling and dying. No players, it just does itself.

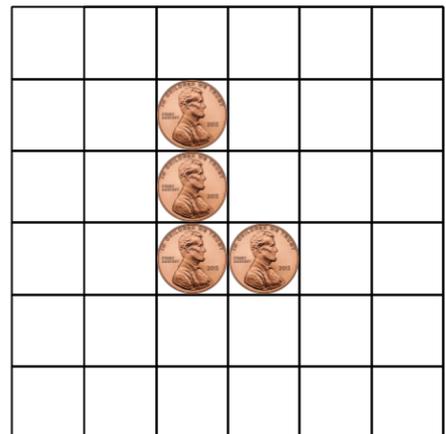
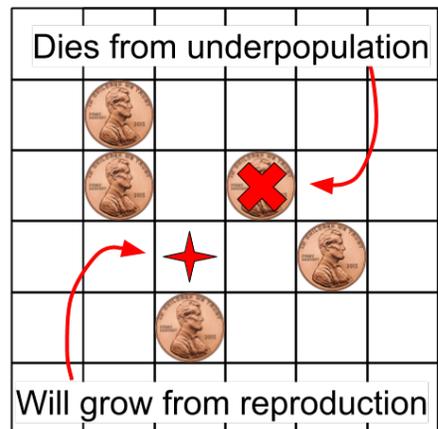
Try it yourself, to get a better understanding. Make a six-by-six grid on a piece of paper, with the squares big enough to fit a penny. Now go grab a bunch of pennies. Place one or two pennies down, in different cells on the grid. Note that each penny's cell is

touching eight other cells (four touch each side and four touch each corner). Now enact John Conway's rules:

1. If one penny-cell is touching one or zero penny-cells, get rid of that penny.
2. If one penny-cell is touching two or three penny-cells, leave the penny alone.
3. If one penny-cell is touching more than three penny-cells, get rid of that penny.
4. If an empty cell is touching three or more penny-cells, put a penny in it.



Follow all of those rules and the board will change to a new design. If you only put down one penny, not much will happen. But try putting down a bunch, in a more intricate and tight pattern, and you'll find that the new pattern after following these rules will look very different. Follow the rules again on the new pattern that has resulted, and you'll have another new pattern. We'll refer to each cycle of rule-following and morphing as one "generation". Most designs will grow, lurch around, and then empty out in under ten generations.

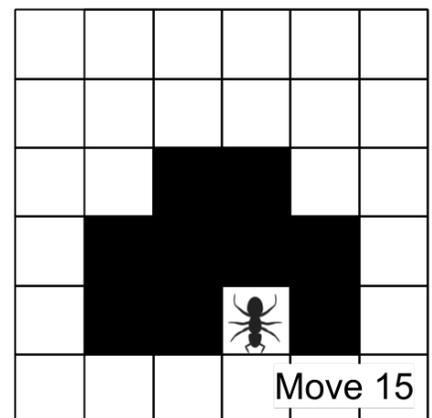
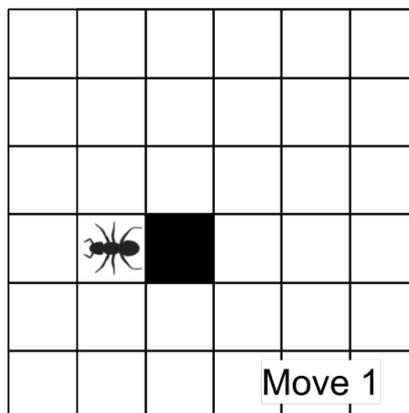
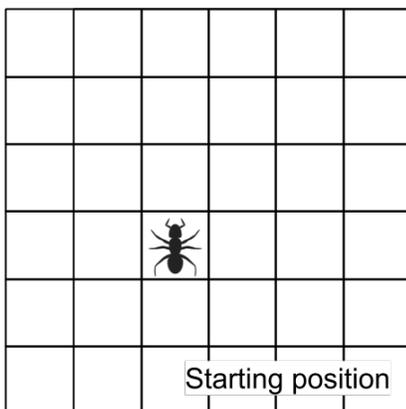


When John Conway created this game in 1970, he was trying to invent a simple game to imitate life. Take another look at the four rules; when

one penny is surrounded by too few pennies, it dies out (underpopulation). When a penny is surrounded by too many, it also dies (overpopulation). A penny with just enough life around it survives, while an empty cell surrounded by enough pennies births a brand new penny (reproduction). So, four simple rules on one grid produces an instance of birth, growth, movement and death. Conway’s Game of Life is particularly famous in the world of maths, and it wasn’t long before fellow mathematicians discovered specific shapes and patterns that would never die out, with silly names like “the Glider” (glides towards infinity at a 45° angle), “the Glider Gun” (produces gliders), and “the Tub” (dunno, kinda looks like a tub).

Sixteen years later, mathematics hunk Chris Langton proposed a similar game, now referred to as Langton’s Ant. This one’s a bit more complicated, so put away your pennies and just imagine. We’ve got a massive grid, but this time every cell can either be black or white. An imaginary ant is placed on one cell, and it moves according to these rules:

1. On a white cell, turn 90° left, change the cell to black, and move forward one.
2. On a black cell, turn 90° right, change the cell to white, and move forward one.



Because of these rules, Langton's ant moves in a decidedly chaotic manner, running around the board and flipping the cells back and forth. Even if you drop a pattern down before letting the ant loose, the ant makes short work of decomposing the pattern into nonsense and scattering it around the grid. The coolest thing about Langton's ant, though, is that with just two rules we have a wild yet still predictable behavior, because for every possible layout, after about 10,000 cycles the ant will *always* find its way to a repeating spiral pattern that extends at a 45° angle for infinity (referred to as "Langton's highway"). So, no matter what kind of chaos you lay down on the board at the beginning, the ant will consume it and find a way to grow its design *every single time*.

There are other examples of artificial life, most of which I don't understand, but these two very simple zero-player cellular automaton games can give us enough inspiration for an infinite number of improv discussions. Because if it's possible to set a few simple rules for some patterns on a grid to mimic life, it's possible to give a form a few simple rules to start thinking and making decisions for *itself*, creating something unique to the moment yet potentially predictable and definitely "smart".

Let's do it.

We only need two things for a smart form; a set of rules, and a random input. Let's start with the random input first: consider all the arbitrary and most predictably unpredictable aspects of every improv show. I mean the things that will always exist in an improv performance, but never with intention. I'll share a couple

that I can think of right now, but I want to first stress that this is an *overarching idea*. The smartform is not about the specific rules I'm about to lay down; those are just *examples* of rules. The important thing to remember is that it's the improv team's job to come up with the rules, and the only limit to the number of rules that exist is your own creativity. With that in mind, I'm going to think of a few off the top of my head:

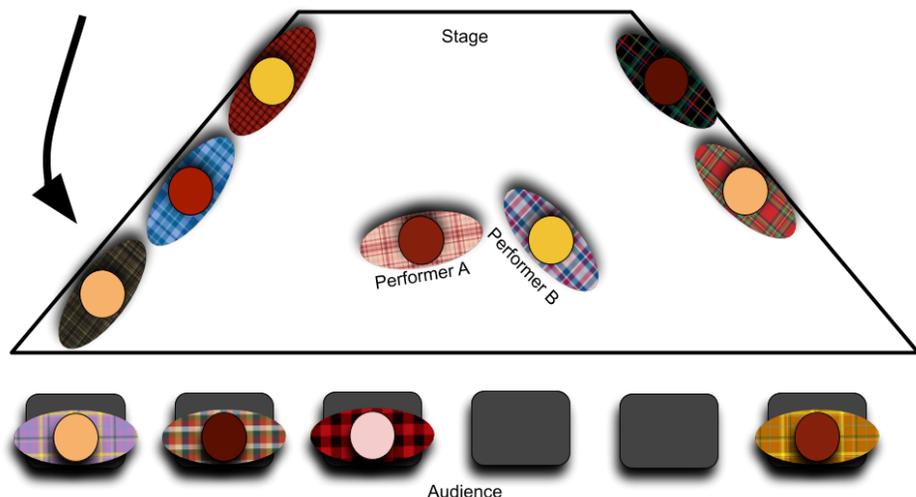
1. Audience seating position.
2. The number of audience members.
3. The sides of the stage the players are standing on.
4. The clothing the team is wearing (unless there's a dress code).

In the same way that the pre-set design in John Conway's grid is an arbitrary input with which we can play out the rules of the Game of Life, any of these unpredictable parts count as arbitrary inputs for our form's simple rules.

Let's examine number three, because that looks like a good one. In Chicago-style improv, it's typical to have teammates wait on the sides of the stage while a scene they are not actively in is occurring. Once a team splits up onto the sides of the stage, we've got an input. Perhaps it's an uneven balance of performers, which is likely to happen if you've got an odd number of players on your team. Our "rules" can look like this:

1. When more performers are stage left, pull the first character who spoke into the next scene.
2. When more performers are stage right, pull the second character who spoke into the next scene.
3. When there's an even split, start the next scene with new characters.

More performers waiting stage right means we will follow Performer B's character into the next scene.



Boom; already we have an absolutely unique show, but one that easily dictates where the performers must go next. Now, when watching from the sidelines, all teammates will be thinking of the same

character, putting everyone in a much closer mindset than a form with more ambiguous rules. When a player gets removed from a scene ("tagged out"), their flight instincts will kick in and they will step to whatever side they're closest to at the time, fueling the arbitrary layout of people onstage and allowing the show to go on randomly, indefinitely.

I came up with the example above as I wrote it out, but already we can see some very cool implications; let's imagine a scene with three people on the left side and two on the right, and two people on stage. We know from our rules that the first person who spoke will have its character followed into the next scene. But what if Taylor, on the left side, wants to follow the second character who spoke? All Taylor has to do is walk on, add a quick line to the scene, and exit to the other side of the stage, changing the sideline layout, and now the rules tell us to follow the second character. Perhaps other teammates disagreed with Taylor, and it starts a game of stage-crossing walkon interruptions. If the audience is aware of the rule, they'll appreciate the game on an intellectual

level, but if they're not aware, it's just a fun moment. And furthermore, any scene with three or more players will give the performers who spoke late the freedom to do and say anything without implication or investigation, because they know their characters' storylines cannot be followed. The form creates its own "main" and "supporting" characters, by virtue of its simple rules.

Again, the "Sidelines Input" is just one of many possible inputs, and the rules regarding next scenes in just one of many possible rules. What if we look at different input sources and different rules? Let's take audience member placement as our input and scene inspiration as our output; we run down the first row of seats from stage left to right and when there's an empty seat, we make the next scene inspired by themes present in the previous scene, while a full seat would tell us that the next scene will be a "world pull" from the previous one.⁶ It shouldn't be hard to keep track in your head which seat you're at in the show; when you watch a scene from the sides, glance at the upcoming seat, and then you know what inspiration to draw from this scene. And because your other teammates are doing the same, it's all the more likely that the next two performers will begin with the same thought in mind. The implications for this input/output are obvious; a packed house means you're only investigating the world of the show the entire time, and a dead house means you're explor-

⁶ This is sometimes called a "commentary" scene, though I hate that term. "World pull" more accurately explains the goal; to take a little thing mentioned about the world and explore it in more depth. If the previous scene mentioned a nearby church, let's see that church; if a character loves their job, let's see an office with a healthy work environment. "Commentary" suggests we must make a comment on what just happened, which is confusing and constraining, whereas "pulling from the world" is open-ended and encouraging.

ing themes pretty deeply. And honestly, that's probably for the best; a big, raucous audience will have more fun with a wild and fast-paced show exploring implication after implication of an interesting universe, while slower and more thematic shows often play best to smaller, quieter houses. But what if that smaller audience knows the team's form? The audience can force the type of show they explicitly want to see by moving seats during scenes. Now we've got a unique form delivering the audience *exactly* what they want, and we have audience participation without interruption.

How about playing with space? Imagine you're in an apartment building, and use the sidelines again to decide which room we go to next. Any plaid in the scene? The next scene will be about the folks that live upstairs. No plaid in the scene? Go downstairs. If you think you can handle it, pair that with seated audience members; an empty seat means we go to the apartment building on the left, while a full seat means the building on the right. We could travel around the whole city with these simple rules, though I'm not sure I could keep up without an actual grid on-stage with a moving chess piece to mark where we're at. This, again, gives an opportunity to audience members in the know to affect the show; if they want to see characters return, it's a matter of moving their seats around to force the show to turn back, returning to the previous building.

What happens when inspiration strikes a performer and they act without obeying the rules? Ideally this won't happen, but if it does, the answer is simple; everyone else continues to obey the

rules, and adjusts accordingly. In the original example with Sideline Inputs, if someone does a walkon without thinking, everyone else just has to pay attention and remember that the next scene's character has switched. The important thing to remember is that the system will always work, and the more it's done, the more second-nature it will be to follow the rules. Don't believe me? Think about driving a car with a passenger in it. The stoplights have three rules you must remember and respond to in real time, and yet every driver I know is able to maintain a conversation with their passenger while subconsciously obeying the stoplight. Nobody freezes up mid-sentence to figure out what the implication of *green* is, because they've done it enough times that it has become instinct.

Ending it

Why is it that teams work for weeks to learn how to perform together, and when it's time to finally perform, they give up the *most important responsibility* to someone who has never rehearsed with them, and perhaps never even seen them perform? Ending a show with a blackout defines a team; it says, "...and that's exactly what we call a show!" When you hand that responsibility to *anyone else*, you're handing over the definition of your team's body of work. Imagine if every time Stevie Wonder recorded a new album, they came into the studio with stuff they had spent months writing, and then the studio technician got to just stop recording everything whenever it "seemed" like it was time to call it. Imagine if every one of Georgia O'Keeffe's paintings just left off in the middle because the curator saw it and said,

“Yep. We get the jist, let’s hang it up!” Imagine if every dinner you ever ate at a restaurant was taken off the stove when the server eyed it from across the kitchen and *figured* it was done.

The only person who can decide when a piece of art is done is the artist themselves. In our case, it’s a whole team of artists. So why in the world would you hand that responsibility over to someone who might not even improvise at all, let alone has never done it with your team and has no concept of what metric you as a team use to define a successful show?⁷

Again, ideally, a team would know precisely when their own show is done, and would have a way of signaling that to the audience. The current best-case scenario is that you luck out and get a competent fellow improviser in the tech booth who has seen your team several times and performs their role with intention. Those techs exist (they’re the ones that read this magazine), but they are few and far between. And in a perfect world, that tech would be the only person who ever pulls lights for the team, like a silent extra member. But that’s never going to happen.

⁷ *To be fair, that’s a metric few teams bother to come up with, and it’s the lack of any metric that leads to those depressing moments in the green room after the show, when all the performers mumble, “I had fun,” and the coach taps at her notebook and says, “I mean, you’re all funny; so it’s always going to be a funny show.” If the team had done the work to figure out what they want to accomplish with every show they do, then it would be easier to walk away from a show and know whether it was a success or not. Instead, everyone has different ideals and metrics, so each performer grades it on a totally different basis. Imagine if each of the Beatles had a different opinion of how their albums should sound! They probably would have broken up a long time ago, instead of continuing to put out powerhouse pop hits year after year, to this day. Oh wait, that’s literally why they broke up a long time ago.*

So, when lacking the time or energy to put in the actual work, let's turn back to the smartform. What if we folded the ending of the show into our set of rules, so that the ending is still brought about with intention, and remains uniquely "ours"? It may not come at the ideal moment, but its presence will indicate and define the nature of the form.

The ending could be defined by something hilariously simple: Perhaps when two people say the same thing, the show ends. This causes the show's ending to be either upsettingly sudden or beautifully profound. Maybe the show ends by accident within its first five minutes. Is that a problem? No, it's wonderful. Tell the audience the show is over and ask if they want to see another one. Or maybe the show ends around minute fifteen when two people say the same thing by accident. Great! Embrace it; fifteen minutes is more than enough time to have given the audience a great experience. Or maybe nobody ever says anything at the same time, so when the performers finally feel ready to end, they bring out two characters and have them say the same thing at once. What they say is up to the team, but it *could* be some beautiful line that sums up the theme of the show. Or it could be nonsense. Either way, it's a show that ends with intention.

The point is that once you set a small and simple rule, you'll realize the depth of the implications that come with it.⁸ That's because we're humans with desire and free will, not mathematicians on a grid. When we have set rules, we'll start to find ways to exploit those rules to get what we want. And it's surprising how, once you apply a constraint, you'll realize what you *really* want. You experience this in daily life; I bet you've never wanted a donut as much as you do when you're on a diet, and you've never wanted that barista as much as you do when you're already seeing someone. But you don't give up, and you don't cheat on your rules. Instead, you find sneaky ways to work *around* your constraints, like "treating yourself" to a donut on Friday mornings, or searching "Starbucks customer forgot wallet" on Pornhub.

Try it. Set some simple rules with your team, and play them out a couple of times. Immediately, and without even trying, your teammates will find the implications; the exciting cracks in the code that let them get what they want by doing more creative maneuvers than they would otherwise do. Everyone will be more

⁸ *This realization first came to me when I attended a workshop lead by Thomas Kelly. He had us do a form based on the story of Orpheus and Eurydice, where one performer was elected as Orpheus and the show would end when that performer saw one of the other performers. After two complete "shows" that lasted about five minutes each and only consisted of one scene with one character always staring off into the audience, we started to explore the other options. We realized that we could still do tag runs. We realized that scenes could change but the Orpheus character wouldn't immediately realize, which led to a lucid tone that we chose to lean into. The Orpheus realized that moving and turning suddenly meant the other performers had to leap comically out of the way if the show was to continue. And we realized that the show could end in three distinct ways; the Orpheus could choose to end the show by dramatically turning and making eye contact on a final line, another performer could end the show by stepping dramatically into the Orpheus' field of vision, or it could happen by accident. In this instance, one rule defined an entire form.*

focused, because they *have* to focus in order to keep up. And every single show will be unique, yet they will all feel distinctly *yours*. Tell the audience what you're doing, and they will get involved in a way they never have before. They'll want to come back and participate more, as they realize the implications of their own actions. You'll get closer and closer to that improvisational ideal, where audience and performer alike are participating together to build something that has never existed and will never exist again. And you'll do it all with just a few simple rules.

SOBRIETY IN IMPROV

HANNAH STARR

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

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

ously (I definitely did) but I saw that what we were doing on stage was important and revolutionary (it was not, we were literally playing Freeze). I treated the art form with such reverence that I reported the rest of the improv team when they smoked weed because it pissed me off that they would perform under the influence of something. That was always my rule: If I was on stage I needed to be completely sober.

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

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

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

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

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

puddle of vomit and piss. I laid there, not able to move, and thought, “I can’t keep living like this but I’m scared to die”.

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

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

nature of improv terrified me at a time in my life when I was trying to regain control.

My saving grace came in the form of a friend who had been there through the rough times in my drinking and understood that my sobriety was a life or death thing. Joel approached me about forming a team that would perform an improvised 90s sitcom. Having a solid structure and the same cast of characters made improvising sober much less terrifying because I we had a roadmap. 99 Problemz was born and for the next two years that was how I relearned to improvise without booze. I got to do shows with my best friends, and the fact that they all understood the importance of my sobriety and that they still wanted me there was something that I desperately needed, even though I didn't realize it at the time.

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

The truth is, we do our best work when we are fully present, and you can't be fully present when you've been drinking. I can also tell you as someone who is often the only sober person in the room, that improv performed when drunk is sloppier, more ag-

gressive, and just kind of boring. This is the job that we want, so why are we drinking on the job? Alcohol limits the scope of what's possible on that stage, but I can understand why we turn to it. Because improv can be scary. Because we're afraid to fail. The truth is, when you do fail, it's not so bad. At the end of the day, we're playing pretend. So, if it's just playing pretend, why don't we let our full selves out onto that stage. Trust our instincts and the wild, awesomeness that's within each of us?

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

There is still a long way to go in making our community and institutions acknowledge that we are a scene riddled with addiction and that we need to be more inclusive of sober performers. How can we do this? Maybe if you produce a show where you typically give out beer, why don't you give out some La Croix as well? If you are going out with your team, maybe find a place that has food options rather than just a bar. And it's different for everyone, but I know that I like being included and invited to functions, even when there's booze. I can make the choice about whether or not it's a good idea. Also, I swear to god, if I see an-

other AA scene performed by people who have never been to an AA meeting I am going to throw something at the stage.

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

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

DIRECTIONLESS

ARNE PARROTT

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

“Cabbage Patch.”

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

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

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

“One cabbage of many! All stacking up in the barn for a haaaaard winter.”

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

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

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

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

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

“BUT!”

Her pile of teammates stops writhing and looks at her. Silence fills the room.

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

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

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

nice and I like feeling heard, and as the scene is swept I get that rare feeling of knowing for certain that it was a good move.

I play some Guaraldi-esque jazz out of the first beat and we move into game slot two. The performers wistfully float around the stage as wise old snowflakes who are worried about the harm they're going to inflict on this village, and I switch to a jazz waltz version of Pachelbel's "Canon" to avoid any accidental Christmas music because it's January and we're all over that. It's nice, but low energy. I try to find an opportunity to ramp it up, but I never really commit to anything, so nothing changes and it feels like my fault. It's still nice.

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

The second scene of the second beat begins and I can tell the improvisers are a little lost. They're both very good and even though their scene is treading water, neither of them panics. I hesitate

above the keys--sometimes, piano can clarify, but other times, it further muddies the water. The audience will always notice the first piece of scoring in a mostly silent scene, so I wait, hoping to punctuate a moment of importance. One of them makes a remark that they haven't seen their sister in ages. The other says that they haven't seen their brother in ages. They do a slow turn to look at each other and I take my chance; A little "ding" on the piano as their eyes meet, a triumphant indicator that a direction has been found. It plays out with them catching up after 20 years apart. I play bouncy music that doesn't sit in any particular rhythm which gives me the freedom to accentuate their moments of joy with more bell tones. It has the same chord changes as "The Way You Make Me Feel." which I always default to and I don't know why. As I'm wondering about it, the scene ends and I kick myself for tuning out.

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

The third beat brings back the kid who played too many video games lecturing *his* son about not playing *enough* video games. I manage to land a good "game over" riff that nearly (but not quite)

justifies my choice from earlier. The tags and sweeps start coming with ferocity and I find myself playing along less with the hastily established emotional tone and more with the rhythm of the speech. The long lost siblings have a falling out and a more sinister version of the “ding” returns as they swear to never see each other again. Sweep. The Witch crashes the country wedding promising to end the winter if she can marry the bride. I try to return to the talking/music game from earlier, but there’s just too much happening on stage and it doesn’t work. Sweep. The grownup teenager is at his senior prom but is treating it like his 10 year highschool reunion. Prom should obviously have music, but I hesitate. What would play at a prom in 2019? My creaky 30 year old brain finally settled on Ed Sheeran's “Perfect” which I heard in a commercial once, but I quickly change to “Graduation” by Vitamin C because it’s timeless and has that same chord changes as Pachelbel's “Canon,” which that makes it a super opaque call back that only I will enjoy. As we push through this weave of scenes and sounds towards our conclusion, one person jumps to the center as a snowflake that’s falling gleefully towards the ground. A second person joins them as a differently shaped snowflake and I am forced to grudgingly acknowledge that the whole Tetris thing worked out well, and return to the theme for the third time tonight. Soon, everyone is a giggling snowpile on the ground until one steps forward and says, “BUT as soon as the snowflakes are stacked...” I hit the high octave again and everyone in unison says, “THEY DISAPPEAR.”

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

WHOSE PITCH IS IT ANYWAY?

7 Things I Learned Trying to Bring Improv to TV

SAM BOWERS

God bless *Whose Line Is It Anyway*. It introduced everyday American and British audiences to improv, leading to more theaters, fuller classes, and fuller houses (now streaming on Netflix). While *Whose Line* may be the mainstream representation of our art form, we can all agree it doesn't adequately showcase the full range of what improvisation can be, superbly showcasing short form gameplay while hardly touching genuine scene work or any semblance of long form.

I've been working for years to bring more improvisation to television. Since 2014, I've served as the Director of *Improv Nerd with Jimmy Carrane*, a podcast that has been run through a brutal pitching circuit. I've worked as the Program Director of The iO Comedy Network, developing, packaging, and pitching a wide variety of original series on behalf of the theater. In 2018, I produced and directed Claire McFadden's *Framed*, an improvised pilot that was an Official Selection of the New York Television Festival (NYTVF), where we took several meetings with broadcast, cable, and digital networks. I've been extremely lucky get-

ting the chance to pitch to dozens of people while also successfully selling absolutely nothing. The following are a series of things I learned about trying to bring the improvisational art form to television.

Before I dive in, I want to clarify exactly what I mean when I say that I've been trying to "bring improv to TV." I've been involved in pitches on about half a dozen improv-based television programs. These shows have taken many shapes, from short form, game-based shows to long form, 22-minute cable programs. While all of these shows are diverse in their structure and format, they maintain the same core principal: when the camera starts rolling, we don't know where we're going, and the actors and directors are allowed to make genuine discoveries and choices. Here are two of the projects, *Framed* and *The Late 90's*.

So It's Like Whose Line Is It Anyway?

When pitching a show, be prepared to talk about *Whose Line* a lot. It's the best mainstream example of the improvisational art form and also a massive broadcast television success. The production costs of *Whose Line* are incredibly low (a season is shot in only 2 weeks in one room in Hollywood) and the series is now in syndication. It's family friendly, ripe for celebrity cameos, and unlike any other comedy show on television. It's a dream series that made people very rich. Because *Whose Line* is by far the most successful improv television series in American history, it's what executives will point to. If you plan to pitch a show about a meth dealer, be prepared to talk about *Breaking Bad*. The skill in

pitching these shows is getting the execs to understand what components are similar to *Whose Line* while also becoming excited about the new elements you're introducing.

(Almost) Nobody Thinks Improv Can Work On TV

There's an ingrained doubt and bias in the minds of nearly anyone I've pitched an improv series to. The most special part of an improvisational performance is the ensemble and audience experiencing something magical together, specifically tethered to that place and time, never to be seen again. I've learned you have to convince these executives that your improv tv series is more than just turning a camera on in an improv theater. Explain to them the specific structure you've developed and why it's engineered to work on camera. Executives understand this. With the exception of the rare stand-up special, nothing is ever shot linearly as it was experienced for the live audience. For example, a 22-minute episode of *Whose Line* is usually edited down from 3 hours of taping. Want to know why Ryan Stiles always complains about the game "Ho Down"? He was so bad at it they forced the cast to play it over and over until they got something TV-ready. Explaining your workflow and method is necessary to get someone to bite.

I've only encountered two executives who were confident improv can work on camera before we talked. One executive started out as a performer in the improv world and eventually moved to the development space, but still plays in NYC every now and then. The other executive had worked closely with Tim Bartz and the

team behind “Shrink”, a scripted series with improvised segments of therapy sessions sprinkled in. Both of these execs knew the difference between long form and short form, as well as the merits of both and how they can translate to TV. While they currently only represent a fraction of the executives I’ve pitched, I expect the trend to continue in their favor as newer execs will be exposed to the world of improvisation as it continues to grow.

How Can We Guarantee It Will Always Be Funny?

I’ve never understood why Hollywood thinks it’s so much harder to capture quality improv than it is to capture a quality script. The majority of comedies on television *are bad*. For every dependable scripted comedy like *Seinfeld* you have 10 *Mulaney*’s. Unfortunately, the world of Hollywood is really just Wall Street for talent, and spending someone else’s money means limiting risk as much as possible. When pitching an improv show to an executive, you need to prove to them it will be consistently funny, which a live stage show is usually not. I think the best way to do this is by actually shooting several episodes/sizzles of a project, otherwise known as “tape,” that way you can say, “See? We did this more than once and it worked each time.” When pitching a scripted series, it’s easy to prove it’s funny, because the proof is literally on the page. Unless you have a track record and tangible examples of your brand of improv working over and over, most executives will be far too nervous to take the plunge on shooting something that literally doesn’t exist until the moment it’s shot.

Improv Is Exotic

When you've been around improv long enough, I think you forget just how much you know about an art form that truly mystifies people. We know improv isn't a magic trick, but rather a series of learned behaviors that leads to an exciting theatrical experience. People outside of improv still think it's magic, and Hollywood executives are still excited to find the wizard who can brew the perfect potion.

During every meeting we took for *Framed* at NYTVF, we asked our hosts why they requested to meet with us. Nearly 100% of the time the executives said some form of "We've never seen improv like this on TV before." In fact, the ones who didn't say they were impressed with the improv were actually surprised to learn *Framed* was improvised. Despite gigantic improv hubs in Chicago, NYC, and LA, as well as regional theaters opening every year (ComedySportz now has over 30 international locations), improv is still considered underground and mysterious. Until we start seeing an improvised series on every TV network, pitching an improv-based show will always intrigue an executive, because they know there's hardly anything like it on TV.

It's also important to note that being unlike anything else on television can be a very bad thing. Not every executive is a visionary genius, and many are simply out to find their version of what's already working in the TV marketplace. Many executives will say "If it was good, someone would have done it already." Make sure your idea has some roots in elements of successful TV series.

You Need Famous Friends

One harsh reality of TV pitching is just how important it is to have “attached talent.” In Hollywood, names sell and audiences tune in to watch people they’re familiar with. This was one of the driving forces behind the success of *Whose Line in America*: Drew Carey. Audiences didn’t know what improv was, nor did they know Colin, Ryan, or Wayne, but Carey had been on network sitcoms for years and brought audiences in. You might find more success pitching your improv show to a celebrity who once started in improv, and if they attach their name to it, you could have a solid chance to get something made.

Unfortunately, none of the shows I’ve pitched have had any A-list names attached. For shows that didn’t have talent OR tape, the pitch died very quickly. If you have one or the other, or somehow even both, your pitch will survive much longer.

You Might Need Representation

Agents, managers, and lawyers *can* be very important. At NYTVF, we were extremely excited to take a meeting with HBO. Pitching to a premium destination is always a treat because they have gigantic budgets and make their own rules, meaning no idea is too far out there. My enthusiasm was shattered within mere moments of entering the meeting when the executive learned of our representation status. We didn’t have agents, managers, or lawyers backing us up. HBO and several other places have a hard rule that they do not take submission materials or pitches from talent that doesn’t have representation. This is for legal purposes.

If we pitch a show to HBO, for example, they pass, and then make something similar to what we pitched them, there's a chance we could find a way to sue. When your reps are involved, the legal terms of the pitches and intellectual property are more secure, alleviating HBO from liability. Fortunately, this is not the case for most distributors.

Ground The Idea

The unfortunate nature of pitching an improvisational TV show is that it literally *doesn't exist*. You can only talk about things you *might* do, or will *attempt* to create. This makes it very difficult for an executive to feel confident enough to bring your idea to his or her boss. When an executive loves an idea, they don't just hand you a suitcase of cash; they have to take the pitch you just gave them and deliver it themselves to whomever is above them on the ladder. When your improv show is rooted in vague concepts like "deconstructing themes" or "discovering relationships," it's hard for an executive to take that idea and run it up the flagpole. It's important to apply some layer of structure or format to your improv show so everyone above you can easily talk about it.

While we haven't struck gold yet, I honestly think we can get there. In the world of Chicago improv, *true genius* gets performed on stage every night. I think it's wrong to say that there isn't some way we can translate that brilliance to the screen. At its best, improvisational theater presents the audience with profound questions and outrageous humor delivered by performers who are following the fear and breaking the rules. I've been told

many times that improv won't work on TV, and that's the next rule I'm hoping to break.

UNREGRETS

DR. RON

This is a big, gushy love letter to the Chicago improv and theater community. I am surprised and flattered by how much you love me back. I am a middle-aged white guy. You shouldn't love me that much. But I appreciate it!

This is a love letter to the improvisers I've met throughout my life, and to improv the art form. Since I am an academic, I can't just say what I feel and in one go, so I've divided this piece into three parts: Part I covers some of my personal history and how I came to love the Chicago improv scene; Part II describes how my training as a community psychologist informs my improv, and how improv has helped me be a better psychologist. Part III is just a little taste of the improv in different parts of the world. Enjoy!

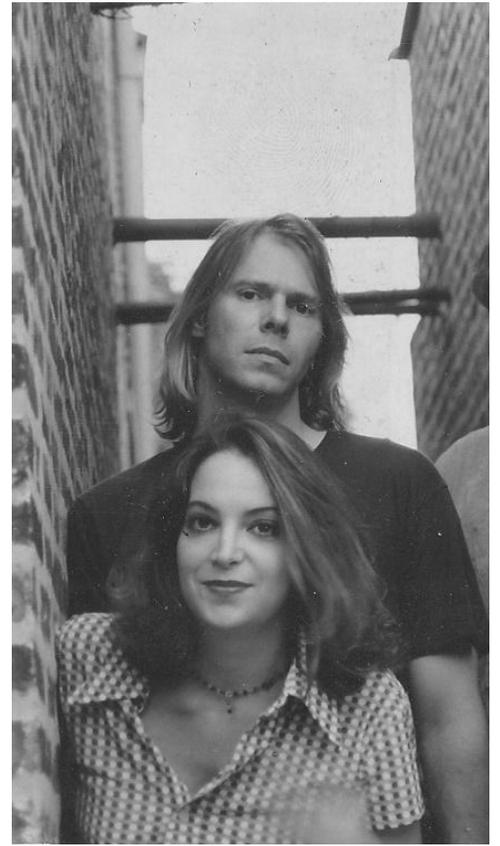
Part I: How Improv Saved my Life

I discovered improv in 1995. Unlike most people in the mid-90's, I was pretty cool. I had long blonde hair and wore contact lenses. I played guitar and wrote songs in an alt-rock band named Plume. We released singles and a CD called "God Bless Men and their Rockets."¹ I dated Beth the Singer. We were a Chicago alt-rock power couple. I drank a lot of booze and did a lot of drugs and was not a great boyfriend. I desperately wanted people to like some version of me.

¹ *It doesn't matter anymore – rock is dead.*

We looked like this:

In 1995, Beth the Singer of Plume worked for an auction house that sold used industrial equipment. Beth's personal assistant was a guy named Kevin Dorf. This place was the Groupon and Cars.com of the 1990's – lots of improvisers worked there hoping to sell a \$50,000 cement mixer and slack off for some months on the commission.



One day, Beth the Singer told me that we were going to visit the opening of a new show at an improv comedy club on Clark Street. I remember going to this show: it

was called The Armando Diaz Experience and Hootenanny, hosted by a guy named Armando Diaz. I am not absolutely sure who was in that first show; I am pretty sure it included Kevin Dorf, Brian Stack, Miles Stroth, Jimmy Carrane, and Noah Gregoropoulos. Later shows I remember included Tina Fey, Rachel Dratch, Amy Poehler, and Matt Besser. I thought it was the fucking funniest thing I had ever seen in my life. Beth and I lived on Cornelia Ave. and so we went to every show we could at Improv Olympic.

Graciously, some of these improvisers would come to a Plume show at Lounge Ax or Metro or Double Door or Beat Kitchen or Empty Bottle.

This was the period when Smashing Pumpkins and Urge Overkill and Liz Phair were playing gigs or were being picked up in the

Great Chicago Signing Frenzy of the 1990's. You may read that the bands during this period were super-supportive and friendly with one another. Do not believe this. It was competitive and cut throat. We would poster our gigs in clubs and come back a day later to find them torn down and replaced by a more ambitious band's posters at the same club even though they were playing on a different night. We'd replace them and they would be torn down again. People would not make eye contact with you at parties and clubs – they were always looking behind you to see who was coming in, and would excuse themselves, or just walk away, when they saw “their people over there.”

I remember the improvisers were different. These improv guys would take their dates to our shows and were cooler AND more polite than our fellow alt-rockers in the Chicago scene. They were always super-supportive of us and our band; they would ask about our music and not talk during the shows. I was amazed. They seemed to actually want other people to succeed. I never forgot that.

For the next few years, I went to a lot of improv. I grew up on Monty Python and watched “Saturday Night Live” from the beginning. I loved to laugh, so I went to a lot of improv shows at Improv Olympic. They were always great. I remember seeing The Victim's Family and Blue Velveeta and Jazz Freddy and some Harold teams I do not remember the names of. These shows at Improv Olympic were better than Python and SNL. It was rougher, but the performers seemed to be having a good time. Like most people, I could not believe it was made up. I remember

being particularly impressed with Brian Stack, who would just wait and watch and then do something brilliant and funny that would tie everything together with a minimum of fuss. I remember an old hairy guy always sitting at the downstairs bar who would occasionally grunt-laugh at something. Later I learned that this was Del Close.

But this was not to last. Beth the Singer and I broke up when Plume broke up in 1999.² At the time, I was suicidal with booze and depression and failure. In retrospect, I am not bitter I didn't get to be a rock star. I did not have the work ethic or talent, and I liked to drink too much to be a rock star. If we had made it, I am sure I would be dead from heroin or booze or AIDS and would have dragged a bunch of people down with me. I stopped going to improv shows and just drank with purpose for a year because booze was the only thing that provided me with relief. When the booze stopped working, I got really scared. I knew I was at a crossroads, so I checked myself into rehab and have been sober ever since.

I decided to go back to university in 2003 to finish my bachelor's, and pursued a PhD – first in social psychology at UIC (which I failed and got cut from the program), and then in community psychology at DePaul (finding your proper place to thrive is a huge thing for me now). Fast forward to 2012. I am writing my dissertation (essentially, a really long book report) which is truly a solitary trudge, and I am miserable. I needed something fun to

² *Beth the Singer is still the coolest and nicest person I have ever met and still sings and performs in local bands.*

do, and so when I saw an advertisement for Second City on a CTA bus, I recalled my fun times seeing improv in the late 90's and decided to try. I did Second City's levels A-E. I was a solidly mediocre improviser. But the classes were super fun! Improvisers were really nice! I liked being in a community. I'm still (at least Facebook) friends with several of those first classmates.

In 2013, I started classes at iO on Clark. I had great teachers, without exception. I was single, so I went alone to shows every night except Sunday to do my laundry. I loved Revolver and The Hague and the Deltones and Coup de Grâce and Smokin' Hot Dad and Dummy and the late-night jams and others I don't remember. iO staff and performers were nice to me but distant and looked at me curiously; I was a couple decades older than most improv students. That's OK; I was entertained. Then, everything changed for me when a bushy red-haired guy named Joey Ramone shuffled by my bar stool and said, "Hey dude, like, who are you?" Joey introduced himself to me and started introducing me to other improvisers. From then on, I fell in love with almost everyone I met, almost every theatre I went to, and almost every class and classmate I ever met.

Here is a secret: I wanted to be an actor since I was 8 years old after I was cast in a small role for a stage play in middle school. However, my family made it clear that this behavior was unacceptable. Acceptable activities: sports. Playing rock guitar was an absolute act of rebellion.³ But I was desperately unhappy for most of my life. I had to wait 40 years to be in my next stage produc-

³ *To this day, I still dislike sports.*

tion – as Giles in Maggie Gottlieb’s production of Buffy the Vampire Slayer musical, “Once More With Feeling.” It was super fun! But I was also startled by an overwhelming feeling of sadness, which I later came to understand as regret. Regret is a form of bargaining that happens during the process of a dealing with loss, even if the regret is realized decades later. It is the feeling, “If I only had known then what I know now.” But that is impossible; everyone is doing the best they can at that moment.

Many more good things and great people have happened since then! Being part of the improv community in Chicago saved my life. If it weren’t for you, I would not be here.⁴

Better late than never! That’s been the motto of my adult life.

Part II: Psychology and Improv

In 2014 I got a PhD in Community Psychology from DePaul University.⁵ So what is Community Psychology?

You are probably familiar with Sigmund Freud’s psychoanalysis, B.F. Skinner’s operant conditioning using rewards and punishments, or Abraham Maslow’s humanistic Hierarchy of Needs, recently re-branded as “positive psychology.” These individualistic approaches have dominated psychological world views, but are regrettably ineffective when it comes to scalable relief of systemic human suffering. For example, massive investments in prisons

⁴ I cannot name every single person who was kind to me. There are just too many names to name. Suffice it to say that if I know you, I love you and am grateful to you.

⁵ This is 100% the truth: Joey Ramone sat in on my dissertation defense and then took me out for pancakes afterwards. Later that night, I went to a show at iO on Clark in my dissertation suit. It felt like the most natural thing to do.

has done little to protect us, but rather has stigmatized and victimized generations of our most vulnerable citizens while unwittingly training them how to become seasoned criminals. Hundreds of thousands of people are given individualized treatment for drug use, and are then sent back to the social networks and ineffective programs that often further cement hopelessness and demoralization. Everyone needs dignity, safe and supportive housing, and decent jobs, but we are often provided dehumanizing shelters and dead-end job training programs.

Psychoanalytic, behavioral, and pop-positive psychology therapeutic models were not designed to address contextual factors. Individualistic models perpetuate programs that are expensive, ineffective, and fail to address the social environments that provide so few constructive opportunities or resources. The failure to embrace more preventive frameworks dooms our efforts to control or eradicate many problems caused by poverty, discrimination, inequality, and powerlessness.

Fifty years ago, the field of Community Psychology (CP) emerged out of the crises of the 1960s, a time of turmoil involving the Vietnam War and the Civil Rights Movement. The most important word in CP is “context” – understanding the entire context in which people live and function is the most effective way to institute long-term positive change. Individuals feel, behave, and change according to their environment and systems in which they live, and individuals change their environment accordingly. Therefore, CP holds that any psychological intervention must ALSO acknowledge and address the root contextual systems – in-

justice, poverty, dis-empowerment – to improve individual well-being. CP also offers the powerful message of prevention as an effort to move beyond attempts to treat each affected individual and promotes collaboration by actively involving citizens as true partners in efforts to design and implement community-based interventions.

To give an example: In the U.S., I study a type of self-run recovery home for people who wish to remain abstinent from drugs and alcohol. These homes are unique because they have absolutely no professional staff to run them or tell anyone what to do from a position of authority. They are small scale—typically 7 to 12 individuals. Everyone pitches in equally on house chores, pays their fair share of the rent, and all decisions affecting the house must be made democratically. So long as you meet those requirements, residents can live there as long as they want. Everyone depends on one another for the success of the house; if one person is faltering, it is in everyone’s best interests to help that person. If someone relapses, that person has to leave—and now the remaining residents’ rent/chores have increased until a new person replaces the person who left.

These homes are effective, with success rates over 2 years of up to 90%, whereas most interventions are only 20-30% effective. They work because they operate within a naturalistic environment where people learn from one another, have a voice in what happens in their group, support one another to relieve stress, and form friendships, with the caveat that there are clear consequences for violating this harmony.

Huh: a small group of 7 to 12 like-minded individuals working together for a common purpose where they are required to trust each other in order to achieve a goal? To me, that describes the basics of an improv team. So when I think about my own community psychology research studying group recovery homes, in the back of my mind, I'm thinking of improv teams, group exercises, and so on. So although I take classes and workshops and see a shit-ton of shows to have fun, I also think improv makes me a better community psychologist.

The need to belong is a fundamental human need. It has been well-established that social support can influence emotional and physical well-being, and as such, the study of group-related phenomena and interpersonal connections has been a key component of community psychology research and other fields. In CP, we all exist in three layers: “the individual” with our own thoughts, feelings, and behaviors. We interact within a “microsystem”—our immediate network of individuals, such as family, friends, coworkers, and classmates—which in turn is embedded in a “macrosystem,” comprised of governments, cultures, and societies, and the planet Earth itself. Community psychologists are concerned with an individual's own experiences within these larger systems and how these systems interact to affect one another. Real change involves changing ALL levels, not just the individual.

These systems are most effective when you really feel part of it—what we call the psychological sense of community (PSC). PSC is “the perception of similarity to others, an acknowledged interde-

pendence with others, a willingness to maintain this interdependence by giving to or doing for others what one expects from them, the feeling that one is part of a larger dependable and stable structure.”⁶

If you don't have PSC, it's hard to cooperate and get things done as a community group, or to help one another recover from addiction in a recovery home, or play on an improv team.

It turns out you can measure PSC. My colleagues at DePaul came up with the Psychological Sense of Community Scale, which consists of 24 statements/questions that tap into three domains called: Entity, Membership, and Self that reflects group membership, fulfillment of needs, shared emotional connection, and influence. And when you do this measurement, you can find out whether people really connect to their groups. It's fucking awesome. And when we measure this in recovery homes, those homes that have collective high sense of community and have individual members who feel really connected to their group home and other members, tend to do well over time.

So as improv teams (or substance abuse recovery homes) form and develop over time, you can do certain activities to enhance the sense of community. One example is just acknowledging, explicitly or implicitly, that you need one another and you're glad that your teammates are there. These are exhibited via the group hugs or “I got your back” huddles or just pats on the back before and during shows (I love seeing these gestures). Another activity

⁶ Sarason, S.B. (1986). *Commentary: The emergence of a conceptual center*. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 14, 405-407

is just acknowledging that you're grateful to be in Chicago, at iO or at CIC, or a theater that supports your talent and wants you to succeed. Just say it out loud, and you will strengthen your bonds to others and be a better improviser.

But if there's someone in your team that you don't like, or you feel disconnected with your group or "the scene" in some way, it's worth thinking about what you can do to enhance your own psychological sense of community to re-connect and re-energize yourself and have fun again. Much psychology research supports the notion that it is *much* easier to behave your way into right thinking and feeling, rather than the other way around.⁷

For you experienced improvisers, I don't think I'm telling you anything you don't already know. I think Del Close and the other pioneers knew these things in their bones and tried to invent games to create a strong psychological sense of community, though they called it something else, like "one group mind." And you can probably come up with specific games to enhance this beyond the trust fall. This is why I love going to shows and hanging around you people and taking classes: it bonds me to the best of humanity.

Over the past seven years that I've been hanging around the improv community, I've wanted to share this idea of how important it is, and how lucky you are here in Chicago, to have this incredi-

⁷ If you want more on this, the best academic books on improv are written by Keith Sawyer. Dr. Sawyer actually studied Jazz Freddy and other improv groups in the 1990's and wrote about jazz and improv in Group Creativity: Music, Theater, Collaboration. I also highly recommend Zig Zag: The Surprising Path to Greater Creativity.

ble powerful psychological sense of community that you can tap into- if you so choose.

Part III: Improv Around the World

Since 2016, I've lived in Sofia, Bulgaria. There's not a big improv scene here, so I know almost everyone who started the different theatre groups and training centers. If it makes you feel any better, the same short-form vs. long-form dichotomy happens almost everywhere, the "we were here first so we own improv in this town and how dare you invite us to participate in your dumb festival" happens just like in every other small market everywhere. So it goes.

In March of 2016, I performed with Sarah Cowdrey, Phil Meister, and Jeff Murdoch in the very first English-language improv show in Bulgaria (so far as I know). It was a blast! People asked us if we had really "made that all up," which is the nicest compliment there is!

In September 2018, we had our 3rd Sofia International Improv Festival. During this and the previous three years, we have had great teachers come from Chicago and all over the world to teach at the festival and at workshops outside the festival. This has been such a great connection to home for me.

I am writing this in Moscow, Russia, where I am performing and teaching a couple workshops. If you have not yet gone to an improv festival outside of the United States of America, then you are really missing an amazing experience. Even teaching foreign visitors at a summer intensive in Chicago is not the same. I have

been to “impro” (which still sounds awful to my ears) festivals in Oslo, Copenhagen, Tampere (Finland, brutes), Brighton, Sofia, and Bucharest. In 2019 I hope to go to festivals in Dublin, London, Lyon, and Strasburg (France, Europe), Berlin, Athens, and to Cape Town, South Africa. Improv people are generally as friendly, welcoming, and fun to be around as they are anywhere else.

Attending international improv fests have really opened my eyes to how isolation can impact a community. There are absolutely cultural differences on what improv “is” depending on where you go and how long the scene has been around and who has come through town and the vibe of who “started” the improv culture where it is (this is all solid gold information for a community psychologist interested in context). Simply put, what people see as possible in improv depends almost entirely on the founder(s) and what they have seen before. If you have never seen a “talking band poster in a teen bedroom” scene, then you will probably never think about doing it, but you’ll be blown away if you see it. If all you see are arguments and conflict in two-person talking-head scenes, then that is what improv is. If you live in a low-trust culture (and most places in Eastern Europe are extremely low-trust cultures), you will have a remarkably difficult time cross-pollinating improv groups to perform together.

But it really gets interesting when you teach improv to people whose lives are different from your own. For example, it is extremely difficult to run social status exercises in Bulgaria. If I assign low and high status to two improvisers respectively, they will

ALWAYS treat each other poorly, but in different ways. The rationale is, why would a high/low status person ever treat a person of the opposite status well? The idea is unthinkable in Bulgarian culture. It is super-fun and frustrating and interesting all at the same time.

International festivals are a great way to open eyes to what improv is elsewhere and what improv actually could be, for better or for worse. I have seen some amazingly great shows that, on paper, I thought I would despise but ended up loving. I've seen hour-long dialog-free improv from French groups that are utterly captivating because they are so heavily influenced by mime and clowning. Seeing people beat-box rap in a second language is fun as hell. But I have also seen some of the most boring, offensive improv in my life get *standing ovations*. In many places, improv groups will *pick and choose suggestions from the audience and then discuss which ones they like ON-STAGE* and then choose one. This offends my purist Chicago improv sensibilities of choosing the first suggestion one hears.

So dear readers, have no doubt: improv is everywhere, and seeing it elsewhere stirs up all kinds interesting and sometimes contradictory feelings. But this is the nature of the art and where it came from.⁸ GET OUT THERE!

⁸ The recent book "Improv Nation" by Sam Wasson posits that improv has replaced jazz as the USA's most important artistic gift to the world. I like improv more than jazz, so I agree with Sam.

That's all the space I have for this essay.

Thank you for being my Facebook friend!

Love,

Dr. Ron

P.S. THANK YOU FOR EVERYTHING!