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Two Twosomes, Not a Script in Sight

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The improv duo of T J Jagodowski and David Pasquesi, better known as TJ and Dave, do not speak to each other on the day before a show. They think any sort of contact detracts from the spontaneity of the performance. Murray Nossel and Paul Browde, the two men in "Two Men Talking," meanwhile, won't shut up. Before facing the audience, they confide intensely with each other for up to two hours (longer than the actual show), pouring out the thoughts and events of the day.

The two duos, however, experience the same sensation before they walk onstage at the Barrow Street Theater, their home whenever they're working in New York. They don't know "what the hell is going to happen," as Mr. Nossel puts it.

Mr. Jagodowski, 36, and Mr. Pasquesi, 47, who hail from Chicago, create a one-hour comic playlet ex nihilo every night, not knowing a single line beforehand. Mr. Nossel, 46, and Mr. Browde, 47, who were born in South Africa but have lived in Manhattan for many years, share a wealth of personal stories with the audience but don't know which tales the other one will tell at any given performance or if new ones will be introduced.

During a four-month stand at the Barrow Street that ended May 3, for instance, Mr. Nossel began relating a disturbing teenage experience in which his father verbally abused him as "nothing." Mr. Browde, who is a psychiatrist, had long encouraged his friend to enact the memory. Nonetheless he was shaken the first time Mr. Nossel asked him onstage to play the part of his father; he knew what was coming.

"The biggest transformation for me has been the telling of that story," Mr. Nossel said. "I was worried it would get back to my father, that people would judge him for it, people would judge me for it. I'm a traumatized person for what happened to me. My father was quite brutal in many ways. He was a sick man."

If "Two Men Talking," which is next performed on June 24 and 25, sounds a bit like theatrical therapy, it is in a way. Mr. Browde is influenced by the narrative therapy movement, which advocates the use of storytelling to address childhood traumas. Additionally, the first raw version of what became "Two Men Talking" was presented at a family therapy conference under the title "Friendship and Community in the Age of HIV."

The experiment was born of a quarrel between the two friends about whether Mr. Browde should make public the details of how he contracted HIV.

"We thought it would be an interesting argument to present at a conference, about who owns a story," Mr. Browde said. "People liked it, but they wanted more context."

The context is that both men had grown up in Johannesburg, where they met as children and attended school together but didn't become close until they met again many years later in New York. They began to fill in the missing years by compulsively exchanging stories from their pasts. "It was like meeting a kindred spirit," Mr. Browde said. "That was the impulse for telling stories, to form a bond."

They started writing the tales down after the conference, but when Dan Milne, a director friend, invited them to develop the project at the Young Vic in London, the first thing he did was throw the script out. If the actors were going to be telling a story again and again, he reasoned, they had to remain alive to the moment.

"The listening aspect is crucial," Mr. Nossel said. "I cannot take my attention off Paul for a second when he's telling a story. I'm not sitting there planning which story I'm going to be telling next."

(Continued...)

Mr. Nossel and Mr. Browde at least have their actual experiences to draw from during a show. Mr. Jagodowski and Mr. Pasquesi — who next perform at the Barrow Street July 25 to 27 — have to pull an hour's worth of story and anywhere from 5 to 12 characters out of thin air. They're not even assisted by plot suggestions from the audience, something they see as the tired gimmick of many another improv outfit.

"When you take suggestions, a lot of it is to prove to the audience that you're making it up," Mr. Pasquesi explained. "But it doesn't prove it. Also you do it to engage the audience into thinking they're participating in the evening, which I don't think we need anymore."

The two were first thrown together at an improv festival in 2001. Mr. Jagodowski was delighted by the accident. "If you've ever improvised in Chicago, you know the name David Pasquesi. He's in the pantheon." The experience led to a regular Wednesday night gig at the iO Theater (formerly the ImprovOlympic), where their antics have made them a cult attraction.

The two men have spent much of their energy fighting off improv clichés. "Sometimes with improvisers," Mr. Pasquesi said, "something occurs during the day, and they think, 'This would make an interesting scene,' and they bring that to the show.

But that kind of works against what we're doing, which is reacting to this thing that's only here right now." What's more, they're convinced their extremely attentive audiences would instantly smell a rat if they tried anything so premeditated. "They will recognize that you came out with an agenda," Mr. Jagodowski said, "and it feels terrible for everybody."

Once the shows are over, the four men's artistic paths again diverge. The two Chicagoans painstakingly weigh the success of their effort. The South Africans never mention the show again. "I don't even recall it sometimes," Mr. Browde said. "It feels like a dream."