

SOME TERMS

This book is not going to teach you the basics of doing improv. It assumes you've studied the fundamentals, either through a theater or another book. But even the most basic terms can vary from theater to theater, so let's explicitly define a few phrases and make sure we're on the same page.

YES AND

This is the big one, the one that everyone knows. It's the mantra that explains how to do improv. On a practical level it means: when you are doing improv, you confirm the information that has already been said, then add more.

DENIAL

This refers to either an out-and-out rejection of something stated as fact (e.g., "Put down the phone? But I'm holding a sandwich!") or the rejection of the implied, unstated context of something ("You want me to dance? But this is a restaurant!"). Denial is a cardinal sin, despite the unfortunate truth that it can be extremely funny, which is why very veteran teams indulge in selectively denying their scene partners.

TOP OF YOUR INTELLIGENCE

This means, “Don’t make your character dumber than he should be.” All things being equal, you play your characters as smart people who know as much as you would know in that situation. Lots of people, when they feel the pressure to be funny, make their character arbitrarily stupid. Now, there’s plenty of time for selective stupidity—where there’s a method to the madness—but don’t be broadly dumb just to get things going.

THE UNUSUAL THING / GAME OF THE SCENE

“Game of the scene” is a term coined by the Upright Citizens Brigade, and it means (very roughly) “the funny part.” The funny part starts when we find something that’s different from what we expect: “the unusual thing.”

There’s the real world and how things normally go—that’s the scene. And then there’s a weird part that is unusual—that’s the game.

If you improvise a boxing manager who tells fighters to never throw punches, then the boxing match is the scene, and the manager’s insane advice is the game. The two fighters shake hands, someone rings a bell, the fighters dance to the center—that’s the scene. And then one drops his arms to his sides and lets himself get hit in the face, because that’s what his manager told him to do—that’s the game.

There are many semantic arguments about the “game of the scene.” That’s because the game addresses the comedy of the scene, and analyzing comedy with terms and categories is a dicey, imperfect business. The most common argument is over the difference between “an unusual thing” and a “full game,” which is an unusual thing heightened and explored.

For the purposes of this book, a game is the unusual thing. What you do with it, how long you play with it, and how far you take it are all matters of taste.

When we use the term “game of the scene” and emphasize its importance in this book, it is because we are presupposing that we want our improv scenes to have a funny part and not just be dramatic scenes. Was it funny? Then it had a game.

Funny improvisers can be said to “get game.”

JUSTIFYING / SAYING WHY

Improv scenes often involve someone doing or saying unusual things. Very often the character with the unusual behavior will be challenged to answer, “Why are you doing this?” We call explaining your weird behavior “justifying.” It’s usually not a sensible explanation, and it may be something that makes sense only to someone looking at the situation from an odd perspective. See this scene between James Mannion and Cory Jacob.

James: Roger, why did you write your reports in blood?

Cory: I wanted you to know I care about this company.

IF THIS IS TRUE, THEN WHAT ELSE IS TRUE?

Once you have something funny, you ask, “If this is true, then what else is true?” If a priest decides that he is an atheist, maybe we see a scene where his choir has been instructed to sing the R.E.M. song “Losing My Religion.” What else might he do? Perhaps he’s replaced the crucifixes with statues of Albert Einstein.

Answering this line of questioning in your scenes is also called “playing the game.”

SUGGESTION / INITIATION / WALK-ONS / TAGS / EDITS

Suggestion: Most long-form improv sets begin with a word or a phrase from a member of the audience. This serves as the jumping-off point for the start of the set, not necessarily as a major topic to be explored.

Initiation: The first line of a scene.

Walk-On: An entrance into a scene already in motion, i.e., by someone other than the people who started the scene.

Tag: An improv convention in which an actor who has not been in a scene walks up to and taps a character on the shoulder. The person who is tapped leaves, and is replaced by the new person. Whoever else was not tapped remains. It’s implied that, once the new person enters, the scene changes

to a new location (related in some way to the original scene).

For example, let's say we have a job interviewer who is yelling at an applicant. An improviser who has not been in the scene walks up and tags the applicant. The applicant leaves. The new improviser takes his place and addresses the interviewer, "I understand you've been yelling at our applicants." It's implied that we have moved into the future, and now the interviewer is getting scolded by his manager.

Edits: An agreed-upon convention for players to signal to each other that a scene is finished. The most typical edit is the "sweep," where one player runs across the front of the stage, as if a curtain is being closed.

GIFTS / ENDOWMENTS

Gift / Endowment: When someone declares something new about another actor's character, it's a gift. "You look happy." When you essentially assign someone a role, it's an endowment. "You must be my father." Gifts and endowments are good, and those terms are often used interchangeably. It's bad form to use a gift to make your scene partner perform a stunt. "Weren't you going to read a poem? In Spanish?"

DEL CLOSE / OPENINGS / SECOND BEATS / HAROLDS / CONNECTIONS

Del Close: An improv director in Chicago during the 1960s–1990s, who championed long-form improv as a performance art and not just a tool in rehearsals.

An Opening: A ritual where you take a suggestion and expand it into ideas. It should feel like an overture before a musical, in that you hear snippets of ideas to be expanded upon later. They are artsy, abstract, and hard, and there are many different kinds.

Second Beat: During a set of multiple scenes, a second beat occurs when your scene revisits characters or a situation from an earlier scene in the show. Usually you try to revisit whatever made the original scene unique, rather than just continue the story. If you are revisiting a scene for a second time that's called a "third beat."

BE PRESENT

If you were to take the fear that a new improviser feels, tear it from her soul, and condense it into a sentence, it would be this: “What do I say next?”

Next. Later. The ending. New improvisers are constantly looking ahead, trying to see a clear path to a nice, satisfying ending.

You’re going to have to forget that.

An important step of becoming a great improviser is letting go of the future and choosing to BE PRESENT.

And all you need to do in order to be present is to ignore one of the most basic human instincts you have: you need to stop thinking ahead.

If you are a human being who has survived past the age of zero, you are not great at being present. You wake up, and you’re already worried about when you’re going to get to the post office to pick up that package, or what you’re going to get for your friend’s birthday on Thursday, or if you’ll have something cool to say at your 50th high school reunion in 20 years.

Someone walks up to you at work and says hello, and you immediately start scrutinizing her face to guess what's coming next: "What the heck does this person want with me? Is she gonna try to get me to sign a birthday card? Is it too late for me to pretend to not see her? Also, what am I gonna say at my 50th high school reunion in 20 years?"

As soon as you start watching a movie, you're trying to guess the ending. When the TV goes out for one second, you're picking which relative you're going to rescue if it turns out that a zombie uprising has started.

As soon as you've decided that you are going to ask someone out, you start wondering what kind of couple you'd be, how long you might last, how many children you'd have.

You won't be fooled, your instincts assure you. You will be ahead of it, way ahead.

But the present moment is huge in improv because improv happens on a **stage**. The audience are people who are in the same room as you. They can hear your breathing. They can see every little change on your face. They can pick up on every little piece of nonverbal information you're putting out there. If you hear your ex-girlfriend in the audience sigh, your eyebrows will perk just slightly higher, and the whole audience will know that something is up.

There is always a lot going on in the current moment if you're practiced at paying attention to it, but new improv students are always worried about the future. A new improv student looks at their scene partner and thinks: *Maybe my character is going to fall in love with this other character.* They make that choice. *I'll start planting seeds now that we will someday be in love.* And they say out loud, warmly, "Nice day, isn't it?"

Meaning: nothing is happening now, and the scene is dying. The student is setting up a moment that isn't here yet. In fact, it won't ever get here.

Instead, you must see what is already happening and report it. Like this:

- You're sitting down at a table, so you decide you must be at a restaurant, and begin miming that you're eating. That's happening now.

- Roughly at the same time, you see your partner is smiling at you, so you feel that you must be on a date and you smile back. *Ooh, something is afoot.*
- You notice that in doing this you feel kindly to the other character, so you think, *maybe I'm in love with this person.* And out loud you say "I love you," to let your scene partner know what you're thinking. You just get right to it, so that it's happening in front of the audience's eyes.
- And because your scene partner was watching your eyes, he/she knows how your character feels, looks down and takes the moment in, and then looks up and says, "I wish I felt the same way."

When you are present, you report what is happening. You are always in the middle of the moment. You feel it and make an assumption about what must already be happening, which also means, by the way, that you always assume something is happening. When someone says "hi," it's never just "hi."

You shrink your scope down. Instead of thinking ahead 22 minutes, or even two minutes, you look around you at the current moment.

"Now" gets bigger and slower and richer and more evident.

You turn into a Sherlock Holmes of observing the present instant. From a snapshot of a moment, you can make decisions about what you feel, what the other person must be feeling, and what must have happened to get us here.

It's not where you're driving, but what the car ride feels like now, what you feel about the passenger, the song on the radio, and the landscape you can see right at that moment.

You're constantly waking up into worlds that already exist and trying to fake it. There's no point in planning ahead, because everything is constantly changing.

You observe and react—honestly and directly—and wait for your partner to do the same, and then you'll have something else to observe and react to.

The future vanishes! It's weird and cool and oddly soothing.

BECOME THE MOST RIVETING PERSON ON THE STAGE

You will know that you are truly being present when this happens: you become the most riveting person on stage.

They say you can't teach charisma. But you can, and I just taught it to you.

Be fully present, and the audience will watch you like a hawk.

It doesn't matter how good an actor you are. Or how "naturally charismatic" you are. If you are honestly communicating how the current moment feels, in an authentic way—no matter how clumsily or awkwardly—the audience will pay attention to you. People will magically give you space. Yes. It happens.

I saw a show a million years ago with a nervous, bulldogging man and a quiet, confident woman. He started the scene as a husband on a fishing trip with his wife. He was complaining about the weather and demanding a beer and asking her why she picked this day to go fishing, all the while not giving her time to answer. She had time only to peep things like no and yes and "Boy, it sure is rainy!"

In his defense, the guy was more nervous than actually bullying, but the effect was that his scene partner couldn't get a word out.

But she was so much more confident as an actor! She did everything physically. Her eyebrows popped up when he revealed that the weather was bad. She looked a bit sad when he said the fish weren't gonna bite. When he asked for a beer, she leaned over into a cooler and plucked a beer up in sharp, funny movements. I remember she clutched the can just at the top with her fingertips, letting the imaginary can dangle as if it were a gross thing she didn't want to touch. And when she handed it over to him, and he absent-mindedly took it as he rambled, she gave a quick nod of satisfaction to herself, and at that the audience laughed.

She was in the scene. She was a specific character. She was cool and calm and confident and specific. She was having fun. She was funnier.

And all the while he was talking, we were just watching her.

That woman? MERYL STREEP. No, I'm kidding. I don't know who she was. But I remember thinking that's the way to play with a stage hog: you ride the wave in front of you, instead of looking ahead for a different one.

SEE IT LAND, LET IT LAND

A good note for being present is *see it land, let it land*.

You make a move—verbal or non-verbal—and wait to see it land in your partner’s face before you keep going. That’s “see it land.”

And when your partner makes a move, you feel it and show your feelings. Just a bit. A little smile, a little nod. That’s “let it land.”

Improv often feels like a series of couplets. You move, they move back. They move, you react. You both provoke reactions in each other, like two poles of a battery.

BE COMFORTABLE WITH SILENCE

Another obstacle to being present: people talk too much. New improvisers routinely talk until they are interrupted. They think talking equals confidence.

Stop talking. Let there be silence after you speak. That’s when your words are absorbed.

Stop talking, maintain eye contact, and let stuff sink in.

REPS

Students in my classes will often ask for “hard notes.” They want the hard truth on what they need to do to get better. I generally do not oblige.

The hard truth is often simply: learn to act like a normal person.

Ever see what happens to a person when you point a camera at them? Their face goes into a fake frozen smile. Their spine stiffens. I’ve seen people unconsciously bend their arms so they look like robots, and also inexplicably tilt their heads far to the side. And these are the changes that happen just for a still photograph, something we all actually have a decent amount of practice doing.

In improv we’re asking you to move around, talk, and make things up, all while being watched. This is all before we even worry about being interesting, surprising, or funny. Just the basics of existing like a natural human being are incredibly difficult at first.

But these basics are essential if you want to be funny on stage. You have to look comfortable and natural in the unnatural world of an improvised scene.

Another challenge: people, in general, are bad at words. You have a feeling, and then your brain has to do some amount of work to miraculously translate that feeling into words. And then the recipient has to take those words and complete the even harder task of translating them back into feelings.

Recently in class I saw someone forget his own name. Remembering other people's names is very hard, I know, but I had assumed retrieving your own name from your brain would be simple. Still, during a names warm-up, one student, when he was supposed to say his own name, went, "Dave. Wait! No, I mean Sean."

He was flustered. It's the start of class, and he feels the weight of everyone watching him. Everyone is like that when they're learning. Even veterans are like that on certain days. Words are hard.

Another time I saw a scene that went like this:

Player 1: Could you keep it down? Your drums are really loud.

Player 2: I'm sorry. I just... it's that I have a gig tomorrow.

Player 1: You're keeping up my wife and infant son. What's your problem?

Player 2: Nothing! I mean, I love infants.

No one says, "I love infants." Maybe you say, "I love babies!" or "Babies are so cute." But no one in the course of a normal conversation says, "I love infants." For that matter, no one says, "You're keeping up my wife *and infant son*."

Now, on one hand, that kind of awkward phrasing is part of the fun of improv. You word things slightly "wrong," and it's a gift you use to have fun on stage. But when you're starting out, almost every single thing you say is peppered with awkwardness. The unintentional game of every scene, when you are learning, is "these people sound insane."

It's normal. Your chords aren't wrong, you're just looking at the frets and taking a long time to get your fingers into place. You're heading down the court in the right direction, but you're looking at the ball while you dribble. The music starts, but you don't start dancing for several measures, and when you do you're behind the beat.

That's okay! You're learning.

But there's no hard note that gives you comfort on stage. No teacher, exercise, or book. It's just reps. Repeat, repeat, repeat. It is the most reliable method for getting better. More and more of your real self will become available to you as you keep at it.

BE PRESENT EXERCISES

EXERCISE:

60 SECONDS OF SILENCE

Think of your brain as an excited puppy, trying to race ahead to the future. Here's an exercise to get it back to the present.

Two people up. They get a suggestion and then assume a starting position. Something not too big is best—a hip cocked to one side is better than a big crouch while screaming. The people should be able to see each other. No stepping downstage and gazing out over the audience.

Then they wait 60 seconds. No object work. The scene isn't starting. They just wait 60 seconds and regard each other. After 60 seconds, the teacher says "start," and they do.

60 seconds on stage is a hugely long time. At first your brain is racing: you're thinking of ideas of how you might start the scene. You pick one. Then you don't like that idea and you change it. Then you're trying to guess what the other person is thinking, and you change your mind again. You become self-conscious about your posture and adjust it.

Then you start to settle. You're still thinking things, but it's less frantic. You start to settle on a vague, not-quite-locked-down notion of who you are and how you are feeling as a character. The self-consciousness and panic boils away. You relax.

Then, you're calm. You have a general sense of the dynamic—*I'm nervous; she's stern* or *I'm excited; he's also excited*. Ideas float into your brain, but now they're like pieces of paper gently floating on a breeze, not gunshots at your feet commanding you to dance.

And then the scene starts. You will be listening well for the first time.

Don't worry if the scenes begin a bit slowly. They will quickly become very compelling and good.

BE CHANGEABLE

I have a completely unfair test that I try on people to see if they would be good improvisers.

I offer the person a mundane thing, like a piece of gum or a glass of water, or even a pen. “Hey, want a glass of water?” or “I’m going to go get a sandwich—you want anything?” (If the person says yes, then I can’t do the test, and I just give them the gum or whatever.)

But if the person says no, I immediately ask, “Why, are you scared?”

This test is funny because most people will instinctively say, “What? No, I’m not scared.” They say this even though the question does not make any sense. Of course they are not scared of gum. Really what they are saying is: “I don’t quite know what you mean by that question, and in fact I don’t really know what’s going on, but I will tell you this much: I am not scared.”

People who are naturally good at improv will instinctively adjust themselves to the absurdity of the question. They say, “Yes, I am scared.” Or maybe they’ll say, “Yes, very scared, in fact.” Really good ones will change their face to actually look a little scared.

They just adapt themselves for the fun of it.

If someone does that, and they've never studied improv, I will tell them, "You should take an improv class. You'd be great at it." And they're like, "Were we talking about improv?" And I say, "No, and also I don't have any gum."

This section is about being changeable. It is a skill uniquely important to being an improviser. All actors learn to be present, but the improviser also becomes equally adept at being changeable.

WHAT MUST HAVE ALREADY HAPPENED?

One of the keys to being changeable is making this switch: every time you worry, "What is going to happen next?" replace it with, "What must have already happened?"

Stop looking forward and start thinking about the moment before.

Here's a scene between actors Dennis Curlett and Danny Cymbal. They start as co-workers talking in a break room, and work backwards from the way they are talking to each other to create the scene.

Dennis: Hey, buddy, what's going on with you?

Danny: Oh, Phil, hi! I'm just taking a quick break before I gotta get back and type all the reports up. How's Mary?

Dennis: She's great! She made a lasagna.

Danny: Oh yeah?

Dennis: Yeah! Like a meatball lasagna.

Danny: And um, don't tell me. Tim. Little Tim, how is he?

Dennis decides here that the reason Danny's character is naming everyone in Dennis's character's life is to passive-aggressively make the point that he, Dennis, does not know *Danny's* name. Once Dennis declares this, Danny agrees to it.

Dennis: Okay, I know what you're doing. Yeah, I don't remember your name.

Danny: Yeah.

Dennis: Okay, I'm sorry. I apologize.

Danny: It hurts. Okay?

Dennis: It's kinda freaky to me how much information you retain about MY life.

Danny: I do it on purpose!

Dennis: What?

Danny: Because you never remember, man!

Dennis: It's not a personal thing, man!

Danny: It's not a personal thing? We've hung out!

Dennis: Okay, it's just one thing doesn't stick in my head.

Danny: My name? What is it?

Dennis hesitates. Danny starts to say his character's own name, to give Dennis a hint.

Danny: Daaa—

Dennis: Dave!

Danny: You didn't remember.

Dennis: No, I didn't! I didn't! I'm sorry, I'm just a guy who's bad with names. Look, you're obviously important to me because I still hang out with you! I started this conversation with YOU. I'm just bad with names!

Danny: Whatever. Cool. We're fine. It's fine.

Dennis: No, no, okay, look. How about for the next six months you can call me anything you want.

Danny: How does that make it better?

Dennis: I don't know! I just feel bad! I want you to know it's not a personal thing. It's a problem I have, and for the next six months you can call me anything you want and I will answer to it.

Danny: That's fine, we're fine, that's good. Don't worry.

Dennis: All right. I'm sorry.

Danny: *(leading him)* Sorry...?

Dennis: Sorry....

Danny: It was literally three seconds ago I told you my name.

Dennis: You really think I don't remember your name right now?

Danny: Yes, I really think you don't remember my name right now.

Dennis: Well, you are 100% correct. I don't know!

Keith Johnstone said, "Improvisation is like steering a car by looking through the rear view mirror."

The future is not worth worrying about in improv, especially when you're at the start of a scene. You only need to worry about adjusting and confirming—letting the other people in the scene know that you know what's going on.

Another example. Let's say you're playing a girlfriend on a date in a park. After a few lines, your boyfriend drops to his knees and says, "Will you marry me?"

You might be tempted to play it that your character is completely surprised by this. After all, you, the actor, are completely surprised, and it would be reasonable for the character to be surprised.

But a more sophisticated move would be, the moment you see him proposing, you adjust your thinking to: this relationship is not new, it has been going on for a long time, and now he's proposing. You might not have known it was coming now, but you probably knew it was coming at some point. You're probably at a stage where every time you go on a trip with your significant other, you are wondering if this is when he's going to propose.

The funniest and most apt response when the boyfriend drops to his knees and proposes is not "I can't believe it!" but "Finally!"

BE COMMITTED, NOT ATTACHED

One of the main tenets of good acting and good improvising is to commit. Be invested in your character. Really believe in the things your character believes.

But the trick is that you also must be ready, always, to shift and adjust.

I read an interview with baseball player Alex Rodriguez, in which he said that right before he swings his bat, he's holding it very lightly. He said that if someone were to grab the bat one second before the pitch, they'd be able to easily snatch it out of his grasp. It isn't until just before he's about to swing that he tightens his grip—yet it looks from the outside as if he's holding the bat firmly the entire time.

That's how your choices should be: confident and convincing to the observer, but ready for rapid adjustment at any moment.

I once saw this scene between improvisers Jesse Falcon and Jason Mantzoukas. Jesse bursts through a door, and Jason is sitting at a desk. Jesse says, "Come quick! There's a monster in the swamp!" And Jason very quickly shoots back with, "I. Don't. Care!" He says it firmly, confidently. It is very funny for him to blow off Jesse like that, and the audience laughs.

It's also an overtly bad improv move. He's ignoring the initiation, which is basically a denial. And he really laid that denial out there and got a laugh off of it. This could break the scene, by creating a precedent that nothing said is really happening.

But Jason adjusts. He realizes he's threatened the scene, sighs, and says, "But... I am the sheriff. Let's go check it out." He mimes reaching into a desk and pulling out a badge.

Problem fixed! No harm done. If he had stuck rigidly to "I don't care!" as hard as he first made that choice, that scene would have died. He adjusted.

Make big choices and commit, but be ready to change.

KEEP THE MUSIC, CHANGE THE LYRICS

What if you have to change in a way that contradicts something you've already done? Isn't that going to break the scene?

Not really. A common strategy is to keep the tone you have, and just change the things you talk about. Keep the music, change the lyrics.

Here's what I mean:

Let's say you mime heaving open double saloon doors and walking with heavy boots, implying that you are a cowboy entering a saloon. Then someone greets you, "Hello, Principal. Your 10 a.m. appointment is waiting."

They don't do it as a joke; they just missed what you did. You have two options:

1. If you haven't yet spoken, you could just drop your physicality totally and switch into the body language of a principal. The audience might giggle, or they might not even notice. If your scene partner didn't see it, maybe it wasn't as big a deal as you thought. Getting on the same page is more important.
2. If you have already spoken, you can keep the tone of your voice and the physicality, but agree with the new choice.

So, if you mime heaving open double doors and say, "Charlie, get me a whiskey" in a gruff voice—and then someone says, "Principal Davis, your 10 a.m. is waiting for you"—you just nod and keep walking the way you're walking and say, "Great. Thanks, Morris. Bring me the attendance reports, and dammit, Charlie, get me that whiskey!"

You keep the music, and just change the lyrics. You can easily fold changes into your scene that way.

EVERY LINE IS AN OFFER

One of my teachers, Michael Delaney, has a good piece of advice: "Good improvisers habitually agree with offers made to them."

"Agree with offers" means that you choose to view things that happen in the scene as offers, and that you generally want to accept them.

It's like "yes and" but a bit more pointed.

If someone says to your character, “Hey, you look angry,” a good improviser tends to want to make that true. Notice the “tend”—you don’t have to go with it. If it directly contradicts something that is a big part of your character, you can sidestep it, but your general default instinct should be to go with it.

If someone says, “Man, what a view,” you see that as an offer to talk about the view.

Accepting offers is really important at the top of the scene. It counteracts our instincts to add in too much that belongs only to us. Slow down, absorb everything, adjust your thinking, and say yes.

It’s not as important once the scene gets rolling and we all have points of view and things to unpack. At that time, too much accepting offers can stall the scene.

A side note that we’ll talk more about later, in the section on fighting well in scenes: telling someone not to do something is an offer to do it more. If someone says, “Would you stop being so rude to my father?” they want you to be rude to their father. The most helpful thing for you to do in that example is to turn to the father immediately and say, “You look like a troll.”

HALF-OFFERS

Lots of times in scenes, someone will say, “Is this about...?” It’s what I call a half-offer. You should consider it, but you don’t have to accept it. See this scene between improvisers Lisa Timmons and Gwen Mesco.

Lisa: I cut my own hair this morning. And I don’t know what to do, should I... how does it look?

Gwen: I feel like, when I’ve had bad haircuts, I don’t want people to lie to me when it happens, and it’s not good.

Lisa: Okay, I accept the fact that it doesn’t look great.

Gwen: It does *not* look great. But you're still very pretty. You have really good bone structure. I just moved to this neighborhood that has a lot of Orthodox Jews, and they have a lot of wig stores.

Lisa: Let's get a wig then!

Gwen: Yeah, let's get a wig.

Lisa: Do you have any? Do you just... happen to have some?

Gwen: Is this about Joe?

In that last sentence Gwen is making a half-offer to Lisa.

Some teachers suggest that you always take these, unless they directly contradict something we already know. But sometimes people will offer an "is this about...?" that is so far afield of what's happening it would derail the scene, such as:

- "Is this about how you really want to have sex?"
- "Is this about how you resent me?"
- "Is this about you hating your kids?"

If the half-offer is nowhere close to what you are thinking and feeling, it's okay to reject it, though it's good form to yes-and some part of it, if you can:

- "In the past, this has been about sex. But right now that's not at all what I'm thinking about."
- "I do sometimes resent you, but not right now."
- "My kids drive me nuts, but I don't hate them."

Think of these half-offers as similar to when someone offers you food at a party. Accepting it is gracious, and dismissing it without even thinking about it is rude. But if you're allergic to this particular food or really full—it's okay to politely decline.

In the scene between Lisa and Gwen, Lisa accepted the half-offer that her hair crisis was really about a breakup.

Lisa: So you saw that Instagram. She has short hair!

Gwen: I know! So what? We all know you can do better than him!

EMPATHY

Underlying the skill of being changeable is empathy. It's the ability to see where someone else is coming from. To be fluid. To adopt points of view you not only weren't expecting, but that you don't agree with and barely understand. To change your own character's history instantly, in order to make the current moment make sense.

Empathy in an improv scene is not easy. People struggle to accept gifts if it means having opinions they wouldn't naturally have.

But if you're being changeable, you need to do it.

Someone endows you as Adolf Hitler? You have to embody the mindset of Hitler, from his point of view, as best you can assume. He didn't see himself as a crazy person. He probably saw himself as a capable guy who wasn't afraid to call out the truth, or to make grand plans and really "go for it." He was probably proud of generally winning at everything he did, as that is kind of what happened right up until the end.

Of course I am not saying Hitler was good. Let me go on record here: I am opposed to Adolf Hitler. But if I get endowed as him in a scene, then I'm going to play even him with a degree of empathy.

Empathy gets ignored when people wax nostalgic about the powers of improv. Everyone focuses instead on the lesson of "saying yes." Even accomplished comedians look back at their time in improv and speak about the revolutionary concept of being cooperative, and how their lives were so beautifully improved when they started learning how to "say yes" to things.

But it's the ability to change your viewpoint to something you did not expect, with truthfulness and ease, that is the game-changing skill you develop as an improviser. You can make any position truthful.

Here are a few feats of empathy that improv will require you to perform on stage, from easiest to hardest.

1. *Being an intelligent version of a character who believes something you do not.* If you're a passionate liberal, can you play a right-wing politician with strident religious beliefs and not sound like a jerk? Can you set aside your distaste for that person and indeed advocate for them?
2. *Yes-anding a character that your character disagrees with, without changing your character's mind.* If you're a right-wing religious zealot, and the other character is someone trying to legalize heroin, can you say something like, "I remember how you took that economics class, and it convinced you legalizing drugs was a smart idea—but it's not worth it. It's morally wrong"? In other words, can you hold onto one viewpoint while furthering a different one?
3. *Yes-anding an accusation lobbed at your character that genuinely surprises you, the actor.* If you're a right-wing religious zealot, and someone says to you, "That never stopped you from shoplifting from my store," can you accept that and justify it with ease, even if seems at first to be contradictory to your character? "I steal to protect the free market, which is a way of honoring God." A non-empathetic move would be to fight back and counter-accuse the other character as a way of trying to "win" the scene. "I only stole because you had slept with my wife!"
4. *Yes-anding the other character while justifying an accusation that surprised you.* Let's say you respond to "That never stopped you from shoplifting from my store" with "You're good at noticing people's hypocrisy. I admire that in you." I bet it would get a laugh, just for being a surprisingly generous response.

Other handy tricks that empathy lets you do:

- Being able to respond to what someone meant to say, rather than quibble over the wording of what they actually said.
- Speaking to the suggestion in a way the audience intended you to. If someone suggests "snowstorm" during a week of an actual snowstorm, they are thinking of different aspects of a snowstorm than someone who gives that suggestion in July.

- Giving endowments to other actors that they are happy to receive.
Giving gifts people want.

And for what it's worth, the ability to see things from someone else's point of view comes in handy in real life far more often than a willingness to "say yes" to situations you'd normally avoid.

BEING CHANGEABLE EXERCISES

EXERCISE:

CHARACTER MATCHING

Everyone in a circle. The teacher picks someone to start. That person walks across the circle and speaks as a character for a line or two.

Perhaps they adopt the tone of an elderly, crotchety man, and say, "Well, look who's playing in my yard! The Spencer boy!"

Whoever is being spoken to responds as the same kind of character. Same voice, same philosophy. Even in this case, when it has been established that the person being spoken to is a little boy, the little boy responds in the same voice and philosophy.

"That's me! What a troublemaker I am! And I'm gonna mess up your lawn good!"

The initiator responds, making this a three-line scene: "You better not!"

Then the person who crossed the circle takes the responder's spot, and the responder walks across the circle and speaks as a brand-new character to someone else.

This exercise lets you quickly adopt a variety of energies, and lets you practice changing yourself based on someone else's decisions.

FIGHT WELL

Fights are tricky in improv. Quick disagreements, long debates, and screaming matches are all potential sand traps that will catch your scenes and drag them under. Fights are so tricky that teachers generally tell beginners to avoid them completely. “Don’t fight” is a frequent note in early levels, but that’s too severe. We need to fight in scenes; we just have to learn how to fight well.

Improv rules change when you’re in a fight. Suddenly to “yes and” you must be disagreeable, as a character, and do the opposite of what your scene partner asks. Suddenly you need to deliberately play a bit below the top of your intelligence and argue for a point you know is foolish.

Your animal instincts will really screw you when a fight starts. You’ll make brilliant and rational excuses for your behavior, when really the scene needs you to shamelessly do more of whatever you were accused of. Time will fly when you’re in a fight. You won’t even notice that the scene has frozen.

Actors who have very little comedy experience are real suckers for fights. They dig their heels in and will not budge. They are so happy to have a

clear desire: to win the fight. There are many performers who can't even imagine a scenario where their character is wrong, much less how funny that might be.

Comedians who are poor actors come around a little faster. They're quicker to grasp that they need to enjoy arguing a foolish point. They enjoy being on the "wrong" side.

A fight done well is a fun dance. Picture two people running together, side by side, and then one of them suddenly decides to turn around and run backwards. Now one of them is facing the wrong direction, but they're both still running together.

Like a lot of things, once you get it, it's easy. You just have to learn to avoid digging your heels in, to be ready to be wrong, and to keep yes-anding even when the only thing on the table is an accusation against you.

DON'T = DO

As I've mentioned, here's a very loose rule of thumb: if a character pointedly tells you not to do something in improv, chances are you should do more of it.

Let's say someone says to you, "I hate how you never clean your room." In the heat of the moment, your desire to play to the top of your intelligence, and to be chill and agreeable, will make you want to say, "I'm sorry! I'll clean it right now." But that's not what they want. They want you to be someone who never cleans their room. Weirdly, being a nice person in the face of an accusation is a denial.

"Don't touch that button" means *touch that button immediately*.

I saw a great scene that had this improbable and fantastic beginning between three players named Curtis Gwinn, John Gemberling, and Brett Gelman.

Curtis: Hey, little buddy, what's wrong?

Gemberling: I'm hooked on gas!

A member of the backline (Andy Rocco) entered the scene with a helium gas canister, blew up a balloon, and then left the gas canister. Gemberling noticed the canister, and his eyes lit up.

Curtis: You better not hit that gas! Here, I'm going to put on these sunglasses and earphones and turn the other way while I read this magazine.

Gemberling approached the canister. Then this happened:

Brett Gelman: *(as the canister)* Hey, little boy...

Gemberling: Wait a second! Gas canisters don't speak English!

Brett Gelman: *(haltingly)* El pequeño muchacho, ¿viene toma una canistero de gasia?

Then, Gemberling took a big hit of helium gas. Huge laughs.

This whole scene was built around someone being forbidden to do something, and then doing it anyway. Doing what you are told not to do is saying yes, and often extremely fun.

MAKE THE ACCUSATION TRUE

The main way that fights fail in a scene is that people stop yes-anding each other. We stop learning anything about the characters and the world. Everything stops while the people butt heads.

A second loose rule of thumb to follow within fights is to get in the habit of yes-anding accusations, which means making the accusations true.

Your ears should get sensitive to when your character is being accused of something, and you should immediately want to make it true. Sometimes just overtly agreeing with the accusation is the best move.

Player A: Honey, Bob says he saw you out at a restaurant with your aerobics trainer. (*accusation*)

Player B: Yes, I am having an affair with my aerobics instructor. (*agreeing with the accusation, or taking the “wrong” side*)

A: You admit to having an affair?

B: Yes.

A: Why would you do this to me?

B: Because I'm committed to getting good at aerobics! (*justification thought of at that time*)

Now we're learning more about the characters. We're moving forward and building on what has happened. We have more to unpack and play with going forward.

Think of accusations as a casting breakdown. When someone says, “Well, you're the one who had the affair.” Don't think, “How can I explain myself?” Instead think, “I've been cast as someone who cheats on his spouse.”

REJECT SOLUTIONS

A common trap is creating a problem and then trying to solve it. Solving problems is being stuck in the future. *Maybe we should do this? How about this?* Instead, reject the solution and make the problem worse.

Here's a scene between performers Max Sosna-Spear and James Mannion, about a guy who has become obsessed with the movie *Kramer vs. Kramer*, a very serious 1979 dramatic film about a couple getting divorced.

Max: Adrian, every one of your DVD boxes has *Kramer vs. Kramer* in it.

James: Yeah, well my parents got divorced like a week ago, and it's really the only movie left that I've been able to relate to.

Max: You got all of these copies of *Kramer vs. Kramer* in the last week?

James: Yeah! Well, I had to do something! I couldn't do anything else except think about it!

Max: Oh, geez, I'm so sorry.

James: I just kept going on eBay, ordering another one and another one.

Max: That's sad. I'm so sorry. Do you want me to help you put all the right DVDs back in the cases?

Max is playing truthfully, so he offers a reasonable solution. That's fine because it keeps the scene feeling truthful, but James rightly rejects the solution in order to protect the unusual thing.

James: I don't want to watch any of that other garbage! The other stuff is made up! It's not real! Look at this: *Die Hard*! This is just an escapist fantasy! *Kramer vs. Kramer* is the only movie with any sort of reality to it!

A reliably fun reaction to anyone offering to solve the problem is to do more of the problem. James could have said:

James: I don't want to put the regular DVDs back! In fact, I'm going to put two copies of *Kramer vs. Kramer* in each of these cases, so I have backups.

Or you can do a “bait and switch,” where you appear to accept the solution but then reject it.

James: Yeah, that’s a good idea. Let’s get the regular DVDs back in these cases. *Kramer vs. Kramer* is coming out on Blu-ray, so I’m going to have to buy it in that version anyway.

Reject solutions that try to get rid of the unusual thing.

ARGUE THAT THE WORLD IS FLAT

A common strategy to make fights funny is to argue the dumb side of any discussion. Take the wrong side and defend it as best you can.

Let’s call this arguing that the world is flat. Imagine two characters are arguing whether the world is flat or round. The position that the world is flat is obviously more fun.

Any time you find yourself in a fight, make sure that at least one or possibly both of you are arguing something surprising, or wrong, or even a little dumb.

Here’s a scene from improv group Convoy, off the suggestion “dishwasher.” Alex Berg plays a guy who insists that a dishwasher cannot handle washing a colander. Todd Fasen plays a normal human.

Fasen: It’s broken, I don’t know.

Berg: Well, we shouldn’t have put the colander in it.

Fasen: No, the colander’s not going to ruin the dishwasher.

Berg: It’s not a dish!

Fasen: What?

Berg: A colander's not a dish!

Fasen: You put silverware in there, and silverware's not a dish either! Stop scapegoating the colander for all these problems!

Berg: I'm just saying it's such hubris putting a colander in there. You hand-wash a colander! Everyone knows that!

Fasen: No, you can put a colander in the dishwasher. You want to hand-wash pots and pans. I think most things you could put in a dishwasher.

Berg: I agree with you on pots and pans. It's on the colander where we just don't see eye to eye!

Fasen: Look, I think it's the fact that you bought a dishwasher at a garage sale for us!

Berg: Hey, I got a good deal!

Fasen: It can't handle most things!

Berg: It's not MEANT to handle a colander! It's meant to handle a dish!

Fasen: I think a dish is more hearty than a colander!

Berg: No, no, no! A colander has all the holes in it, it mish-mashes the water every which way!

Then Alex Fernie tags them out and begins a business meeting. Berg and Fasen become his co-workers.

Fernie: Gentlemen, the fourth-quarter numbers are not good. They're 33% below our projections. The only thing I can think to blame is the colander.

Berg: Hey, we factored the colander into our projections!

Fernie: Well, the numbers are terrible. And I look around here and I have to notice, well, why is a colander working for a company?

Berg: It came with great recommendations. Personal references were through the roof. It can't be the colander. I blame Jones.
(pointing to Fasen)

Fasen: I think we're giving too much responsibility to the colander. We're the top video game company in North America, and we told the colander to design our new video game.

Fernie: This isn't the time to point fingers. What we need right now...

Fasen: I'm pointing a finger at the colander!

Berg: I pointed one at Jones!

Fernie: Look, we have to figure out something to do. We're looking at another year in the red and we're gonna go under, colander or not.

Berg: I agree. What if we let the colander run the marketing campaign for Uncharted 4?

Berg uses as intelligent an argument as he can muster to defend himself throughout, citing personal references and recommendations. In that last line he rejects a reasonable solution in favor of doubling down on trusting the colander.

None of this breaks the “play to the top of your intelligence” guideline, because you will argue the dumb thing as smartly as possible. That’s practically the definition of a joke: argue a dumb thing in a smart way.

SYMPATHETIC DISAGREEMENT

A good technique to use during an improv argument is “sympathetic disagreement.” This refers to tone.

A character says something, and your character disagrees. But while disagreeing, your character says he or she understands why the other person feels that way.

In other words: yes-and the accusation, even as you disagree with it. Something like, “Look, I get it, but....”

You say: “Hey, I bought a hamburger at this Wendy’s, and there is a full finger in it!” The responder, accepting the accusation and making it true, says: “Our chefs are the best. I assume this finger was put in there on purpose and is going to be delicious.”

They are handling a gift you made up, so it’s bad form to attack them too aggressively here. It’s a bit hard to think when someone is yelling at you, even when it’s a make-believe character. Using some sympathetic disagreement allows you to keep your opinion while giving them some breathing room.

You say: “Hey, I’m all for trying new delicacies, okay? I didn’t think I’d like Thai food; turns out I love Thai food. But I’m sure that a finger is not a delicacy.”

Emotion is good in general, but within a fight too much anger distorts things. People get defensive and stop adding any information. Sympathetic disagreement lets you keep your honest reaction without digging in your heels too much.

EXERCISE:

A REAL REASON

Same set up, but this time Player B tries to feel why they would have done such a thing for real. Like, in real life. The only condition here is that you have to accept without argument that you really have done the thing: you can't change it so you didn't do it, or say that you didn't do it on purpose.

For example, if Player A says, "Sir, we found these knives and excessive liquids in your luggage. Why were you sneaking these onto the plane?"

If you were doing supervillain approach, you might say, "So I can take over the skies!"

If you were doing the "own it" approach, you might say, "Because I plan on using them to bully other passengers up there."

I actually think both of those responses could work. But if you take a moment and try to feel why you might really have done it, I bet you'd take a moment to consider, and then say something like this:

"You know, I was just hoping you wouldn't check. I thought I could get away with it. I think the TSA policies are kinda dumb. I'm not planning anything bad, and I just didn't care to follow your rules."

PROS: The answers are rich, specific, and have the ring of truth that makes improv compelling. This is what the best improvisers often do when endowed with a strange situation. It is the best approach in actual scenes.

CONS: It's hard to measure, from the student's perspective, if you've done this right. Students don't necessarily know what truth feels like on stage. And since there are so few restrictions on how you respond, many students will inadvertently deflect: "I don't know! Someone else must have put them there!" or "Ach, I took the wrong bag by mistake!"

The exercise basically says "be good actors and be interesting people," which is not the most helpful instruction, but this is the best approach in a scene. Give a "real" answer.

BE BRAVE

For many improvisers, there's nothing scarier than an accent. Someone starts a scene in a British accent, and the other improviser suddenly goes into mental overdrive trying to figure out how he can explain why he doesn't have to have a British accent also.

For others, there's nothing more jarring than playing a different gender. You're a woman who gets labeled as a man, and you'd rather just play a woman, so you create some huge backstory to explain why this person thought you were a man, but no, really, you're a woman.

For others, there's nothing more intimidating than a serious and dramatic topic. Someone tells you that your character has cancer, and you inwardly dread the rest of the scene. "How can I be funny now that you brought cancer up?" The idea of just responding honestly seems terrifyingly boring.

For others, there's nothing more nerve-wracking than being the one to answer the big question. Everyone is saying they are scared of some guy named Dave, and making a big deal about it, and you don't want to be the one to make the big choice about why you're all scared of Dave, because you don't want to be "wrong."

For others, there's nothing more unsettling than sitting a scene out, even though it's going fine and doesn't need anyone else.

Improv has a way of making you do whatever you're scared of as an actor. You hate nothing more than dancing? The audience will give you the suggestion "Dirty Dancing." You hate being a talking animal? Your scene partner is going to make you an emu, and you don't even know what that is. If you never watch television, then your scene is going to be one where you have to imitate the star of the new hit show "Happy Mondays," which the audience all knows and loves.

You can avoid all of these things if you're quick-witted enough to dodge them, but it's often better to do the thing you're scared of. "Follow the fear," as the saying goes.

A note I got in an early improv class was: "Will, you're just watching the scene. You need to be *in* it." This was from John Cameron Telfer, a teacher at Chicago City Limits. It was one of those notes I knew I needed for my real life as well as the scene I was in. I was avoiding really feeling things as they were happening.

Years later, in an Upright Citizens Brigade practice, I was in a scene featuring everyone as miners trying to break into a collapsed mine. I chose to be a photographer, staying on the outside, snapping photos. My coach, James Eason, shouted: "Will: PARTICIPATE!" *My old habit*, I thought. I dropped my camera and got to my knees to join the other miners.

The right choice is often the brave choice. The character from the opening that you're scared of doing. The opinion you're worried the audience won't agree with. The object work you think no one will understand. You just have to commit and do it. Visualize your spine made of flexible steel and jump into it.

The audience will love it. Improv is more about confidence than it is accuracy. Maybe it's straightforward: brave things are also difficult or surprising things, and therefore more enjoyable for the audience. Or maybe the audience can smell the bravery on you, and they become fascinated.

Once, at UCB in New York, Amy Poehler asked to meet with all the teachers to give us her thoughts on teaching improv. We were all thrilled to meet with one of our comedy heroes. We didn't have a classroom big enough to hold all the teachers, so we went up a floor from our school to an unfurnished

floor above us. Amy sat in the lone folding chair, and all the other teachers stood around her in this big cavernous space.

One of Amy's most emphatic pieces of advice was not to let students quit in scenes. They don't have to be funny or good in early classes, she said, but right from the first day of level one, we can't let them quit. No bailing. Nip that in the bud, she said.

Staying in your scenes even when you're not sure what to do next is the kind of bravery we need. It makes the scenes exciting.

Bravery means "making brave acting choices" and does not mean "putting up with intrusive choices that make you feel gross." You don't have to be picked up, or be physically pushed around, or talk about sexual or violent topics if you don't want to. See the "You Don't Have To Be Picked Up" section below.

What I'm talking about is acting. You know it when you're playing scared. Be brave.

KNOW, CARE, SAY

You've heard these rules of improv:

- "Don't ask questions."
- "Avoid teaching or transaction scenes."
- "Don't be coy."
- "Know your scene partner."
- "Be affected."

You know them. Every improv theater community has these rules and a handful of others in the same vein.

All of those rules, in all of those variations, boil down to this:

In your improv scenes, characters should generally:

- **KNOW** what they're doing,
- **CARE** about whatever the main issues of the scene happen to be, and
- **SAY** how they feel about things.

It is not intuitive to behave this way. We are socialized against doing all of this. In real life we tend to openly declare when we don't know, and apologize. We ask questions.

We walk away from situations that we don't care about. We don't react to things that are crazy or weird.

We keep our mouth shut all the time to avoid problems. We don't speak. These are your first acts of bravery: choosing to know, care, and say. By doing them, you are overcoming socialized habits and keeping your scenes interesting.

Know

Try not to say, "I've never done this before!" or "This is my first day!" or "The boss isn't here!" or "This wasn't my decision." Instead, say, "I know what to do," and "I AM the manager here." It's okay if you don't really know about the specifics of a given situation; just play the emotional truth. You may not know anything about car engines, but if you are a car mechanic in a scene, you know generally the way a person talks when describing what's wrong with a car.

Care

Saying "I don't care" is boring. If your boss fires you, give a shit. Being bored or unaffected kills scenes, and is usually done by an actor not skilled enough to adjust to something that surprised them.

Find reasons to get passionate about the topic at hand. Here's a scene in which, off the suggestion "brutal," one actor (Colin McGurk) reacts to the other (Christopher Corbin) having just passed horrific gas.

Colin: Oh, God! Chris, what do you eat, man?

Christopher: I had a lot of cauliflower and brussels sprouts today. I'm on a veggie raw diet.

Colin: I gotta work in here! We work in this environment together!

Christopher: I know, man, but I feel awkward because I don't want to go into the next room because Jeanene's in there. Feel like it's better in front of a guy.

Colin: Okay, all right. I guess that's a code I can follow.

They have opinions they feel strongly about, and they find a way to feel even more strongly about them.

Christopher: My tummy is doing circles. My wife is getting on me about my weight.

Colin: Your wife? Why are you nervous about Jeanene, then?

Christopher: Because she's a woman. My mom raised me to not fart in front of women!

Colin: I didn't know that! You're MARRIED? I thought you were just nervous because you had a thing for Jeanene or something. You have a wife? GO FART IN FRONT OF A WOMAN RIGHT NOW!

Christopher: I WILL NOT!

Colin: It's not that big a deal to fart in front of a woman!

Christopher: I was brought up right! And I'm gonna stay that way!

It's Christopher's passion, his deep caring, that makes his opinion so funny.

Say

Here's a scene where a baseball coach (Frank Banz) makes a major confession to one of his players (Seth Gilbert).

Frank: Chandler, I just want to say... that was a really good triple you hit out there.

Seth: Thanks.

Frank: I've got your father's heart.

Seth: What?

Frank: Your father died. And I was his batting coach. And I have your father's heart. And I want you to know when you hit that triple today, it made me cry. And I feel that part of him is in me. Because normally I'm happy for people when they make a hit but, man, I got all teared up.

Seth: I don't even have a response to that. It's like, he died like two years ago, so two years ago when we were working together and you took that vacation that... I'm speechless!

Frank: Who doesn't take vacation?

Seth: But how did you plan it?

Frank: I've always had a bad heart. I planned it. We planned it.

Seth: You and my father were in collusion to work this out together?

Frank: Yes. He said if I ever die, I'm donating mine to you.

Seth: Why did you choose this moment? This is the beginning of...?

Frank: Because I almost cried and I looked like an idiot out there. If I see you hit again, I'm just leaving the stadium!

Seth: This is the World Series, game 7. This is it! If I don't go up...

Frank: *(crying)* My little boy!

The rules are trying to get you to know, care, and say. In fact, once you automatically start to do that in scenes, you can forget the rules. We often say to “avoid transaction scenes,” but once you’re experienced you can do a transaction scene, because you’re doing one in which you know the person, you care about what you’re buying, and you say what you think about it.

“FIND THE LOVE”

Being brave as I’m describing it has to do largely with acting. A good note on acting comes from longtime casting director Michael Shurtleff’s book *Audition*.

The advice is “find the love.”

Shurtleff says that no matter how dry the audition piece seems, you can find the love between the characters. Even if it’s angry, that anger comes from love. It’s on the actor to find it.

This applies to the start of improv scenes. No matter what the situation, find a reason to care about what’s going on in it.

“I COME TO AN IMPROV SHOW TO BE BLOWN AWAY.”

Besides knowing, caring, and saying, bravery in an improv scene is also a group-wide decision to make cool stuff happen.

Here’s a scene I saw when I was a student: two people were a couple in a casino about to play roulette, and they argued a bit before settling on number 27. The scene wasn’t going great, but they pressed on. No one even stepped out to be the croupier. Someone on the back line did a half-hearted sound of a ball clicking around a roulette wheel. And then the sound stopped, and someone else on the back line made this decision:

They said, “27.”

The couple won! They got really excited and started thinking of how they would spend the money. Maybe we’ll get a big dinner, they said, or upgrade our room at the hotel. Then the wife said, “Let’s bet again. Same number.” They put it all on 27.

The guy who made the sound of the clicking before did it again. Then the guy who was the croupier once again said, “27.”

The couple went more nuts. They jumped and hugged. They started talking about how they might buy a car. Or maybe take a trip to the Bahamas. They were specific and funny about their wishes. Then the husband said, “Again.” And they bet it all on 27.

Click-click-click. “27.”

The couple went absolutely apeshit. They screamed, “I love you!” to each other! They said they’re gonna go around the world! They’re going to get a bag of cocaine and do it all even though they’ve never done drugs! They’re gonna make a baby! They’re gonna bet one more time!

Click-click-click. “27.”

The couple screamed! The class loved it. Then the teacher, Ali Farahnakian, edited the scene and said, “Kudos for the decision to make them keep winning. That’s what I want. *I come to improv shows hoping to be blown away.*”

The lesson was clear. Top of your intelligence would say you can’t win that many times in a row. But a good sense of theatrics and patterns says: yes, it can happen.

You can't just jump straight to such huge outcomes. You have to earn it step by step. You can't break reality, but you should, with good comedic taste, bend it. See the section "Take the Local" under "Be Authentic."

DON'T MAKE IT ABOUT MONEY

Money is a big part of life, but a boring part of improv scenes. When you let scenes become about money, you're usually dodging the funny part and avoiding the trickier problem of engaging with an unusual philosophy. Be brave and engage.

DON'T LET THE STRAIGHT MEN WIN

There are two kinds of bad improv shows: too silly and too careful.

Too silly is the worst, certainly. These are the ones where everyone is playing very broadly, bugging their eyes out and walking in huge exaggerated strides, practically turning to the audience with every line and making a face. Every character gets ratcheted up to the most farcical version. Every spouse is cheating, every boss is mean, every employee is stealing money. No one has internal motivations, just knee-jerk worst case scenarios. It's as if the actors are trying to entertain children. These types of shows are bad for improv and comedy and America.

In these shows, empty silliness is winning, and commitment is losing.

But a real close second for "worst kind of improv show" is the show that is too careful. Usually done by students who have had a few classes and have been scolded to "play to the top of your intelligence" and to "treat your fellow players like poets and geniuses," these shows feature people talking too softly to be heard, sitting in chairs, and refusing to feel any emotions about anything at all, as they fold their arms and quibble the scenes into permanent boredom. Worst of all, no one makes any choices.

Everyone is so reasonable and careful and real and critical and hesitant that the show sucks.

In those shows, the straight men are winning, and fun is losing.

It feels like fear is keeping people in their seats. Fear of making a wrong move, fear of looking dumb, fear of breaking some rule you can barely

remember. You need to get over fear and play characters who are active, make choices, provoke action, and show reaction.

Now, sure, you want voices of reason in your show. We often need characters who notice what is strange, and who are affected and confused by the funniness of the scene.

They should never get the upper hand, though. We shouldn't spend too much time with them, and they should "lose" the scene.

YOU DO NOT HAVE TO BE PICKED UP

Here's a very important caveat to being brave: you never have to do anything on stage that makes you feel uncomfortable. This is different than being brave. Being brave is about being a brave actor: willing to do accents, be emotionally vulnerable, make the big choice, etc.

But what if someone gets too physical or intrusive? Or keeps pushing opinions onto your character that you just don't want? Do you have to "say yes" and "accept the offer" and go along with that?

Fuck no! Push back, and say no. Physical intrusiveness is rude, and no one wants it.

I'm talking about stuff that is blatantly wrong, like getting handsy, trying to kiss someone, or dirty dancing. You can say no, push back, and get some space. The teacher or coach should notice this category of rudeness.

This also includes stuff that some people are cool with. What if someone is yelling too close to your face? Or tries to physically pick you up? Some people don't mind being picked up, but lots of people do. You are allowed to set your own boundaries and push back.

You'll want to check with yourself that you're not just being scared of an acting choice. Someone asking you to be a character who simply talks about sex is probably not being intrusive. Someone who is insisting on giving you a lap dance is.

Here's how you handle it. Often a quick "no" in character is enough.

Player A: Honey, it's time for our anniversary lap dance!

Player B: Ew! No. Cut that out.

If they try to endow you with an opinion you don't want, you can just say you've changed your mind. Saying why is good form here.

Player A: No lap dance? But you always love lap dances.

Player B: I have in the past. I have enjoyed your lap dances. But now I'm realizing... I think it might be really gross and weird.

See "You Already Know The Real Why" under "Be Authentic," for more on picking truthful explanations for your behavior.

Everyone's boundaries are different. Some people might not mind a lap dance in a scene. Your boundaries may change from year to year, from team to team. You are allowed to decide. Push back confidently and easily with no guilt. You can change your mind even later in the same scene if you want.

Improv is about being a brave actor, yes. But it's never about being actually uncomfortable. You are a co-writer of every scene you're in. You're allowed to say no and push back always.

BE BRAVE EXERCISES

EXERCISE:

I, YOU, WE

A good shortcut to knowing, caring, and saying is to make the scene about the people in the scene.

A common error for newer improvisers is when two characters spend the whole scene talking about a third character who isn't there. The spouse, the boss, the crazy friend. It feels natural, but a scene can't really get started until the people in it talk to each other *about each other*.

In real life, we rarely talk to each other about each other. We're scared to do it, or it feels rude.

But for our improv scenes, we have to get comfortable speaking directly.

A good exercise to practice this is to do two-person scenes in which each person must start their lines with "I," "you," or "we." Do this until you feel the scene has found a game.

Making a scene about the characters we can see generally makes the scene more powerful.

Here's a scene between Chris Kula and Billy Merritt.

Chris enters as a customer in line at a counter, looking up over a cashier at a menu.

Billy enters to be the cashier. He adopts a stern face and stares intently at Chris.

Chris: Hmmm, I'm not sure what to get.

Billy: Look at me.

Chris: What? No, I...

I, YOU, WE continued

Billy: Don't look up there. Look at me. I will help you. Look right at me.

That subtle bit, just saying “look right at me,” was enough to get the audience laughing. Now the actors still had work to do to determine what the scene was about.

Chris: No, I just am not sure what...

Billy: You want to see *The Revenant*?

The Revenant was a real movie out at the time.

Chris: I'm not sure. I saw an ad for it and it didn't really grab me.

Billy: All we have here is *The Revenant*. I got rid of the other movies.

The game of this scene is a movie theater that has only one movie. But Billy's “look at me” gave the whole scene a menacing tone, and gave them something to unpack about a person in the scene right away.

EXERCISE: CONFESSIONS

Do two-person scenes in which each character makes a confession to the other one at some point. "I have something to admit to you." That kind of confession. Confessions are a good way to jump-start a stalled scene, because they make you say something personal, honest, and important.

They also tend to make the scene very much about the characters in it.

Here's a scene between Lisa Timmons and Raymond Lew.

Ray: I've been working so much on a PowerPoint presentation for Nathan. It's... it's just insane.

Lisa: That's why you've been too busy for everything else? *(She gestures at their chess board.)* This "Nathan," he rules you.

Ray: He's the CEO of the company! I'm taking time out of my day to meet you here in Palisades Park, all-right? I expect a little more compassion.

Lisa: All right.

Ray: Seems like you don't even want to play now.

Lisa: I'm letting you win!

Ray: I appreciate that, but... well, I would feel better if I didn't feel obligated to play chess.

The scene needs a boost. A confession from Lisa rights the ship.

Lisa: I have a confession to make. This Nathan? I hired him.
To distract you from your game.

There's a big laugh, and Ray suddenly has a lot to unpack.

Ray: No! He has a corner office! He's been on CNN, talking to
Mad Money! How can you... just... make him up?

Lisa: I am very rich.

The confession focused the scene to be about the characters we are watching.

Follow the Follow-up

After the confession, the scene continues with the characters reacting to the confession. The scene is filled with tension and the characters are trying to figure out what is going on. The scene is a great example of how a confession can be used to focus the scene on the characters we are watching.

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EXERCISE:

BLOW THEM AWAY

This is an exercise that is simple to explain, though a bit tricky to do.

Do scenes where the goal is to blow the audience away.

In the spirit of the roulette example, do a series of scenes where you are trying to blow the audience away with how far things go.

Make more interesting choices with greater commitment than you normally think you're allowed to. Feel your power. (Don't be physically intrusive.)

Sometimes it's good to have an exercise that is simply a big challenge. Rather than a strict structure, it's on you to make this happen. *Find a way to blow the audience away.* You'll have to get creative. You might want to start slowly, giving yourself room to find new possibilities.

EXERCISE: **COMPLIMENT/BOAST**

This is an exercise to boost the confidence and vulnerability of members of a group.

WARNING: This is a touchy-feely exercise. You have to get over being cool, which is the point.

I recommend this for the last session of an eight-week course, or for teams who are a bit burnt out or in their heads. It is good either at the top of a rehearsal or after a break.

DIRECTIONS

Split up into pairs. If there's an odd number, the teacher should join a pair.

PHASE ONE: Compliments

When the teacher says go, one person in the pair starts complimenting the other on their improv—what they do, the way they do it, anything.

At 45 seconds the teacher says “switch,” and now the person who had been getting complimented does the complimenting.

PHASE TWO: Boasting

This is the harder part.

Everyone switches into a new pair. When the teacher says go, one person boasts about their own strengths in improv to the other person. Say what you're good at. Boast about the version of yourself on a good day; it's okay if you don't always do the thing you're bragging about. The person who's listening should help by nodding.

The teacher should tell the class that they are being given permission to boast. Being on stage requires a bit of an ego, so boosting your own before you act is not self-indulgent but necessary. The audience, your team, and you all want the confident version of you on stage, so this boasting exercise is actually helpful to everyone. It is also good to practice bolstering your own view of yourself, as a balance against the negative voice that can get into every performer's head from time to time.

At 45 seconds, the teacher says “switch,” and the other member of the pair boasts. It's not nearly as hard as it sounds, and everyone leaves the class feeling pretty great.

This exercise is also good to force wannabe comedians to stop trying to be smarter and funnier than everyone, and to make them be emotionally vulnerable once in a while.

BACKGROUND

I learned this when I took a monologue study workshop in the fall of 2001. I had been put on a house improv team at the Upright Citizens Brigade shortly before this. It was my first time being a regular performer, and I was terrified of not being up to the task, so I started going to an acting class. It was a drop-in monologue study workshop run by a guy named Rob McCaskill, who'd taught an improv course I'd taken a few years before.

Doing "real" acting was extremely frightening. I was a computer programmer, and everyone else in this monologue drop-in class were these very emotive, actorly actors. The first day, I performed the monologue from the end of *Cool Hand Luke*, feeling silly and scared as I did it.

I liked Rob a lot. He gave generous, pragmatic advice that was easy to do and didn't make me feel terrible. It ranged from very direct things ("Try a longer pause after each period," "Pick a specific person you're addressing") to more general stuff ("Let this get simpler," "Do less"). Just the act of going to this course made me feel braver, and the actual advice also improved my performance.

Rob would often have us start the workshops with this compliment/boast exercise. It reminded me that the other actors didn't see me as someone who wasn't up to the task, but instead as someone who was being brave and going for it. We were all rooting for each other and focusing on what was working.

TOP OF THE SCENE

A crucial time for being brave as an actor is at the top of a scene. The very start of the scene can be a frantic time up in your head. You're trying to think of a way to use the suggestion or the opening. You're thinking of the notes you got at the end of your last show. You're wondering who's in the audience. You're thinking about the teammate you're feeling protective of / nervous about / irritated by.

Your attention is often divided a million different ways. That's not good for your scene. Imagine if every time you started driving you were simultaneously baking a soufflé in your car.

It's also bad to get too precious about the start of a scene. If you overly craft an initiation or spend too long on the backline, the show can lose momentum. But there are some simple best practices for the first few lines that can help avoid common communication problems.

START CHILL

Generally, start with your characters pretty chill. Yes, they're ready to react and have opinions and be affected, but underneath that, they should be relaxed and naturalistic.

Do this even if the scene begins in a confusing way. If you don't totally know what's going on, just assume that you will soon figure it out and act normal until then.

If someone starts a scene by saying, "Doctor, here's the scalpel," you should not say, "I'm nervous. This is my first day." That's a dead giveaway that you're a new improviser. You follow the "know, care, say" principle and simply start performing surgery.

It's like that 1990s show *Quantum Leap*. In every episode of that show, the main character would leap into the body of a new person. He'd be right in the middle of a situation, and he'd have to figure out from context clues what was going on. He'd never say, "Hey! I just beamed into this body! I have no idea what's going on!" He'd fake it until he figured it out.

LOOK AT EACH OTHER

Remember to look at each other.

Very often improvisers step out for the start of the scene, and they are deep in their heads crafting a line, or they are looking down at the front of the stage, with their brows furrowed, as if they're headed to a job interview—not seeing each other.

This happens to everyone. Just remember to look up.

STARTING WITH OBJECT WORK DOWNSTAGE RIGHT

An uncanny number of scenes start with someone walking out to the downstage right corner (close to the audience) and getting immersed in object work. Chopping some food, making some contraption, fussing with papers.

There's nothing wrong with a non-verbal start to a scene, as long as you make sure you look back over your shoulder for a quick check-in.

But what often happens is the person doing the object work is up in their

head, waiting and crafting the “perfect” start, and the person watching from behind feels totally exposed and is panicking in their silence (though they shouldn’t be; see the “Be Comfortable With Silence” section of “Be Present”).

Then the person doing the object work will start with a slightly hostile, “Uh, are you gonna help me with these dishes?” when all they really mean is, *psst, I’m doing dishes down here.*

And then the other person, who feels exposed and ignored will say, “I *was!* But first I have to deal with all these maps!” Because they wanted the scene to be about maps.

And then the dishes person will start fighting: “Forget your maps! You with your maps! Always with these maps!”

This is a false fight. The characters aren’t mad; the actors are panicking because they didn’t check in early enough.

If they had just looked at each other once before talking, none of that would have happened. They would have seen each other, calmed down, and started in a non-hostile way. “Sure are a lot of dishes.” That’s perhaps a bland initiation, but it’s better than a false fight.

INITIATION ETIQUETTE

Don’t interrupt or finish someone else’s initiation. This is very commonly done by eager alpha bulldogs who are new. Whoever moves first should be given focus and a generous amount of time to make their move. The person who responds also gets a lot of time before they have to answer. Avoid the very common practice of talking until you are interrupted.

If the person who steps out takes a long time to start, then you can say something. But new improvisers are panicky. To them a “long time” is half a second. Let’s say that person gets three full seconds.

THE INBOUND PASS

Keep the second line simple, especially if the initiation was complicated at all. Your first and second line should be casual, routine, and problem-free—like an inbound pass in basketball.

In basketball, you start a play by standing just out of bounds, holding the ball. One of your teammates waits on the court. You throw the ball to him; you “inbound” it. Someone from the opposing team is there, too, and they might block your throw a bit, but generally they don’t try too hard. The inbound pass is usually no big deal. The real play will happen once the ball is brought up the court a bit.

That’s how your scenes should start. Someone initiates in a simple, clear way, and someone responds. Don’t make it complicated when you toss it inbound, and don’t do anything complicated when you catch it.

When someone says, “Bill, step into my office,” you just go, “Sure, what’s up?” You don’t say, “IS THIS ABOUT HOW I FLOODED THE LOBBY?” That’s too much. That’d be like catching the inbound pass and immediately heaving it down the court.

If the first line is confusing for whatever reason, just play it casual and slow. Don’t panic.

If someone says something that’s sort of inscrutable like, “Citizen, your plate is missing,” and there’s no real way to know what’s going on, still play it nice and casual. Follow the tone of the conversation to fake it until you know what’s going on. “My plate is missing? Oh no!”

Here’s a scene from improv group Bangarang! between Ryan Stanger and Ryan Meharry. They’re inspired by an opening monologist who said that when she was bullied on playgrounds in elementary school the teachers would never get involved.

Notice how much normal conversation they have before Stanger reveals his unusual thing, and that Meharry patiently waits.

Stanger: Hey, I’m gonna lay something on ya. First of all, how are ya?
Ya good?

Meharry: Yeah, I’m pretty great.

Stanger: First day of school is always weird. I know you're teaching sixth graders now, and you were doing fifth grade last year. It's not that much of a difference, but sixth grade is its own animal.

Meharry: Yeah, man.

Stanger: So anyway, I feel like you and I connect as teachers.

Meharry: Yeah, I feel like we're both two of the more regular guys here.

Stanger: Totally! We get each other. And so my angle this year is: when people are scrapping out in the playground, and I'm on yard duty, I'm hanging back. I'm not going to involve myself.

Meharry: You're going to let kids fight?

Stanger: I'm gonna let them fight it out! And if somebody gets hurt, somebody... dies... I don't think that's gonna happen, I think they're kinda weak, you know, but if that happens I feel like that's kinda what nature wanted to do, and...

Meharry: I gotta tell you, man, I think that's a really bad idea!

Stanger: I thought you were going to be on board with me on this one!

Meharry: Why would I be on board? You might lose your job over this!

Meharry could sense that Stanger had something, and so he just said "yes" to the facts, waiting for the shoe to drop.

YIN AND YANG

Another way to think about the top of the scene is with the Taoist principles of yin and yang.

Yin is passive, patient, empathetic, malleable. It is akin to a “yes.”

Yang is active, assertive, decisive, altering. It is akin to an “and.”

After a series of small moves that simply confirm information without adding a lot, it’s time for a “yang” move: make a decision, add some information.

But once someone makes a big “yang” move, then it’s time for a simple “yin” response. Confirm and unpack what was just added. Even a beat of silence is a good idea.

A scene can handle a few “yin” moves in a row, but too many “yang” moves piled on top of each other clogs the scene.

In the previous scene, Meharry heard Stanger say, “I’m gonna lay something on ya,” which means a “yang” move is coming. Meharry knew to make simple, confirming “yin” moves until he heard Stanger drop the bomb.

DON’T BE ALLERGIC TO THE WORLD

The pressure to be funny can be enormous. If you combine this pressure with the confusion that can happen at the top of a scene, you’ll end up making the common mistake of being freaked out by the world you’re in.

Let’s say someone initiates, “Okay, to milk this cow you want to tug on this udder nice and good.” That’s meant to be a normal, simple beginning, but you’re nervous and want something to happen so you seize on some small detail like, “TUG it? You want me to TUG it? Is that really how you milk a cow?”

This happens a lot, especially by people who have been doing a lot of stand-up comedy. They want to make a mountain out of a small detail. That might be the way to go eventually, but not at the top. Just be in the world.

It’s especially tempting to be allergic to the world if someone starts a scene that is challenging acting-wise. If someone starts with an accent, or by singing or dancing, or with some very bold physical choice, you’ll want to make that the focus of the scene, at least partly so that you don’t have to

do it. “It’s so weird being in England!” or “Don’t dance here—everyone’s watching!”

Expect to make some sort of internal adjustment at the top of the scene. Might be small, might be big—but expect to do it, and know that this is no big deal. If you’re scared to be an actor and play make believe, you’ll hurt the scene.

On the other hand, don’t ignore really crazy things. If someone is very strange right at the top, which is also common, then don’t ignore it.

If someone starts a scene with, “So, you want to sign up at this gym? At this gym, we fuck the weight off you.”

It is okay and probably preferable for your character not to want to do that. Just don’t be allergic to the surrounding world—in this case, the idea that you came to a gym and wanted to sign up for a membership. That part you should accept. Don’t let your shock at that initiation make you say, “How did I even get here? I don’t even like gyms!” You should say, “Um, no thanks. I’m not comfortable with having the weight... fucked... off me.”

You don’t want to be oversensitive to weird things, but if something is big and bizarre then you should react to it and notice it.

REFERENCES

Often someone will start a scene as Darth Vader, Professor Snape, Katniss Everdeen, or Joan of Arc. What if you have no idea who the person they’re referencing is? Or worse, you have some small idea, but not enough to feel confident?

This can be scary, but it happens to everyone, a lot. Learn how to handle and enjoy it.

The first possibility is to try to fake it. It is bad form to immediately bail with, “Uh, I don’t know who you are. Remind me?” and even worse to completely undo it with the oddly common, “Honey, I know you wanted to role play, but I don’t like this game.”

Whoever introduced the references should help their scene partners. Tell them what they need to know. If you introduce yourself as Professor Snape, and you see the other person is confused, then you say, “Ah, Harry Potter.

Young wizard student! Here to learn potions from me, your teacher!"

If you've tried to fake it a bit and you still don't know, then you can ask, in character, what is going on. "I'm sorry, I actually can't remember who you are. Remind me?" Your ignorance will be fun, and it'll become part of the scene.

No one should get too detailed. No one likes improv scenes that become trivia contests.

Also, you should try to keep up with what's going on in the world.

You don't have to know everything, and there will always be something you don't know. But make an effort to stay abreast of what the big movies are and what's going on in the news. If there's a celebrity tabloid story, you will get it as a suggestion, so you might as well try to know what the audience is talking about.

Any time someone brings up something in a scene you have never heard of, go home that night, look it up, and learn about it. There are about 20 things that get brought up again and again. You will learn them.

TOP OF THE SCENE EXERCISES

EXERCISE:

PRACTICE TOUGH BEGINNINGS

Here are some tough beginnings, acting-wise, to practice. Each of these common starts to scenes has something built in that will distract you, unless you tackle it head on with confidence.

For each of these, the characters must talk about something besides what they're doing.

At the top of the scene you are:

- Playing ping pong or volleyball
- Dancing
- Talking with an accent
- Bowling
- Playing blackjack (one dealing, one playing)
- Shopping for books (name books without making the scene about those books)
- Characters from whichever movie is currently popular
- Romeo and Juliet talking (Shakespeare stuff comes up all the time in improv)
- Someone angrily accusing the other of something
- Something weird and specific and fantastical but not a direct reference to any movie, e.g., two people in a room beneath the earth's surface controlling the weather
- George Washington talking to Thomas Jefferson (or any two historical figures)
- Evil witch and good princess
- Scientist and his robot