

Everything I know about improv and some things I don't

written by Matt Moeller

You can email me at ultamatt@gmail.com if you've got questions, complaints, or just wanna say hey. I'm a real person with real person feelings, so please be kind.

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Introduction

Why should you read this book? That's a fair question. Especially with the premium that's being placed on attention in a world ever more crowded by ways to squeeze dopamine out of our exhausted and starved brains. The world is more and more littered with mental 'junk food'. The kind that feels *almost* good enough after one hit. The 'Dorito Effect' as I've heard it called, where you feel like you could be satisfied with just one, but you aren't, and you keep coming back over and over.

We live in a time when we are ever desperate to connect with each other in an authentic, joyful, and safe way. It's hard out there to find another human to sit and be with and enjoy without the perception that they're trying to 'juice' you to tingle their mental clit. Hell, maybe it's *you* that's trying to do it, unaware of your effect on others. All too often in Hollywood I see people 'work' a room. Moving from person to person trying to quickly figure out what they do for a living and if it aligns with their needs as an actor/model/musician. Maybe it's time we tried something else besides min/max-ing our relationships and commodifying other people. Get fucked late-stage capitalism.

But we should also be realistic with each other. The most basic human need is attention. We all want so deeply to be seen, known, understood, and we are all so afraid of it too. Babies, not given attention, will literally die. At the root, any person who wants to perform on the stage wants attention. It's okay to say this quiet part out loud. Even though we may be ashamed of it.

Everybody who steps on the stage with the intention to try and make somebody laugh WANTS to have attention. To have praise. The pleasure of someone's approval made as tacit and as real as it will ever be, if also ephemeral. Laughter. Uproarious LAUGHTER. The siren's true sound.

So that's why you want to read this book. Because you wanna know how to make people laugh. Simple, right?

But here's why you SHOULD read it. Because you deserve to understand yourself and the process surrounding WHY you want to make people laugh. You want to know WHAT people are experiencing that makes them laugh. The JOURNEY from blind luck and frantically flailing on stage into WHOLE BODY thinking, LISTENING, and UNDERSTANDING. Because we all deserve to get to the root of our enormous and deep need to connect with each other. To see it laid bare and de-mystified.

And yes. I'm here to try and demystify this mystical art form for you. No more mysteries. Del can get fucked and Charna be damned. Cook County who? UCB what? Third City? Groundies? All the comedy idols that are venerated and spoken of in dulcet tones by the monks of comedy and the wannabe shills who trawl Los Angeles promising their agents they've taken UCB 101 and have the manual rotting on their bookshelves. What a paperweight that thing is. Fuckin' fight me Besser.

Me? I'm basically a nobody. I haven't made a house team and I'm not a name you know of from TikTok. But I am a computer geek with a foul mouth and burning desire to figure out my own psychology. I've done

improv for 20 years, read every book I could get my hands on and trained across the USA. I think I've got a handle on process and read enough about brains and psych to be dangerous. So give what I have to say a try. Please! Just give me a chance.

Alright. Enough attention mongering. Let's get into it.

Why do you wanna be funny anyways?

I was a fat kid. Tubby with socks that were pulled up and always over provisioned with a fanny pack (Bum bag for you tea lovers). I was also probably autistic in a time when autism was thought of more as Dennis Hoffman counting toothpicks or cards and less like kids who don't fit in and can't be dissuaded from asking 'why' all the time and who have a hard time understanding social queues.

Worse yet, I was highly indoctrinated in fundamentalist christianity, and in the South. So nobody was willing to explain to me how to relate to people and be genuine in an attempt to be empathetic. I got a lot of messaging on how to establish that I was going to heaven and that if you didn't change and repent and say that Jesus was lord you'd be fucked off into a fire with a horny red devil lording over you and "I told ya so" forever and ever and ever until we all were one with god. (Which looking back was more terrifying than the idea of just dying and being dead to me as a child. I vividly recall a nightmare I'd have on occasion where I realized that I was so bored with just being in heaven with nothing to do and I wished that I could become nothing and not feel at all.)

I wanted incredibly badly to be included and understood by the other kids around me, and to be loved by my father who had very little patience for a child and hollered at me to 'hold the light still' more than he had time to tell me what he was looking at in the car/attic/computer/etc.

I watched a show on TV. "Whose line is it anyways".

My family howled at it. I laughed my ass off. Everyone at the school loved it and they quoted “Dumb and Dumber” and “The Mask” and “Austin Powers”. I was decent at mimicking things. So I did. Everyone laughed. My brain finally lit up like a goddamn Christmas tree in National Lampoon’s Christmas vacation. HALlelUJAh! This must be it. This HAS to be what heaven REALLY is. It’s LAUGHTER.

It’s the overt and unobscured approval of the people in my life that I didn’t understand and who actively scorned me. It’s finally a way to fit in with those who I never was accepted by. It’s a way to relate to other people when I found myself totally unrelatable.

I want to make people laugh. No.. I NEED to. I WANT IT.

Monty Python. SNL. All the little sketches my nerd brain could pull off the internet via Kazaa and Limewire. I learned about Belushi, Life of Brian, Airplane. all of it. I was a teenager now and I was weird, angsty, and too horny. Horny for comedy and for girls too. All of it was frustrated by my vow of chastity and my promise to learn a “real job skill” (Dad). True love waits! I still managed to try my hand at comedy even harder in my family and friendships. Dinners, after church hallway chats, all chances for me to cut up.

Finally the chance came to do some improv. As was tradition at my church for Christmas, there was a comedy show featuring various leaders and members of the church doing their best to make each other laugh. Naturally I suggested we perform our very own rendition of “Who’s line is it Anyway?”.

The night of the show, during the ‘short form improv’

section, I came out onto the stage to act like our band leader, a short Latina woman, mimicking her accent and hip movements. (Problematic!) The whole church DIED laughing.

I loved it so much. THIS must be what heaven really is!

20 years later, Long Form, studying at 4 or 5 different schools of improv. Lots of one-off lessons with improv greats. Failing so hard at so much for so long. Learning a ton. Being in the presence of the greats and doing the work of the craft and I'm still in love. It's been a long road, with as much heartache and pain as joy and connection. It's been a life. I've been a student and dummy, a show booker and organizer, and I've been exiled and shunned. I've done it all and done it all wrong. Learn from my mistakes. Make new mistakes.

Okay, so what IS improv exactly?

It is SPONTANEOUSLY performing something PHYSICAL to tell a STORY with a GROUP. There are exceptions to this for sure. I can already feel many solo improvisers giving me the side-eye, to which I say “You’re effectively using the audience as part of your group”. But let’s break this down. These are the layers of what makes improv, improv.

Spontaneity

This is the bedrock of improv comedy. Nothing exists as improvised unless it’s exactly that: made up on the spot. Everything that you bring to the stage which is fixed or set is merely setup for the spontaneous portion: The Petri dish on which the mold of improv spurts out.

This is both the hardest and the easiest part of improv. Making things up! Many folks have deep seated fears about being correct (or simply not incorrect), and desperately cling to the idea of ‘how to do it right’. They want lines to memorize or props to bring onto stage or pre-fix characters they workshop in front of mirrors to get the accents just right. All that is fine if it serves you, but being spontaneous, and making something up on the spot is the bleeding, beating heart of improv. Don’t forget that.

Some of those skittish types of people start to sort of ‘get it’ too, but when you’re doing a warm-up with them or a game, they’re always going to be the ones to try and stop the game and verify the rules when they sense someone hasn’t conformed. Playing “Zip Zap Zop” and someone says “Pew”? They’re the one most likely to put everything to a screeching halt. Don’t do

that. Don't be like that.

Improv is about PLAY. At the very core and heart of this thing we do is the deep desire to connect. And PLAY is about CONNECTION. It's also about discovery and trying on roles and ideas foreign to you in a safe setting. It's about making an attempt to learn or do something new in a safe and supported way.

Look at kittens who 'play' fight. Puppies. Any child or baby of any species is doing their best to mimic their parent or others, and in many advanced species that play continues on for a good long while and they mimic social dynamics. We're an evolved species, so it would make sense that we'd mimic all sorts of advanced and weird scenarios for fun.

So play. Fuck the rules. If everyone is having fun and nobody is being hurt then you're good.

Physicality

If you're being spontaneous, but just kinda standing there spouting off weirdness, congratulations on taking your first UCB class. In all seriousness, the spontaneous choices have to be reflected in the physical nature of the scene. Dave Razowsky has a great book about this he's just put out so go grab a copy of that thing.

We are incorporialized into these meats that we lug around. It's the primary way that people perceive us in front of them. And we're meant to entertain them with our pose, voice, cadence, and every other aspect we can generate to show them the spontaneous energy flowing from us through our meat suits.

We are fucking trapped inside our meat prisons and

this is just how it is. Let's use them to the fullest to show each other how we feel, how we relate to one another. Let's be led by them to create new pictures on the stage and discover how we feel by letting our bodies take shape first.

So be inspired by your body. Let it throw you around. Let it be small and round. Move it in some sort of undulating pattern. Express all the facial expressions you know how to make. Say the same thing three times and each time make your body do something new and weird. Take form and shape and let that shape surprise you instead of being pre-planned! Look at other shapes and try to mimic them in joy. It's your meat! Move it!

Each body comes with a set of suppositions and ideas from the audience. I'm trapped inside the body of a tubby middle-aged white man, with all the ideas and hope/fear/pain that type of meat has brought everyone in my audience. You might be trapped inside of a brown body, a femme body, a body that needs mobility aid. Whatever. That's what you're in, for better and for worse. You gotta understand that no matter what kind of story you want to tell, you're always going to look like that to an audience member. So play that as a strength and not a weakness. More on this later.

Storytelling

Now what do we do with these bodies who are being spontaneous? The only natural thing to do! We tell stories. "But Matt!" You say: "What about sHOrt FoRm?!" Yea Yea yea, I know you think that you don't get narrative in those things, but there's a ton of ways

we do storytelling in our lives! Stories don't have to be EXPLICITLY TOLD!

It's about assumption. Along with being locked-in to our meats, we've encountered other people in our lives. This informed our upbringing, our cultural context, and our ideas of the world at large. When you imagine a typical person in New York you make some assumptions about them (I'm walkin' here!), different than that person in Atlanta (Y'all!) or Tokyo (). Likewise, if you talk with a detectable accent, you might have people make assumptions about you, and try to piece together what it is that they think you're like. This is just how brains are: 1. Trying to protect themselves and 2. Lazy.

Basically, every time someone has ever seen you, whether you like it or not, they've made assumptions about you. These assumptions are in the form of a loose story inside their head. This might sound like a curse to you, but in reality it's a major blessing, because improv is all about DISCOVERY. It's about taking two dissimilar ideas and smashing them together like toy cars in a way that someone hasn't considered before. And if they've got an idea about you, that's more surface to smash against.

Humans are storytelling animals. We LOVE a story and always look for one. To create one in a group setting is the most unconscious choice of any human being. To make a tale of redemption, woe, comedy, these are the things that'll really ring your bell (anybody's really), because story is the native language of the human brain. We're constantly looking for causality. If This then That. Why did this thing happen or that thing happen and how does it affect people? If I do this thing what other thing might happen? What's

the social dynamic here and how does that make sense to my brain.

And EMOTE for god's sake. People care about stories through FEELINGS. You might think of a story using the story circle, the hero's journey or what the fuck ever. But all the plot dog shit doesn't matter in improv. It's all about how we FEEL about each other and the STORY OF RELATIONSHIPS with one another. Feeling relationships that can change over time!

To quote BOC: "Nobody ever left an improv show and said 'Thank god they fixed that Bike'" Nobody gives a single fuck about your object work or the contrived plot that you're trying to force if they don't give a fuck about the PEOPLE in front of them. Broadway can scoot by on elaborate sets or stunts. Movies have CGI. We don't got any of that shit. Most improv shows I've seen have been a group of people in mismatched band graphic t-shirts on a foot-high platform in a dimly lit room and I loved them all so much because they gave a fuck about each other on and off stage.

Show me the love goddamn it. I wanna SEE IT.

Group Mind

Now what the fuck is group mind? Some cuckoo nonsense created by a bunch of dirty hippies hoping to explain away their LSD trips as some sort of collective consciousness that you can tap into while dropping acid? Fuck that dumb shit. Let's get REAL about this.

Group mind is the intrinsic emergent ability of a group of improvisers to understand each other's context, intentions, and desires without traditional explicit com-

munication.

Simply put, it's accurately guessing what someone across from you in a scene is thinking, or about to do, without asking or being told. It's why you and your best friend have an inside joke that you don't have to say out loud to each other anymore. It's the same reason why your barista at the coffee shop you regularly go to knows your order.

A lot of the old gurus would cry out about how it was a special magic force that would emerge on its own with amazing improv groups. And you yourself might have seen it and decided that you can't do it! You're not good enough or haven't been doing it long enough and I'm here to tell you you're wrong.

Group mind is about two things: 1. The human brain's ability to predict 2. The human brain's innate need to be safe

Which is fucking great news for you. All brains are programmed to do this from bazillions of years of natural selection.

The Need to Predict

You are a fucking prediction machine. You wake up in the morning and predict that you'll need clothes, predict that you will encounter other humans that want to interact with you, and you should prepare for that by cleaning your body and preparing yourself mentally for these interactions.

You meet with someone and begin to form a mental model in your brain about what they're like. Erik likes the lakers, Cam plays trumpet, Tameka has a cat named Quincy. Stuff like that. The more of a model

you have about someone in your mind, the more that you understand them, the more that you can be able to PREDICT what they will do or say or be interested in at any given moment and the more that you can give them mental gifts. “Oh did you see that new cat toy on the internet”? Or “I just got us tickets to a lakers game Erik, let’s go!” Etc. etc.

This plays out on stage all the time. I see improvisers playing together and dropping little bits of information or physical offers that the other one will pick up because culturally and interpersonally those two people like each other. They know each other. With Erik I could easily start a scene by miming a free-throw. If I start a scene with Tameka saying “Where’s Quincy gone?” She’s gonna know immediately that I’m looking for her cat.

The Human Brain’s Innate Need to be Safe

Beyond Maslow’s hierarchy of needs (food, water, shelter) you’ve got your Lizard needs. These are the same things that a Lizard would need to thrive (safety from predators and physical harm) A lack of threats to your immediate corporeal survival.

Then there’s what I call “Monkey Safety”. We’re descended from Apes and Monkeys which are social creatures, cleaning each other, looking out for each other, and living within some sort of social hierarchy. They perform many social rituals to improve their odds of continuing to be a part of monkey society. Because if a monkey is separated from the community of other monkeys, they’re in great danger! They’re more likely to be eaten by a jaguar because there are no other monkeys contributing to danger awareness and communal

alert. They're more likely to die from being malnourished because there's not any extra sets of eyes looking at other trees for fruits. And they're more likely to not be groomed, and thus full of lice/ticks/fleas as a result. In general, monkey life is harder and more perilous when there's no other monkeys to look out for you. As a monkey, it's in your best interest to be around other monkeys that like you.

So if a monkey is under threat of separated from their tribe, I'd describe this as a threat to their "monkey safety". Indeed the threat of a danger to your monkey safety is something you've innately tuned into. You've developed special neurons in your brain called "Mirror Neurons" to help you read other monkeys in the room and make sure that you understand them enough that you can continue being part of the monkey tribe, that they won't threaten to kick you out and that you won't threaten them either. They need to be part of the tribe just as much as you do.

These mirror neurons are constantly looking into the eyes and face of the other, reading their feelings, trying to create a model inside your brain of what they might be thinking, might be feeling, might be experiencing. If you can predict this with even a little more than 50/50 accuracy, then you've got an advantage over other monkeys at survival. And as a result of a bajillion years of evolution, most of us are much much better than 50/50, even if we can't vocalize it or accurately guess sometimes. Almost every human has at least a vague sense that someone's facially expressions mean something.

So all combined, evolution and our big old mushy brains have emerged to make us amazing at improv.

Because improv is about being human. It's about being in each moment, with each other, telling a story together and trying to connect with each other.

Do this on stage, in front of a crowd, and they will go bonkers.

This is Improv

So, to sum this shit up. Improv is anything that's MADE UP ON THE SPOT, enacted in some CORPORATE way for an audience that explicitly or implicitly creates a STORY for them while tapping into the COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS of those performing the storytelling.

There might be a few exceptions here, such as The Bat (voice only Harold), one-man shows (Man V Movie by Vaillancourt). But largely all improv you see will be comprised of these four components working together.

Oh, so you do Standup? Tell me a Joke!

A lot of people, my mom included, upon finding out that you ‘do improv’ will immediately associate that with standup comedy. For some fucking reason there’s a huge well known chain of stand up comedy venues known as “the improv”. It’s the most confounding nonsense to most people, as at best most professional comics do 10-20% of their set as improvised material when they do “crowd work”.

The most immediately recognizable improv touchstone for most people is “Who’s line is it anyways?”. Perhaps we should be running around telling people we do “Who’s line”, but then I’m sure some long form purists would shit their pants over that.

So what do we do about this? Nothing? Just whine every time someone says ‘oh you do improv? Tell me a joke?’

I suggest we do improv about it. Every time you get the same stale reply of ‘oh yea, tell me a joke’ I want you to ask them for a suggestion and then launch into a one man show about whatever the hell they tell you. Take it as your clear and unambiguous chance to give them the wildest and most unexpected one-man show about asparagus.

If someone says “I’d love to see you do standup!” Do the same thing. The exact same thing. No excuses.

If everyone who ever “Yes, And”ed immediately jumped into a writhing mess of an experimental show every time someone said that shit you’re damn sure they’d remember it and figure it out quicker.

Spontaneity - Nothing Means Nothing, Nothing Comes from Nothing.

To quote the amazing Macho Man Randy Savage: “Nothing means Nothing”. I’m not entirely sure he meant to speak in deep proverbs or was simply uttering the lexical tautology of “A word means what a word means” but I’m going to choose to believe that he means causality can be found anywhere, and should be.

In the world of improv comedy I’ll give you the dirtiest little secret of all.

True spontaneity does not exist.

Nothing Comes From Nothing

You cannot be “blank”. As hard as you try you cannot. You will not. Your body is comprised of atoms that you or someone you likely know has caused to exist inside you, from the foods you choose to eat, to the air you breathe, to your parent’s genetics, you are chock fucking full of information from the moment you have consciousness.

Besides the obvious constructivist point, you’re full of context. You’ve been places, seen things, talked to other people, probably watched a movie or TV show and had a friend, perhaps a lover, perhaps a mentor, perhaps an enemy. You are full of all those experiences in every moment you lug yourself around this dying planet. This creates your context.

And then there’s the suggestion. All of this informa-

tion is hard to sort through and summon! It's a lot. So we ask our audience for a suggestion to get us going. Try your best not to get a food or sex reference and you've got yourself a really nice suggestion. My best pull? Get two random letters from the audience and then make them figure out a word that starts with the first letter and ends with the second letter.

So to this end I'd agree with Macho Man and then also add "Nothing comes from Nothing".

Nothing Means Nothing

As you continue on with your scene, inspired by the suggestion and your contextualization of it and your sum total of your life experiences, you start to ping pong off your scene partners. Their contextualization is different! It ADDS to your contextualization making a super set of experiences and thoughts!

They will also create spontaneously with you. When they add to the scene, that creates MORE, NEW context!

If each choice were a dot, and each choice from that choice were another dot, connected via a line, you would start to see a connected graph! A pattern of contextualizations and connections would occur, and you would be able to see the nature of improv at its core. Choices spiraling out from choices forming choice patterns and then patterns of patterns, like a fractal. Each choice is important in either establishing the pattern or changing it. Each choice it's own microcosm of context.

Okay so What?

You are full of context, and you are a living meaning-making machine. You do not have to empty your mind and do your best to be blank. You don't have to reject the first few thoughts to find the 'third thought'. You are smart, and experienced, and full of the thing which you are which is YOU.

So don't try and search for some deep thought or unsearched pocket of your mind and then do a stilted and murmuring scene where you're closed off from your partner and the audience. Just remember.

1. Nothing comes from Nothing - Everything is functional as comedic context.
2. Nothing means Nothing - Everything that you notice can be ascribed meaning.

Now get out there and do something! Listen to your mind, see what contextual associations it fires, and share them with people.

Spontaneity - OAR. The REPL of Improv.

For my CS nerds out there this one might be dead simple for you. In computer science there's a term called REPL. Which stands for "Read Evaluate Print Loop". This is a description of how almost every terminal and command line process works.

The first thing it will do is READ information in from the user. Anything you have typed and then hit the 'enter' key will be sent to the program. It READs this information into itself.

The next thing it does is it will EVALUATE the input. It parses it and acts upon the input if it's good and valid, and if it's not, it'll decide what to do about what it has read.

The last thing is it will PRINT out information to the user. Either a result of the evaluation or an error message of some sort related to its inability to evaluate the message.

The loop portion means that the computer does this again and again, in a constant conversation with the user. It's this REP loop that makes up the majority of all user interaction on anything anywhere, with the computer program being the tool trying to understand the inputted wishes of the user.

I believe that if we really break down any improv scene at the most basic level, we would have something similar. Each player, upon being present inside a scene will perform the OAR loop. Which stands for Observe - Assume - Respond.

Observe

At any point in the scene, you as a player must OBSERVE. See what is happening on the stage, the tilt of another player's head, their smirk. The way your body is shaped upon the stage. The pantomime drink in your hand. Take it all in. Don't just observe what is occurring in reality, but also attempt to observe what you are FEELING inside of your body. What are the sensations that you are having? What are the previously stated facts of the scene (if any)?

Assume

Based on the observations, make some reasonable assumptions. If the other player is grimacing, make some reasonable assumptions. "Oh! They've just tasted something gross in the drink they're holding". You can make assumptions based on any and all observations, including observations of your own actions and your own state.

Respond

Generate a new offer for your partner that contains both observation and assumption. These are the component parts of YES, AND. YES -> (Observation of the reality), AND -> (Added portion to new reality containing your assumptions).

Once you've added to the reality by responding, there is something new to Observe. I suggest you give your partner a chance to make assumptions and respond here, and their response can be non-verbal as well! Make sure you observe everything that you possibly can about your partner, how, why, when they talk and

the shape of their form.

OAR your way to a good scene

When we break down improv in this way, it can seem much less formidable. It's not all on your shoulders to make or break a scene, but only to add to the energy of the OAR loop. Much like any one stroke into the water by a literal OAR can only propel a boat so much, it's not on you to carry everything.

As Ari Voukydis once told me: "There's no Ten point shot in basketball".

Physicality - Your body is your instrument whether you like it or not

You are made out of meat. Sorry. That's just how it is.

And when you stand on the stage, wherever that stage is, people will be looking at you. Whatever you're wearing. However you're standing. Whatever you look like. They're studying you. Because you've literally put yourself on a platform. Literally.

Look, I know a lot of us got into being funny because we're ugly. Or we used to be and had to develop a personality. Some of us had bad trauma that both drove us to be pretty/handsome and funny, which means it was probably some really bad shit.

But when you're doing improv, you gotta be able to be inside your body. You gotta be corporealized into your meat. Your shape on the stage is what's going to transmit information to people before you even speak. Your face will show them –the moment you walk on stage or not– if they've got to be worried for you or not. So put a gaze on your face that shows how at ease you're feeling.

And while you're at it, treat this as an opportunity. You get to inhabit the stage in whatever presence you'd like to be.

How we're shaped tells a story.

Go watch the 2011 documentary PINA by Wim Venders. It's an incredible film that'll teach you all the beautiful elements of dance that we could be doing

on the stage. It changed the way I did improv, so go watch it! In the movie, people flutter about like flowers, dance a dreadful march onto dirt poured onto the stage, spontaneously stop, and fall onto their faces only to be caught by their partner, they leap into each other's arms, and tap dance on veal. (Yes, that's real.)

We treat the physical presence of improv as a secondary thought for some reason. We could all be dancing on the stage together, or acting basically. Why are we wasting this opportunity? You know how much easier it is to become a character when you're carrying yourself like that character.

Your status and your shape are connected

If you look around you in the world you'll quickly see humans who are powerful and those who are powerless. It's not hard. Just take a walk around your neighborhood and you're likely to see some toxic 'alpha males' and some dejected, weary, tread upon people.

What do they look like? Try and strip away what you immediately see and look at the SHAPE of how they stand, sit, and move? Who's more angular and who's more curved? What's going on with the eyes?

In everyday life we use our shapes to convey messages to those around us. Trying to be more rigid, tall, and broad to those we wish to show high status to, and more soft, rounded, and malleable to those we want to show low status to.

I know that as a 5'11" white guy I intentionally give a small smile nod to people I pass to try and acknowledge them and tell them I'm not a threat. I'll scuff

my shoes on the pavement when I'm behind someone a fair distance to give them a signal that I'm existing back here, and I'm not a thread.

What do YOU do every day to subtly signal intentions to people? Do you look customers in the eye and smile? Do you sigh loudly when asked to do something. Do you tense up and ball your fists when you're around someone you don't like?

Your body is the vessel that's telling these stories, and the communication needs to come from your WHOLE BODY.

You are Trapped in Your Meat and All the Context it Brings

A word of warning: You're never going to be able to escape what you look like to an audience or how you present on the stage, especially now.

In many ways this is probably appropriate. If you somehow manage to put aside how much the colonial powers pillaged the world, and how much REAL harm has been caused to marginalized groups, we've still done a fucking terrible job representing the nuanced viewpoints and experiences of those groups and have more often than not turned it into a complete fucking stereotype joke.

WE HAVE TO DO BETTER.

The first step in this is probably and obviously allowing those marginalized groups to completely represent their own experiences. They're the ones with the lived experience and so they should obviously take the lead here. All brown roles should go to brown people, femme roles to femmes, queer roles to queers, etc.

When you're doing stage improv, allow those humans to assume those roles and don't press it onto them. Worry about your own character, my dudes.

Idealistically, I feel like this contradicts the true nature of improv. The desire to understand another person through PLAY. Which inherently demands a trying on of the roles of another, but the needs of reality have to win out here. I don't currently believe there's any way to portray characters from marginalized groups with respect and sensitivity if we are not from those groups.

TLDR: You wanna do a stereotype on stage? Figure out how to get reparations going first.

For now, If you're a white-ish looking straight-ish man, then good luck playing femme, brown, or pansexual. It's an ultra-high risk move at best, and tone deaf turd if you're not an expert. Bottom line? Not worth the risk. Plus you can get what you're going for most of the time *without the stereotype*. Focus on community roles, jobs and titles, and relationships. You should be doing this anyways.

As long as you present to the outside world as being aligned with the evil colonialist powers then audiences and other players are not going to feel safe when you do characters who are affected by those power's oppression.

In the far flung future, if we have made reparations as a society and healed the pain from the past, then and only then I think we could reapproach this question. Even then I think it would require a great deal of trust from your scene partner as well as from your audience. Come back here in 50 years and we can discuss this again.

There may be a day when there is enough equity in the world to challenge this, but I fear with all the real harms coming to our friends that we might not live to see it unless we can un-fuck our democracy in the USA.

Further, There are still certain affectations that are totally acceptable, any impression of British, French, German, Australians or Hill-billies are still acceptable by a member of any group, seemingly because these are global majorities or powerful groups.

Anyways. Watch it with the accents and shit.

Physicality - Stagecraft Exercises

I fucking hate looking at the stage pictures that are created by some of the more cerebral improv schools. The kind of places that teach ‘game of the scene’ above anything at all. They could easily be just two brooms standing at attention.

Y’all. We’re on a stage. An elevated platform. If somebody didn’t care about what that stage looked like they could just listen to you and your friends be witty on your podcast and ‘straight/absurd’ yourself on audio only mode.

Make some pictures with your bodies. Please god. And memorize the stage directional words too. Here’s a quick rundown.

Standing on the dead center of a stage and looking out at the audience. To your Left is STAGE LEFT. To your Right is STAGE RIGHT. In front of you is DOWN STAGE and behind you is UP STAGE. They’re named like this because stages used to be literally slanted to present the action to the audience better. So somebody by the back wall/back line would be literally physically higher up than at the lip/edge of the stage.

Okay. Now that you’ve got that down. Let’s make some pictures. Here’s a couple of exercises.

Movie Posters

You’ve seen a movie poster, right? Iconic ones like Star Wars, Jaws, and Back to The Future. These instant images in your head describe a relationship between people and things instantly.

Start with your whole group on the backline.

EZ MODE: Somebody pick a movie. One by one each player should come out, and announce who they are by name and title. Such as “I’m LUKE SKYWALKER. The MAGICAL SPACE HERO” and strike a pose. Continue to hold that pose until all players are on the stage.

Each consecutive player should attempt to ADD to the movie poster. Recall: Movie posters have LEVELs to them. Differing heights and energies. Different feelings. Different characters.

HARDER MODE: Somebody get a suggestion. You’re now doing \$SUGGESTION: THE MOVIE. Do the previous exercise as described.

Oh MIGHTY ISIS

This one’s an old school one. Invoking the magical ability of the Egyptian god Isis to present themselves in many forms.

One person, your coach, will call out “Oh Mighty Isis, present to me the form of \$THINGY” And then the players will come out onto the stage as a group and attempt to form the object that the coach has requested. If it’s a motorcycle, you wanna try and be two wheels and handlebars etc. Once the object has been formed, all players on stage should call out in unison “It is finished!” And return to the back wall.

Try and ham up the mysticism here because it’s fun.

Man-Monster-Machine-Riot

This one is super fucking weird so buckle up. You wanna explore the space and the connection between the meat, the machine, and the demons that power them all? Best to trip out and read some Carl Jung before doing this one.

Please note that everything here should be done in complete SLOW MOTION. That is paramount!

Man

Mill about the stage as people going about their daily business. Walk around in different states. Hurried, worried, scared, happy, elated, fascinated. Greet each person you come across, ignore them, etc. Play with the hustle and bustle of what it is to be a person. This should somewhat feel like a 1960's instructional film about the 'modern era' etc.

Monster

But what is Man if not a noble monster? Or only noble at times. Slowly but surely a monster will come out of each Man until they slither, shamble, strut, and rake against one another. Until each monster absorbs one another to become one monster. Multi-headed, gnashing, greeting with forked tongues. Show me the monster that exists underneath society. Until we come to see the banality of all monsters through the—

Machine

And we see that the monster is nothing but a machine. A cold notion of industrial progress that each body is churned through until it's ground hamburger to be

flipped, packaged, and two for one'd. Each monster must morph into the machine. A single piston firing or a single wheel spinning. Hopping, moving in team and tandem. Repetitive, industrial, inhuman. Its unthinking and hardened metal is coldly beautiful and equally deadly to the monsters and the men. But as all machines do, it will break and decay. Time grinds everything to dust after all. And underneath the shiny machine we find that the breakdown is actually akin to...

A Riot

A Riot. As we have exposed our inner monster, and inhabited the machine which would turn us to pulp for a dollar, now we must rebel and riot. We smash cut to the men from before, now unraveled into the language of the unheard. Break out the imaginary pitchforks and torches and topple statues together. We are people again. Men. And together we are going to upheave society into something more humane.

Physicality - Getting Out of 'The Box'

Physically speaking, almost 90% of the pantomime that players will be doing falls within a 2-square-foot box that exists right in front of them. Take your arms and put them straight out in front of you, then put them straight down at your sides, now touch one shoulder with the opposite hand straight across your sternum. Congrats, you've measured the width, depth, and height of the box.

If you watch enough improv, you'll see that most improvisers only pantomime within this box. All the tools, utilities, and mcguffins in the world magically appear within this box and magically disappear when the improviser walks away.

"But Matt..." You say "In the real world, most stuff we touch every day IS in 'The Box'..." Okay, Fair point. But it's the getting to and from that 'interaction box' that comprises the most visually interesting human movements in my opinion.

Pulling something off a high shelf. Bending down to tie your shoes. Putting on a shirt.

There's lots of stuff out of the box. And once you learn to inhabit your meat you'll want to stretch what you're doing on stage. Become a dancer and a caricature artist that can contort your body into extreme and interesting poses and the audience won't forget you.

Your work suddenly becomes much more interesting and full. You can work in extremes, so you can even fuck about with the whole idea of 'the box'. Maybe for some reason everything you work with is on the upper

left corner of that physical box, or on the lower right. Maybe you spend much of your time moving things into and out of this 'prep space' and fussing with it. Allow your physical nature to inform your characters and your characters to inform your physical nature. Nothing is not connected. Everything is for a reason, even if you don't know it yet.

Storytelling - Who-What-Where

Scenes and why we do them

A lot of beginner improvisers get into a level 101 class and are instantly drilled with a type of scene. The “Who-What-Where” scene. For those somehow unfamiliar with this, here’s how the drill goes.

How to do the Exercise

Form two lines on either side of the stage. Put two people on the stage. One person is in charge of declaring the “Who” of the scene. The second person is in charge of declaring the “What” of the scene (Generally I coach this as an ‘ing’ type verb) and then the first player is in charge of the “Where” of the scene.

In action it looks like this - Varell and Puja step onto the stage.

Varell - We’re two astronauts! Puja - We’re singing!
Varell - In the supermarket!

Varell and Puja behave as if they were two astronauts singing in the supermarket.

Varell - :musically: I needed to buy some TANG Puja
- :musically: They’re all out of rocket pops!

–SCENE–

This isn’t bad. As a matter of fact this is great when you’ve just got the training wheels on. But something a little sinister is also happening. Because we’re not really exploring WHY we’re doing this exercise.

The general answer for this is that the audience wants to know these basics about any scene they’re watching.

And to a certain extent, this is true. But it's under-selling what I think is the most important thing we could be taking away from this exercise.

The audience is CURIOUS, and your job as an improviser is to attempt to answer their inherent questions in a way that arrests their attention.

Which is to say:

Good Improv is About Constantly Answering Implicit Questions

Good improv answers a continual series of questions.

So in effect, what we should be doing is: Who? What? Where? Why? When? How? What is that? Why are they? Couldn't they just? Oh! Does he know about? Why didn't she tell him? Is that the real truth? But then is? Who? Who?! Oh that's!?!

Etc etc.

So the next time you coach this exercise or see this exercise coached, try to remember that the first three questions of a scene: Who-What-Where exist only to launch the scene vividly enough into the audience's imagination. It's a stepping off point for you to really get answering the unending series of questions provided by a curious audience.

Plus, tons of different players completely subvert this entirely. TJ and Dave and Dave Razowsky come to mind. They rebel against this concept and instead slow roll the answers to these questions in extended physical intros and ephemera. They're still answering the audience's questions, but at their own pace.

Breaking It

Sometimes, highly advanced improvisers play with the format of discovery. Their audiences are ‘smart’ improv audiences (see Wrestling’s “smart mark” audience type) and so they understand the conceit of improv. These improvisers will sometimes do a ‘false reveal’ where something is implied to be one thing and then discovered to be another. This is colloquially called “pulling out the rug”.

Anytime you see a player pantomime writing on a keyboard/typewriter and the other asks them why they’re sticking their fingers into the cake you’re seeing a ‘rug pull’. Be very, very careful with this technique.

Whenever you break the audiences’ assumptions of the scene you’re shaking them pretty violently out of the pattern of correct assumptions you’ve lulled them into. Do this once or twice a show and you’ve effectively added spice to the night. Do this over and over again and they’ve not got any firm assumptions to hold on to when looking for a space to base their curiosity.

Storytelling - Storytelling Exercises

Once you've realized that humans are emotion feeling machines that communicate via story, it's not hard to connect the dots between things and see that we love to tell stories because we love to feel, and we love the feel because we love to tell stories. It's a circle.

So what's a story then.

Well, depends on who you ask. Generally speaking, a story consists of parts, with characters, who somehow change through the events that take place.

There's a ton of different ways to slice this up. Notable folks who have opinions on the subject are Bob McKee, Joseph Campbell, and Dan Harmon. Look those guys up if you want to.

Basically, a good story goes like this:

1. There's an everyday world. Everything is at some sort of stasis. Our main character exists in this world as part of it.
2. Something forces this main character to break with the stasis of the world. The world changes and evicts him, or the main character decides to evict themselves. Basically, something has happened that forces them to change.
3. They undergo the process of change. With the help of others, or the adversity of others, and sometimes dipping back and forth from the old and the new.
4. They return to stasis, but it's a different stasis because they are different too.

This corresponds to the four stages of learning too, and

that's not an accident. Everything is a story! And in
someway, everything is also learning. Because learning
is about advancing our own stories, and stories are how
we relate to each other, and to OURSELVES.

Anyways. Here's some exercises to help you tell a
story.

The Secret Library in the Floor

You might not believe me, but there's a secret library
under the floor of every building, street, and sidewalk
in the world. Wherever anyone practices improv, I
guarantee you that you can pantomime a little secret
library that 'pops up' out of the ground and 'pick a
book' out of it.

Pantomime this book. Small, medium size, huge, thick,
tome-like, pop-up book, comic, whatever. Have fun
with it. Use it as reps for your space work.

Stand around in a circle with whomever you wanna
do improv with. Elect one person to pick a book off
the 'shelf'. In succession, each person should 'read' off
a section of the book. Do this until you've read four
sections. Each section must conform to the summary
listed below.

Section One: Our Main Character exists in stasis.
Section Two: Something forces our main character
to change. Section Three: The main character goes
through the process of change. Section Four: The
main character finds a new stasis with the change
they did.

Here's an example:

1. Bob worked at a hardware store.

2. Bob wanted to work at the grocery store.
3. So Bob quit his job at the hardware store, and applied to work at the grocery store.
4. Now Bob works at the grocery store!

Here's another one:

1. Luke is a farmer who lives with his uncle; he wants a life that's full of adventure.
2. One day, his parents are murdered, and he meets a space wizard for the galactic rebellion!
3. Luke breaks the space princess out of jail with his wizard buddy and their friends, and they barely escape!
4. Now Luke is an adventurous space wizard for the galactic rebellion!

In traditional storytelling circles. Step 1 and Step 2 are considered "The everyday life" and "The call to action", Step 4 is considered "The denouement" or "The new normal" depending on who you ask.

Step 3 is where the real meat of the stuff is. You can break it down into many different aspects. - Refusal of the call to action: "But what if Bob doubts his choice to be a grocer?" - Allies: "Tim, Bob's neighbor, teaches him how to be a grocer." - Enemies: "Tom, Bob's other neighbor, screams at him that he'll never be a grocer" - Threshold Guardians: "Jimmy, the hiring manager, tests Bob on forty different vegetables before he will consider his application" - More...

Who's Driving this Bus?

Relationship drives plot. Not the other way around. If it's not the relationship between two people, it's the relationship of one person with themselves or with some

object/habit/task/place.

Yes, even in Jaws. The boat captains relationship with the shark drives that plot. His relentless obsession is ‘Moby dick’ like.

If you start doing plot for plot’s sake (Looking at you various genre-prov shows), then you might as well call for blackout and start again.

People come to the theater to feel shit.

To quote BOC again: “Nobody leaves an improv show and texts their friends ‘they totally fixed that bike!’”, because nobody gives a fuck about your plot. They wanna see people FEEL STUFF.

I’m pretty sure he was quoting someone else, but that’s what happens when you do second hand quotes..
- \ () / -

Group Mind - Acceptance IS Perfection

When you're good enough and dangerous enough at improv and have been doing it for a few years it's really tempting to start getting ossified in your thinking of how or what should be done during certain games or scenes.

If you've got the kind of brain where you want to do things the "right" way, then this chapter is for you.

Bad news. There's no "right way" in improv. At least that's to say that as long as the audience is having fun and laughing, and everyone on stage is physically and emotionally safe, then nobody will complain.

I know that you've been taught a lot of stuff about improv and stagecraft and hell some of it might come from this book. But at the end of the day, if everyone is connecting and having a good time, then fuck the rules.

Say no. Deny. Turn your back on the audience.

This also applies to warmups, classes, and games.

Say 'Pooooooooopie' instead of 'Zip'.

Make a bird noise instead of a dog noise when someone endows you as "fido! Our pet".

Do a scene where you jump out of an airplane and only say 'whooooooooaaaaah' on the way down.

Who cares. We are all literally just making this up to have a good time. Emily Candini once told me 'improv is fucking stupid and I hate it' and she was a fucking

asshole. I paid a bunch of money for her class only for her to take a big fat dump on improv.

If only she was a little more explanatory I might have surmised that what she means is ‘as good as you can get at this, the core of it needs to still be having fun, and if you’re a “rules monger” about the whole thing... that’s no fun’.

So don’t be a fucking rules monger. Have fun. Let the class instructor call someone out about ‘following the rules’ if they really wanna make a point about an exercise you’re doing.

That’s not YOUR job.

YOUR JOB IS TO HAVE FUN AND HELP OTHERS HAVE FUN.

Group Mind - Trust Your Partner, Trust Yourself, Trust the Audience

Improv is largely an art form which trades in the currency of trust.

There's only a few other arts in the world that are like this, and the one that really comes to mind is pro wrestling.

If you think about it, it's somewhat the same thing.

Trust in Professional Wrestling

You're wearing tights and flying through the air. And yes, contrary to popular belief most wrestling fans nowadays inherently know that wrestlers are NOT trying to hurt each other.

Wrestling is a stunt based gymnastic dance between performers who are trying to tell a coherent story together. The trust comes in that neither performer will actually attempt to injure the other, and that neither performer will try to push their individual narrative at the expense of the other.

The audience in pro wrestling too also places trust in the competitors, that they'll provide a fun and interesting story without really endangering each other with permanent harm. That at the end of the day, everything will more or less be okay and nobody is gonna die.

Trust in Improv Comedy

Similarly, audiences feel the psychological danger of improv comedy. Most humans are terrified of being on stage, and to make it worse, without a sort of plan. When they see you up there they have sympathetic terror! They're thinking about what it would be like if THEY THEMSELVES had to stand on stage.

As such, if you do something that's cringeworthy, in poor taste, or downright frightening (hanging from the literal rafters) you need to at least "wink" to the audience that you're going to be okay. It's alright to break the fourth wall sometimes, especially in the high risk environment of improv these days.

Similarly, if the improvisers on the stage have lingering bad energy between them, the audience will sense it. They're like bloodhounds to the energy on stage. I've seen shows where it's apparent there's smoldering romantic tension between the players on stage, and the audience comes up and asks later on how long they've been dating.

Bottom Line: Trust is paramount. Create a safe space on the stage and off the stage and you'll have better shows because the audience isn't scared to watch. Nobody wants to see a dead body.

Exercises - Improv to do by Yourself in Your Room

A lot of people are under the mistaken impression that improv is something that you can only practice with other people. Here's a few exercises for you to do by yourself requiring only minimal training and implementation.

Word Association

This exercise allows you to work on your spontaneous association. I want you to allow your mind to wander into all sorts of corners and closets inside your brain, mostly because you're safe and by yourself when you do this exercise.

Start just with a word. It can be anything. Open your eyes and pick out just whatever the fuck is in front of your face. Then think of the word that you associate with that word.

Here's what's in front of me right now, my buddy with a pink sweater on. So here you go:

Pink Sweater. Mr Rogers. Toes. Feet. Tarantino.

Great. Now that you've got that, we've got to train you to be much less precious about being 'correct'. Most improvisers are really dying to say something either insightful or funny, and that's a burden to them. That urge will ALWAYS be there, and you need to be able to turn it on and off at will. To understand when to lunge for the audience's fucking throat and when to make them feel safe.

Get a ball of some sort. I don't care what kind as long

as you feel safe enough to toss it into the air and catch it. A tennis ball is best, but if you wanna struggle with something heavy be my guest. You can also do this exercise with a metronome if you have one –you geek.

I want you to toss this ball into the air, and whenever you do, Associate.

If a new word hasn't come out of your mouth by the time the ball is in your hand, toss the ball higher. If you're throwing this thing too high, then stop trying to think so much. Just toss - say - toss - say. Be wrong. Make bad choices. Who gives a fuck.

The goal here is to learn to free associate as fast as you can. Once you've gotten that, it's time to fuck that all up with ...

Dada Walks

What's Dada? Here's the definition from Wikipedia: "Dada movement consisted of artists who rejected the logic, reason, and aestheticism of modern capitalism, instead expressing nonsense, irrationality, and anti-bourgeois protest in their works."

Basically once you learn to associate, I need you to learn to reject your own associations. Create anti-associative patterns and flex your inner bonkers muscle.

I want you to walk around a room, any room. Point to something in the room and stop. And name it.

But name it wrong.

Point to your chair and say "Spoon". Walk. Point to your face and say "Crown". Walk. Point to your

cat and say “Lord Chester chesterington Duke of the seventh seal”. Walk.

Turn your world into nonsense from your own mind.

Part of doing good improv is being in relation and association with other people. The other part is being in that relation to yourself. If you can exercise association, and then also exercise generation, you’ve got both sides of the spontaneous “coin”.

Christmas Morning

Space work, object work, same thing. Whatever your entry into improv, you’re going to be asked to make a pancake or hamburger in mid-air at some point. If not that, then bowling seems to be the most popular pastime to do if you’re also a comedy nerd.

Firstly, each object has: WEIGHT, SIZE, BALANCE, and TEXTURE. A large heavy marble vase is different from a tiny fuzzy cotton ball. Don’t hold these two objects in the same way. DON’T.

Here’s the exercise: Imagine it’s Christmas morning! (Or for those not with any experiences like that, it’s your birthday and simultaneously Arbor Day with an extravagant tree to celebrate with.)

Take a moment to have a seat under your imaginary tree. Look at the tree. Smell the wonderful pine fragrance of it. Now take a moment to pick out three or four packages under this tree! Look at them and describe them first. What color is the paper? Are there bows? How about the size and shape of these boxes? Great! After you’ve thoroughly described them, I want you to select one and OPEN it!

Exclaim to yourself out loud, “Wow! I’ve always wanted a [BLANK] “ Fill in the blank here with something. Then follow up with three observations about the physical state of the object along with allowing yourself to embody the experience of this object. Ideally something about its WEIGHT, SIZE, BALANCE, or TEXTURE.

For example: “Wow! I’ve always wanted a VIDEO GAME CONTROLLER”

“It’s really easy to hold and fits my hands just right”
“It’s not too heavy for me to play hours and hours of shooting games” “And it’s got really good grips on the triggers for me to shoot with!”

Or if you wanna be a little weirder about it: “WOW! A PICTURE OF MEAT LOAF! JUST WHAT I’VE ALWAYS WANTED!”

“It’s extra big so I can hang it over my bed at night and stare deeply into his eyes!” “What’s this? Acrylics? Perfect! I love the way they feel on the canvas” “It’s really heavy looking too, so maybe it’ll fall on me and bonk me into a dream about MEAT LOAF!”

Etc etc.

ABC Characters

What’s a character? Welp. If you really boil and boil and boil it down to the most foolproof elements, it’s an \$ADJECTIVE \$NOUN.

- Will Ferrel’s Anchorman (Ron Burgundy) - Inappropriate News Anchor
- Chris Farley’s Motivational Speaker - Inappropriate Motivational Speaker

- Tim Robinson's 55 burgers guy - Inappropriate Restaurant Guest

If you're keen-eyed, you'll notice the trend here. Be a white man who's inappropriate.

But for real, here's some other memorable characters:

- Key and Peele's Guy's who say bitch - Scorned Boyfriends
- Chappelle's Rick James - Flamboyant Rock Star
- Keenan Thompson's 'what's up with that' - Gospel Show Host

But seriously folks. All you need to make some of the most memorable characters of all time is to mash up a behavior style with a relationship position.

So let's do Letters. Start with A. Pick an adjective and then a noun. How about...

Arrogant Attorney. Great. That works. Now style your body into how an arrogant attorney would stand. What are they holding. Are they walking? Standing? Sitting? Where? How. Good. Now say something in the tone of the arrogant attorney. Remember it's gotta be arrogant, and something an attorney would say. How about "Of course I got my client off, what's this, amateur hour?"

Now move on to B.

Beleaguered Bandmate. Sit behind the drum kit, twirl your sticks. "I dunno man, I don't care anymore, let's just play the fucking set."

Sold. Keep going. Go do all the letters.

If that's too boring for you, do letter spreads A-B, B-C, etc. Anchovy covered Batman "WHERE IS THE

PENGUIN!?” , Brilliant Clown “All the world’s a stage and I’m falling down at a rate of 9.8m/s^2 ”

Great. This is a wonderful exercise for you to try on various types of characters all at once.

Remember that characters are an ideology. They’re not simply defined by what role they play in society, but HOW they decide to play it. Just like you’re not your job or your relationship to other people, but a combination of how you do that and what you do.

Play smart. I know you wanna do ‘sexy cheerleader’ and ‘angry boss’ and ‘lewd coworker’. So if you’re really wanna do that then do it in private and get it out of your system. Then when you’re on stage you better be doing stuff that’s interesting like ‘super powered cheerleader’ (Heroes), ‘demonic boss’ (Angel), and ‘Anarchy Loving Coworker’ (Corporate).

Psychology - The Four Stages of Learning, the Four Depths of Learning

So you went about learning improv because you wanted to be funny and now you're stuck being bad at it. Niiiiiice.

Good news, bad news. The good news is that I earnestly believe that anyone can be good at improv. ANYBODY. It just takes time, desire, and willingness to change. The bad news is that you gotta suck to be good. And that's gonna feel uncomfortable.

So. What's the journey from bad to good look like? Great. I'm glad you asked. Because here's a framework for you to learn anything anytime. It's universal and will help you in non-improv ways too.

The Four Stages of Competence

1. Unconscious Incompetence - Ignorance In this phase, you don't know what you don't know. You're blissfully unaware of improv. You've heard of it in passing, and associate it with standup. "Oh, you do improv? Tell me a joke!", you say.

Or it's "Group game? What's that, like a word at a time expert type thing?"

Or it's "What's a mono scene?"

Or it's "JTS Brown is just a corner store drink, yea?"

Or it's "Herald? Like the guy who announces someone to the king?"

You don't know what you don't know.

2. Conscious Incompetence - Shame In this phase the veil has been lifted and you can see the thing that you want to learn. You've seen an improv show and you want to be good at it, but as soon as you step on stage all the marbles just drop out of your pockets. You can clearly identify the trait, aspect, ability, or skill you wish to possess and attempt to gain it, but it's HARD.

This looks like all those folks who read 10,000 hour books. This looks like people who go from jam to jam and just freeze up on the stage.

This looks like a team accidentally editing their JTS Brown 'wrong' or fucking up Harold format and doing two group games in a row. They're trying with all their might and it's hard.

The worst part about this segment is the feeling of Shame. Because this is when you realize that there are others that you admire that possess this skill and you feel silly and shameful for failing so openly about it. You gotta make space for that feeling but not be hamstrung by it.

It's a powerful thing to allow yourself to be bad at something. As an adult (and most of us reading this probably are) you're so used to comporting yourself about your life with a fair level of fluency or competency that it's hard to allow yourself to be a failing beginner again. If you can, think back to the last time you acquired a brand new skill. For me, it was going to yoga classes at 35 or boxing at 37; visiting Japan and being unable to really communicate effectively.

Approach this segment of your skill acquisition with

as much gentleness and love for yourself as you would a child learning to walk, read, write, whistle, or cartwheel. Try and remember that you're in this for the joy, and that bonking yourself over the head with a big mental stick won't do it for you. Because soon you lean from this state over into...

3. Conscious Competence - Effort This phase is marked by a reward on your efforts. You've been able to do the thing you want to do, but at great effort or cost. It's the feeling of having that first scene that really "fucking hits" with an audience and leaves a room ringing with laughter. This is the thing that you wanted and you've finally gotten a fucking taste of it.

It's the team's first perfect Harold with callbacks.

It's the first mono scene that felt really perfectly paced with nobody stepping on anybody else's moments.

It's the first time that you get someone to snort laugh.

This is what it looks like when you're a kid and you finally launch your bike down the street without the training wheels on. It's amazing. Liberating. You're finally flying.

But there's a little asterisk here. The dance between Conscious Incompetence and Conscious Competence is back and forth. As much as you would like to 'hit it right' and then never make a mistake again, you just can't do that. You're going to teeter back and forth between getting it right and getting it wrong for a while, because it's taking a lot of mental and physical energy for you to do improv 'right'.

Eventually, you'll get better and better and you'll land inside the competence zone more and more often. Af-

ter a good long while you might be able to do it right without trying. That's called...

4. Unconscious Competence - Water This is what it's like to get it right without trying. You're an expert, and you can accidentally do things right that make an audience explode in laughter. At this point you've figured out this hill, and start looking for new skills to be 'bad' at and start over again.

This is putting up a Harold with your team that people quote back to you a year or so later.

I can vividly recall a show I saw 10 years ago by 3033 with a premise so funny that I think it would be an amazing TV show to this day. It's about a man who makes a date at a restaurant for couples only called, aptly, "Couple". His date is late and so the restaurant, fearing for their reputation, pairs him with a beautiful actress to play as his 'date'. The restaurant, being new and unique, draws a local news crew who films there as a live report. And the man's date, still getting ready at home, sees him with this other woman and becomes enraged. She storms down to the restaurant where she joins them at the table. The restaurant, being for couples only, panics again and hires an actor to be her date and sit them at a separate table. It was incredible and hilarious.

In many ways, you don't know if you ever really reach this stage, as the amount of conscious effort to do something 'correctly' is going to keep going down until it's as close to nothing as you can possibly make it. Our brains are really lazy in the regard that they're constantly trying to optimize our pathways.

Once you get here, you realize there's more to learn, so

in many ways this turns into a loop, connecting back into unconscious incompetence.

The Four Depths of Learning

Along with this, we can examine how DEEPLY we know something by using a framework generated for school children. It's called Webb's Depth of Knowledge (DOK). Who's Webb? No clue.

1. Regurgitation Just like a cow can take a piece of grass it's been chewing on from its stomach and start chewing on it again. At DOK 1 you're able to simply recall and reproduce information that has been handed to you. This is about as good as rote memorization.

To use the example of Harold - You understand the structure of scenes. - 1A, 2A, 3A, GG, etc. And can readily recall it.

2. Application In this stage you can apply the knowledge that you have gained. It's basically the who, what, where, when, how of it all.

For Harold - You understand how to do a Harold. You've probably done one. You get what a group game is, some of the common example types, and how to do them. You can edit a scene and figure out where you are inside the structure of Harold.

3. Strategy In this stage of learning, you understand various ways to apply the knowledge you have, and can form opinions on the methods and manners in which your knowledge works or another's knowledge is shown.

For Harold - This is understanding when to break the

rules of Harold. To do a walk-on in the first beats. To pull the rug from a group game. To trash the stage with props and chairs from the green room, as I've once seen. To completely derail or re-rail the Harold for various purposed. This is the 'learn the rules before you break them' type stage of things where you're ready to break the rules.

4. Universalization In this stage of learning, you form maps and concepts as to how ideas from one realm intersect and interact with another realm. This is the multiverse type knowledge moment. This is when you see that everything is really connected and how those connections inform each aspect of knowledge.

For Harold - This is how you understand why Harold is called "Harold" and not "Herald" (Hint: the Beatles haircuts are involved) This is where you get that Viola Spolin originally harnesses the power of spontaneous theater games to assist troubled youth. And WHY she chose that. This is where you realize theater is a tool for social change, for self experimentation and you decide to write a stupid fucking book about improv.

Psychology - How our Brains Experience Causality:

Cause and effect: The basic idea of how the universe should be running. We like to believe that we live in some sort of orderly system, at least in the microcosmic sense of things. But what if I told you that it's only because of our perception that this is true?

Justification Happens Automatically

“Everything happens for a reason”. You’ve probably heard this over and over and it’s true.

The thing nobody tells you is that you’re making up the reason looking backwards. The human brain runs the default OS of ‘Story’ and will draw parallels and conclusions where sometimes there’s just noise for data.

So whenever somebody says ‘It happened for a reason’ and then tells you why, what they’re really doing is telling you how they’ve justified what the hell happened to them.

This happens with purchasing things too. You can be full of doubt and uncertainty about which product is superior, contrasting and comparing, but as soon as you pull the trigger and buy something, you start to justify why the choice you made was superior in some way.

Same thing happens in relationships. You can be dating a real dud for years and years, but at the end of the night you’ll recall the moment they read a perfect song to you over the phone when you were dating, or you’ll tell yourself that this is the only person that can

handle your XYZ. Whatever it is, you'll spend most of your mental energy justifying your choices.

Okay, now, how does this relate to improv.

Wise improv gurus say shit like 'Jump, then figure it out on the way down'. I'd like to amend this to "Only after you jump can you understand why you jumped".

The human mind is a causal machine. You will be able to generate a reasoning. You just need to be able to find that reason and STICK TO IT over time. This is the way story works.

Emotions Happen and Then you Justify Them

Guess what. It gets weirder.

Studies have shown that your body will display emotional reaction faster than you are able to sense in your own mind that you are having an emotional reaction. Your muscles will tense for flight, your eyes will dilate with excitement, and your gut will tingle with that butterfly sensation faster than you can realize what emotions "caused" you to feel that way.

In many cases, our bodies are always "outthinking" us. Our vagus nerve is making choices for our cortex that only the brainstem really can keep up with, let alone our monkey-thinky brain.

So what happens?

Our bodies REACT and then our think brain MAKES UP A FEELING RATIONALE for it. Check out James-Lange Their and Constructed Emotion hypothesis if you don't believe me.

Basically it goes like this - Body senses external thingy
- Body has REACTION - Brain makes REASONING
from REACTION - You feel the FEEL

Wait. What?

I know. It's fucking backwards. But essentially every emotion you feel doesn't come from what you think it's from. It's from your physical body having been juiced up in a certain way, and you're having to construct a story to figure out WHY your body is juiced in that certain way.

So.. Improv...right?

Basically this means that every time you step onto the stage or Zip a Zap Zop you need to be tuned into the way your body is feeling. This might be really hard if you've got bad interoception (the ability to perceive the way your body's insides are doing or feeling). So you've got to go and do extra work to tune into your guts.

Go do yoga, breath work, meditate, whatever it takes to tap into your underlying nerve systems. Listen to your heart beat in a quiet room. Workout and feel how heavy your breath is. You gotta do real somatic (of the body) work to get in tune with your meats, because the meats makes the emotional juice, and then your brain makes the story out of that juice.

Basically it's what every good weird yoga and clown teacher in town has to say. Get in touch with your body and try to listen to it.

And when you've done that... start looking at other bodies. What shapes do they make? How heavy are they and where. What parts of themselves do they lead with when walking? What parts are they guarding

when they stand? What's folded? What's moving?
What's stationary? Rigid? Flexible?

Each body is the vessel of a story and the storyteller
as well. It's a cycle and it feeds both ways.

This is how you can get good at improv with anyone.
Learn to read body language and be interested in your
own body language.

Psychology - What is a Mirror Neuron, What is the Shared Consciousness?

Group mind! The universal subconscious! This is the kind of shit spouted off by Del and Jung alike. It's a mystical sort of space where the dreams and nightmares of the collective come out to play and be seen. But what the hell are we really talking about? Surely this sort of hocus pocus has no place in the world of 2024 and beyond? WRONG.

Mirror Neurons

What? What the fuck is this? Aren't all the neurons in your brain the same. Turns out yes and no.

There's a particular kind of neuron that fires when you see someone perform an action. It fires inside your brain as if YOU were doing that thing. This is the basis for many things in humans, such as language (hear sound make sound), mimicry (see action do action), and empathy (perceive feeling have feeling). Are you a person who hears someone do a silly accent and really REALLY wants to do it back? You might have strong mirror neurons.

Here's text ripped straight out of Wikipedia: Neuroscientists such as Marco Iacoboni have argued that Mirror neuron systems in the human brain help humans understand the actions and intentions of other people. In addition, Iacoboni has argued that Mirror neurons are the neural basis of the human capacity for emotions such as empathy.

Cool huh? But what does this mean for improv?

Mirror Neurons are the basis of group mind! The idea that you can observe someone, hear someone, and experience the same stimulus as them is the primary contributing factor to allowing groups to act together. When you add in a heavy dose of shared context (aka time together experiencing things and discussing things) you get groups that have amazing group mind.

Think about it! Have you ever seen a scene from an improv troupe that derives from one member's seemingly innocuous gesture and dives into the different backgrounds of Spiderman characters (looking at you Will Hines)?

This comes from two things: 1. Inherent understanding of the intentions of your group mates (strong mirror neuron connections) 2. Large context backgrounds for the members of that group.

So next time you're invited to go hang out with your improv team and bowl or play mini golf. DO IT. Generating the context and strengthening the mirror neurons with your group will give you that next level in the improv pyramid toward greatness.

Theory - Choices of Fear v. Love

Every choice you make on or off the stage can boil down to one of two things: Fear or Love. Most people are stuck in fear choices every day, because the world is a dangerous place that is actively trying to exploit you (if you live under capitalism), but you can consciously decide to swap into the other way of living anytime you want to.

Protection vs Celebration

This is another way to say Fear vs Love, but I feel like it's much more emblematic of what's going on. In many ways, the things we do in the world boil boil boil down to a syrupy version of these concepts. You can choose to protect yourself, shutting off ideas and potentialities to survive better in the world, or you can celebrate things and be open and free and vulnerable. Your choice.

In reality, the best path is likely a little in the middle. But when we're on the stage, we must be committed to celebration.

Off stage? That's your time and your place to be a little bit more reserved and guarded. But when we step on to the stage you need to become the most risk taking celebrating yeehaw version of yourself for others to see and enjoy. Give everyone your best attention and YES the fuck out of things. Don't just lower case 'yes' things. I want big UPPERCASE fucking YES energy.

- Lowercase Energy: "lets eat this cake".
- Uppercase Energy: "Lets EAT THE FUCK out of this cake".

And

- Lowercase Energy: “let’s ride a bike”
- Uppercase Energy: “LETS RIDE THE FUCK OUT OF THESE BIKES”

Etc etc.

There’s a time and a place for ‘no’ and “I’m so angry (afraid)” and “I need to protect myself from harm”. Go and do that for sure. I will NOT be the one to tell you to remove all boundaries between yourself and your team. Don’t do that. HAVE BOUNDARIES, and space for yourself and take good care of your health and your heart.

And when you step on that stage I want you to celebrate the fuck out of things.

Why do we Play? What’s the Point?

There’s a lot of reasons. But to me it’s about discovery and trying on roles and ideas foreign to you in a safe setting.

In a way, ALL IMPROV IS ABOUT DISCOVERY. Del thinks that it’s the gestalt effect of two dissimilar ideas connecting, and the energy created when that happens is laughter. I’ll take that one step further and say that a tiny bit of JOY is created whenever you connect two ideas, which is DISCOVERY JOY. And there’s also joy in the empathy when you see someone else create that discovery connection. That’s EMPATHETIC JOY.

We play to simulate what it’s like to be someone else. To discover what the world looks like and smells like and feels like to their skin. It’s the closest any of us

will ever have to body swapping and living someone else's life. So we love to do it because we find the biggest joy in discovery.

It's why we envy inventors, gold miners, chemists, explorers.

Deep down we get a huge dopamine hit out of discovery. The 'newness' of any pleasurable experience is a huge high.

Theory - Three Types of Magic the Gathering Players vs why People do Improv

If you've ever heard of the popular card game "Magic: The Gathering" or seen nerds in comic shops sitting around and throwing cards down on top of each other, you've probably been exposed to this game. The rules can sometimes become complex, but the basis of the game is like that of many card games. You have cards in your deck to play, and end up only using a few types out of the massive library of cards available to everyone to try and beat your opponent.

In creating and developing the game, wizards of the costs isolated three different profiles to help the makers of the game understand why people play.

Each different profile was given a name by the developers and that's how they talked about them in their everyday work. (A lot of this information was pulled from an article by Mark Rosewater.)

Timmy, Johnny, and Spike in Magic The Gathering

"Timmy is motivated by fun. He plays Magic because it's enjoyable. Timmy is very social. An important part of the game is sitting around with his friends."

"Johnny is the creative gamer to whom Magic is a form of self-expression. Johnny likes to win, but he wants to win with style. It's very important to Johnny that he win on his own terms. As such, it's important to Johnny that he's using his own deck. Playing Magic is an opportunity for Johnny to show off his creativity."

“Spike is the competitive player. Spike plays to win. Spike enjoys winning. To accomplish this, Spike will play whatever the best deck is. Spike will copy decks off the Internet. Spike will borrow other players’ decks. To Spike, the thrill of Magic is the adrenaline rush of competition. Spike enjoys the stimulation of outplaying the opponent and the glory of victory.”

Sitting with my friend, we roughly translated this to improv. My interpretation is below:

Timmy, Johnny, and Spike in Improv Comedy

Timmy is motivated by fun and enjoys doing improv for the sense of play and wonder it brings into his life. Timmy likes to make people laugh and it’s important to him to make friends in his improv classes and be friends with the people in his group.

Johnny is a creative player to whom improv is a form of self-expression. Johnny likes to do shows, but wants to come up with new ways to play old games and different long forms to show his own creative abilities. It’s important to Johnny that his team is doing a form that showcases its own unique energy and talents. Johnny wants to have new experiences and to test the limits of the format.

Spike is the player who wants to master the art of improvisation. To accomplish this, Spike will play wherever the best team is, study whatever materials that he can source, and try to learn how to play to the highest of his ability constantly. To Spike, the thrill of improv is in the moment of the show. Spike enjoys the process of improv as well as the performance aspects, and will

apply whatever material he finds to the height of his intelligence.

As you can see, there are many different reasons why someone might want to start doing improv, but all these folks in some way want to belong and have space in a team. You'd be wise to remember this when you start to disagree with your teammates about the direction of your improv group. Think about how everyone might want something different out of the group, try to understand them, and work to negotiate a compromise.

Practical - How to Take a Note and How to Not Take a Note

Learning how to take a note is both the easiest and the hardest thing in the world to do, because it requires that you release your defensiveness and accept difficult advice.

How to Take a Note

Look at your coach in the eye, when they speak, nod your head. When they're done, if you're puzzled about what the note means, ask for clarification to understand them more. Tell them "Thank you for the note".

If you really disagree, after practice ends, ask to talk to them one on one and then concisely tell them your concerns, allow them to reply and then let that be that.

How to Not Take a Note

Don't look at your coach. Cross your arms in front of your chest and huff. When they're speaking, interrupt them, or worse, open your mouth a little with that expectant look like you're not actually listening, but waiting your turn to talk instead. Ask them pointed and leading questions that any reasonable person would take to mean that you disagree with them. Loudly snort as if they're a moron.

After class, pull aside the smallest and most agreeable member of your team and all but force them to agree with you when you badmouth the coach and call them all sorts of names. "Hack" "Moron" Etc.

Moral of the Story

If you pay or designate a coach, fucking listen to them whether you like it or not.

If you really don't like the notes, ask the team if they like the coach and their style. Maybe this isn't the team for you.

If you really think coaches suck, go do standup.

Practical - When to Pull Back

So you love improv so much that you're doing three shows a week and practice twice a week. You're taking an online zoom class and reading this fucking improv book or more.

Stop it. Goddamn it stop it.

If your life becomes more than 10 - 20% improv, you're poisoning your improv. Your improv is going to become a feedback loop –like a shrieking microphone too close to the speaker.

You need REAL LIFE experiences to do improv. Stuff like making new friends, working at the coffee shop, getting your oil changed, hiking, etc. Whatever the fuck it is that you do BESIDES improv comedy. If you don't have that then you'll start vomiting back up improv scenes that you've seen and done. Rehashing them and doing META comedy. The ultimate in bullshit.

Remember that you love this thing because it's fun. It's interesting. It's inspiring. If you smother it with all your attention it's not healthy and that's some addict/codependency bullshit that you should get checked out by a licensed therapist.

I get it. Having people laugh at you is addictive. It's fun. It's amazing and better than most highs you can get illegally.

But you gotta pace yourself. Diversify your skills and knowledge. A background in culture makes a well-read improviser. Go visit museums and see movies and travel. You won't regret it.

You certainly WILL regret doing the same scene a

group before you just did without thinking of it. How embarrassing.

Practical - Easy and Practical Advice

Here's a little poporrouri of different tidbits that don't really fit anywhere. Sorry.

Remember People's Names

Learn how to play the name game and use it to be better at remembering people's names all the time. A person's name is simultaneously the most public and personal thing that exists, and if you can manage to remember it you're halfway to making a new friend.

Don't be ashamed to admit you've forgotten it and reinforce the idea that you want to remember and enjoy knowing the other person. Try not to make an excuse like "I'm terrible with names", it's cliché and boring.

Instead go with something like "You remind me so much of Brad Pitt that I keep calling you 'Brad' in my head, can you remind me what your name actually is please?"

A little flattery here isn't wrong.

Nobody Will Buy Your Shirts

Nobody. And I mean NOBODY will buy your group's shirts. If you decide to print some or make a run, then expect them to sit in a goodwill or box in your closet forever. Three times now I've made a run of shirts for improv show or group and three times I've made donations to the local charity shop. Don't do it.

Space is Premium

It's hard to find a good practice space that's not somebody's living room, especially in LA where any space at all comes at a premium. Practicing outside can work in some places in spring and fall, but just downright won't do in winter or summer.

Do your best to find a studio or someplace that will allow you an hour or two every so often to practice. It's important to get into a neutral setting (not tied to any one person or group member, giving them uneven responsibility or sway) where it's easy to concentrate on the group mind work you need to be doing.

Likewise with a show setting. If there's a local bar or whatever that will give you stage time in their corner every so often then you better treat that place like it's the Taj Mahal. Buy shit from them, help them sweep up, and generally show gratitude by plugging the place/menu/tip your bartender spiel. Be kind, be nice, be cool.

Scheduling is Half of Running an Improv Team

Just like running a DnD group, trying to get an improv team together is an arcane art unto itself. Scheduling software can make this easier these days, but it's still a complete pain in the ass.

Talk to your improv group upfront about what makes and what breaks a 'quorum' of members to practice.

If you have someone who's chronically late or a no-show. Give them a talking to and let them know you want them in the group, but won't be tolerating continual disrespect.

If at all possible, do not have one person be the coach and also the group scheduler. It's too much burden on one person.

Group Dynamics

Do not sleep with your teammates.

Actually, don't date them either.

Actually Actually. There's only two ways dating someone on your team will go.

1. You will have a steamy romance for a while and then the resulting disintegration of your relationship will bring down the whole team because nobody knows how to handle that level of awkwardness.
2. You will be in a romantic relationship with your interest forever and probably will get married.

There's no in-between here. It's either always together forever or ticking time bomb. Your choice.

Practical - How to Start Teaching

Alright. I'll get on my soap box a little here.

You wanna teach improv? Why? Why do you want to do it and why do you think you're the right person to do it?

What Does it Take to Coach

The skills required to coach, lead, and facilitate a group are very different from the skills required to be a good improviser. In most cases, if you're a really funny person, and just not 'clicking' with your group. The problem is YOU. You gotta get off your high horse of 'being the funniest' or 'being the most correct' and be interested and invested in people. You can't expect them to open up all at once or communicate the way you like to. Meet them where they want to be met (mentally).

Do you THINK you're ready? How long have you been doing it? There's a moment between 9 and 24 months of doing improv that almost everyone I know begins to think they could teach improv. And maybe you're right. Or maybe it's the dunning Kruger effect.

Dunning Kruger and You

The Dunning Kruger effect basically says that at a certain point of steadily increasing your knowledge on any given subject, that you believe yourself to be an expert when in fact you probably only have 40% of the knowledge you could be acquiring.

This is because of the doubling effect of learning. If you come in and learn improv for one day, and then come

back for another day. You've DOUBLED your improv exposure in just one day! Two more days and you've DOUBLED again! Do this for a couple of times and you feel like the expert. You've doubled and doubled and doubled probably 10 times!

But then you realize that there's questions that you can't answer. More styles and ways of doing improv than just your one school. More history than you can name because you thought it started with the UCB four.

Nah.

Do it for a long time, and then longer than that. And then start teaching with the realization that you'll probably learn more in one year of teaching and having people stump you with questions than you've learned in a while.

Choice Coaching.

Don't tell people "Well I would have said" or "Well I would have done" and then how you'd play this character or made that walk on. That's bullshit. That's coaching someone to be a regurgitating robot of the choices you'd be making. And they're never gonna make all those choices because they haven't had your life experiences. Basically because they're NOT YOU.

Coach on fundamentals and ideologies. Tell someone to listen harder, or with their body. Tell someone to share the space, or take more space when they're shrinking.

Coach folks on the fundamentals of being more spontaneous, more physical, telling more of a story collaboratively, or whole body listening to each other and the

weird choices they wanna make.

And when you've done that, you can proudly call yourself a coach.

The End

With that, I've written down most everything I've wanted to teach or say. So here's one last bit.

It's time to say goodbye to improv. It was great for a while. I learned so much on how to be a better person and to listen and to honor the lived experiences of other people with it.

It also has sucked me dry. I've cried and worried so much about who likes me and why. Why I can't be on this or that team. The dynamics of theater people suck ass in large part.

I got therapy. I've learned how to be a better person, on and off the stage. It actually made me funnier, if you can believe that. If you have an inkling of an idea that maybe therapy might help you out, give it a try if you can.

I dated the artistic director of a local theater. We broke up and she decided I couldn't be at that theater anymore. So she assassinated my character and fucked with my reputation.

So I decided to write down what I know. If it helps you then I'm happy. If it doesn't then throw it all out. Improv is yours to mold as you see fit. It's nothing at all and everything at the same time, like most living things, it needs to change and grow with the times.

I hope this book has entertained you in the very least. I tried to curse enough. FUCK! There's one for the road for you.

I'm going to go and do comedy now about stuff that's painful to me. It's the best way to heal I think.

Fuck you and Fuck this and Fuck off ya Fuckers.
With love -M@