

Communication and the Art of Improvisation

BY

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ABSTRACT

Over the last 15 years, improvisational theater has been increasingly applied in organizational contexts to improve the communicative environment of that organization. It is widely held that improv benefits the communicative environment, but the reasons for its effectiveness are illusive in the literature. This study seeks to better understand the reasons for its effectiveness in application in extra-theatrical application. It does this through analyzing significant improv texts and interviews conducted by the author with several highly experienced improvisers in Chicago, the birthplace of modern improv. Through thematic analysis, nine significant topoi were established that provide understanding for what is happening when people engage in improv. Ultimately it was found that when all the topoi are combined in practice improv serves as a communicative method designed for spontaneously solving problems as they arise.

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CHAPTER ONE

Introduction

Human communication is largely unrehearsed. There are few moments that afford the opportunity for scripting or rehearsal. We go about our lives from one situation to the next making things up as we go using past experience and knowledge to inform present behavior. In doing so we socially create roles to fill from which we can derive information as to how to act and react in any given situation (Goffman, 1959). These situations generate the guidelines by which we operate, and it is within those guidelines that we establish who we are and what we are capable of within a given context. Given this state of affairs, people will enact a multitude of strategies to achieve their ends (Mises, 1945). The reason the opportunity for scripting an encounter is so rare is simply because of our uncertainty in the future. It is incredibly difficult to completely map out an interaction ahead of time because people might react and interact a little differently than expected.

During the mid-twentieth century Kenneth Burke published his theory of dramatism (Burke, 1945), upon which Erving Goffman soon after developed his own notion of dramaturgy (Goffman, 1959). Goffman makes a strong case for the idea that everyday communicative action and practices can be understood in terms of theatrical performance. Individuals perform roles designed to give to the audience, or conversational counter-part, a sense or impression of who the performer is and his/her perspective, specifically the precise sense in which the performer wants to be viewed. This involves a multitude of strategies revolving around the notions of revealing and concealing. Dramaturgy also includes the idea that individuals are composed of innumerable and in some ways arbitrary elements and it is in these interactions with others that

individuals engage in the process of strategically revealing and concealing those elements that are appropriate for the occasion (Goffman, 1959). My purpose here is not so much to critique or compare either of their ideas, but instead, to jump off from the key notion that they share; daily human interaction is not all that different from what happens on the theatrical stage. That being the case, it is striking that the stage to which they refer is heavily scripted and meticulously designed. Burke is even quite explicit about his drawing on Shakespeare, a playwright who was nothing if not specific in his scriptwriting. In life, people write the script as they go. While it can certainly be argued that particular situations might call for particular responses, we still can rarely be certain as to whether or not a given individual will respond in a precise predictable manner. Therefore, perhaps it is time to examine a theater form that shares in the uncertainty and unpredictability of life.

Fortunately, such a theater form exists. I submit improvisational (improv) theater for this study due to its reliance on spontaneous creation in the moment of performance. Similar to everyday life, improv theater does have guidelines and expectations within its structure, but also like life, in any given performance neither the audience nor the performers can predict with precision how things will play out. It is a theater form in which the performers pick up and drop identities very rapidly. Additionally, it is a theater form which sees its practices transferred to zones outside the theater in various ways; by the performers, as I will demonstrate through interview data that I personally collected, and in the settings of businesses and organizations for the purposes of team-building and fostering environments more conducive to clear and open communication, which I will expand on in the literature review.

Improv, by its nature, is a highly communicative activity. In fact it could probably be argued that it is a purely communicative activity. It is as such because there is nothing else to

rely on, without a script, without physical props (other than a couple of chairs in most cases), and without costumes, the performers are forced to vocally and physically communicate those things deliberately to each other. This by necessity forces improvisers to become better communicators, there is simply no other choice for the people who do it.

Figuring out how to do this was no simple process. Over approximately the last 60 years techniques have been developed and guidelines created to help improvisers learn how to improvise. Birthed in Chicago, the games and methods Viola Spolin first developed working with children were adapted by her son Paul Sills and his friend David Shephard as they started the first improvisational theater, The Compass Players. This theater did not last long though, and in 1959, they opened The Second City (Seham, 2001). Since then, many more theaters have been opened in Chicago including The IO (ImprovOlympic) Theater, The Annoyance, and The Playground, among others, and these theaters have expanded the genre tremendously both in terms of performance venues and as instructional schools. These, and other, theaters have been the training ground for many of the last half-century's most famous and influential comedians, including Alan Alda, Joan Rivers, Bill Murray, John Belushi, Steve Carell, Steven Colbert, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, and many more (Seham, 2001). Since those early days improv has grown tremendously, it has even been featured on the television shows *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* and *Drew Carey's Improv-A-Ganza*. Improv theaters have expanded their footprint as well; no longer is Chicago the only city with an improv club. Thanks to the *ComedySportz* club and its expansion around the United States as well as other independent clubs and college troupes, it is safe to say that if you want to see an improv show, you probably are not very far away from one (Seham, 2001).

Improv's impact has not been limited to entertainment. Within the last 10-15 years, improv's use as a tool for applicability outside the theater has developed and grown (Crooks, 2007). It has particularly grown in the realm of corporate training and communication. These days, just about any improv comedy club will offer corporate workshops as part of what they do, and many companies, such as Ask.com, are embracing improv training and integrating it into their corporate culture (Dishman, 2012). It has grown so much, that there is even a social network specifically made for improvisers who do corporate training and according to this group, 10 out of the top 20 American business schools are currently employing faculty who teach improv to their MBA students for the purposes of improving their communication skills for the corporate environment (Jackson, 2012).

Even from this small sample of information, we can see that people are finding improv useful in non-theater settings, particularly in business or other organizational environments. The question though, is why. I've never heard of companies hiring Shakespearian actors to teach Shakespeare, or practitioners of Stanislavsky's method acting called upon for a corporate workshop, so what makes improv different, what makes it translatable to everyday life situations? Improv is unique in this way precisely because it does not rely on a script. Instead of teaching its practitioners how to interpret the words on the page, improv teachers instruct players in methods of communication and to adopt certain attitudes toward those with whom they are interacting. Another likely reason for this applicability is, in absence of a script, a player has to draw upon that which they know, creating scenes that are already similar to what they experience in their everyday lives in which they can practice, if you will, real life.

As a result of this carryover from one area to the other we should expect that the tenants of improvisation find applicability and practice out of the theater as well, and that is exactly what

we find when hearing from the improvisers. Some of these tenants include acceptance, listening, a deep sense of agreement, no judgment, the related concept of not getting caught up in the dialectic of Approval/Disapproval, and the idea of “Yes, &...”. The purpose for learning these principles is to foster the adapting of a set of communication practices that is conducive to spontaneity. Improvisers argue that this move toward spontaneity improves the communication practices of the individual who participates in improvisation and adopts these methods and attitudes. The purpose of this study is to explore these basic principles in an effort to better understand their potential and consequences for our communication practices.

Improvisation in Contemporary Scholarship

Within the field of communication and rhetoric, improvisation and specifically improv comedy has experienced little exposure. For the most part, the existing scholarship tends to circle around issues of potential application but does not investigate the subject in enough depth to reveal the underlying causes for why improv has the impact that these authors are claiming. These studies generally discuss the benefits of improvisation in various types of organizational contexts, typically in rather broad strokes while also providing a general rubric of games and exercises for improv workshops in an organizational context, and why they are useful for building creative cohesion in diverse groups of people (Crooks, 2007).

In the article “*Joint Performance Across Cultures: Improvisation in a Persian Garden,*” Mary Bateson described the usefulness of an improvisational approach to unfamiliar situations, which she relayed through a story about participating in a traditional Iranian household holiday celebration that included a few very unfamiliar practices. These practices included ritual goat slaughter. She made the argument that it served her well to just roll with the event and figure out

how to perform an appropriate role despite not having any prior experience with the situation. She does not really deal with improv theater in a significant way other than referencing the art form sparingly while being more interested in experiential education, in which improv plays a role (Bateson, 1993).

Other articles, such as “*Creativity, Improvisation, and the Actor,*” discuss improvisation in the context of traditional theater, calling for it to have a more prominent role in theater and performance departments (Murphy, 1971). This article however, offers very little in the way of understanding improv as a communicative framework adaptable to anything other than traditional theater.

The main location of improv scholarship lies in the field of business communication. As previously mentioned, over the last fifteen years or so improv has grown rapidly in business communication scholarship and education to the point that classes on improvisation in business are taught in places like the Duke and UCLA business schools. Berk and Trieber, in their article *Whose Classroom Is It, Anyway? Improvisation as a Teaching Tool*, argue that improv games should be integrated into the modern college classroom. They make the case that improvisation is highly conducive to “deep inductive learning” (we might also call this experiential learning, or learning through game play) to which what they call the “Net Generation” is most suited to respond positively. They close their article with a list of games deemed particularly well-suited to the modern college classroom (Berk and Trieber, 2009).

Susan Parker describes improv’s usefulness for solving problems. From the negotiating of contracts, to the internal affairs of the day to day operations of a business, Parker finds improv to have a wide range of application for the purposes of solving problems. She also finds it useful as a way to practice working as a team (Parker, 2003).

Pamela Meyer discusses how incorporating improv at the organizational level as an element of the company's culture can aid with adaptation to unexpected changes in operations. She argues that by having the employees of an organization gain competence in improv, they can gain improv consciousness. This consciousness keeps them present in the moment thereby giving them a heightened awareness of their surroundings and available means of accomplishing tasks. These two then lead to improvisation confidence, without which, the prior two items will not be of much use. This confidence in their improvisational abilities is what will allow people to take creative risks and deal with problems as they arise. As improvisation becomes more ingrained in the company culture and the skill increases within each individual, the capacity for the organization to respond well to unplanned challenges increases, thereby making the company more agile than it otherwise would have been (Meyer, 2011).

One specific example of organizational application was done with training airline flight attendants in improv in order to see if it improved job performance and satisfaction. The researchers found that the people who were taught improv not only had fun with the training but found it to be highly useful and applicable to their jobs by improving their confidence, ability to adapt, effectiveness, and comfort in handling unique situations. They reported much higher levels of job satisfaction and job performance than their coworkers who were not trained in improv, and they attributed this to their improv training. The participants also recommended that all flight attendants with the airline do improv training. This empirical study made the argument that the skills and principles learned through improv are highly transferable to service-sector workers (Daly, Grove, Stephen, Dorsch, and Fisk, 2009). Though this study only focused on service sector applications, it raises questions of broader applicability that this study seeks to address.

What this literature does not address is why improv is effective in all of these different contexts, we only know that it is effective. None of these articles assert that improvisational skills are detrimental in any of the situations they discuss, but none are interested in investigating how improv moves the individual to adopt attitudes and modes of operation that make for better communication in the first place, only that it improves the communication environment because during improv training the group experiences “time pressure, performance apprehension, and communication challenges” that will allow the group to “experience laughter, support, bonding and success” leads to the result in which a “powerful combination of cognitive, physical and emotional experience that has the potential to change forever the way participants view teamwork.”¹ Basically, the claim is that improv training is highly beneficial to groups and individuals in various situations and that it has the ability to instill an adaptable attitude in its practitioners. But the layer of improv applicability that has not yet been fully explored is *why* improv is transferable to these and presumably many more contexts. This study aims to begin to fill that important gap by answering these questions:

RQ1: What are the communicative dynamics of improv that underlie its effectiveness?

RQ2: How are the methods and theories of improvisation enacted in everyday life as a communication practice?

¹ Crooks, Vicki (2007). *Improvisation: A Communication Training Tool for Cohesion and Creativity*. Conference Papers -- National Communication Association, 2007, p1, 50p. pg. 32

Method

This study utilizes a multi-methodological approach that examines both standard texts in improv instruction and interviews I conducted with 11 professional improvisers. The primary texts that I will examine are *Improvisation for the Theater* by Viola Spolin (1999), *Improv: Improvisation and the Theater* by Keith Johnstone (1979), and *Truth in Comedy* by Del Close, Charna Halpern, and Kim Howard Johnson (1994), which though co-written by three, primarily reflects the teaching of Close. Together, these texts will offer a solid understanding of improv theory and practice that will serve to build an improv vocabulary and offer insight into the application of the form that will then help us better understand the interviews and their implications. These texts are necessary in large part due to the lack of prior academic work on the subject, but they are also useful because they can serve as anchor points against which the real life experiences and ideas of the improvisers that I interviewed can be gauged. Additionally, these texts are useful above other academic articles because it is these texts that are the primary source of the improv theory employed by the secondary writers.

Over a three-week period between July 18 and August 6, 2011, I traveled to Chicago, the widely acknowledged capital of improv comedy, and interviewed 11 professional improvisers. Each of these individuals has been performing and teaching improv for many years, some dating all the way back to the late 1970s. They are highly regarded within the improv community and have all agreed not only to the interviews, but to further lend their credibility in the art form by giving permission to associate their names with their interview responses in the analysis of the text. This is important for this project because given the general lack of primary source material pertaining to improv, a high degree of source credibility is needed in order to establish as much authority on the subject as possible. The 11 interviews yielded 46 single-spaced pages of

transcripts. I plan to utilize the method of thematic analysis as outlined by Owen (1984) in which I will use criteria of recurrence, repetition, and forcefulness to guide my examination of the interviews. I will proceed through both the texts and the interviews by mixing them together according to theme.

In chapter two I will examine the major topoi that emerged from the data; listening, agreement, and judgment suspension. These subjects each satisfy all three of Owen's criteria. They are also linked to each other in that they are more or less the verbs of improv. They are heavily connected to basic improv mechanics. In chapter three I will examine the topoi that occur with less frequency across the interviews and texts. The topoi in this chapter relate to each other generally in that they would not exist without the topoi from the first chapter. They are largely the results, or side effects of the actions of the previous chapter's topoi. The final chapter will conclude the study with findings and implications, limitations, and final thoughts.

CHAPTER TWO

Listening, “Yes, &...”, and the Suspension of Judgment

As a person who has been doing improv for the majority of the last eight years, I have long been aware of the interconnection of ideas within it. No one concept stands particularly tall without several others supporting it, and conversely, that idea supports the rest in like fashion. As one might expect then, as I asked questions about improv to the various people I interviewed, their answers often reflected this interconnectivity of ideas. Sometimes a given improviser locked in on one idea, but many times in discussing an idea, several other ideas worked their way into helping the improviser talk about the first idea. As a result of this, there will be times when in presenting quotes from these improvisers, secondary ideas will come up in the support of the primary idea being discussed. This chapter of analysis will deal with the major improv practices that came up repeatedly and how improvisers think about them and employ them. The second chapter of analysis will focus on some of the more unique comments. Both chapters will have a view to how the improvisers see the effects of implementing these practices in their lives and some of the potential for improv’s application outside the theater.

Several ideas came up in both the texts and the interviews that can be grouped according to their active nature that require examination. The first that will be examined is the practice of listening. I place this concept first because it is the probably the most basic and central practice in improv. While it would be easy to take such an everyday practice for granted the improvisers do not.

Building upon the practice of listening we will then come to the very interlocking concepts of acceptance, agreement, and the phrase “Yes, &...”. These ideas all have to do with

the idea that as improvisers proceed within a scene, in order to make anything happen, they have to accept and agree to the reality being created, to say “Yes” to it, “and” in turn add another piece to the scene that can further be built upon.

Proceeding forward, the final idea cluster that will be examined in this chapter is suspension of judgment. This idea demonstrates the interconnectedness of improv concepts quite well, because it is helpful to the practice of listening to suspend judgment, while at the same time the practice of listening helps the improviser to suspend judgment. This section will also include a look at the specific dialectical idea of Approval/Disapproval that Viola Spolin identifies as undergirding most instances of judgment and why people need to move away from operating according to it.

Throughout all of these clusters runs the notion of presence, or being in the moment. This should make sense because of the nature of the topic. It is rather difficult to improvise and be spontaneous when one’s mind is detached from the present interaction.

The first major element of improv that I will examine is listening. Nine out of the eleven improvisers discussed listening as being both central to their practice of improv and its applicability outside the theater. While this skill should seem obvious from a practical standpoint, the fact that a large majority of the improvisers interviewed discussed it explicitly is of note. It is clear from their responses that to listen is no simple task, but rather has some nuance and depth that demonstrates the degree of commitment these individuals have to the skill.

The authors of *Truth in Comedy*, Del Close, Charna Halpern, and Kim “Howard” Johnson (1994), certainly find the skill of listening to be important. Firstly, it is important because it allows the improviser to “let the words resonate inside his(*sic*) head for a moment, so that he can decipher the underlying meaning. An improviser must consider what is said, and

what is left unsaid...If a player takes the time to consider what the other speaker means, then his response is more intelligent than the knee-jerk response...A more carefully considered response takes a second or two longer, but the wait is well worthwhile (Close et. al 1994).”

Listening also helps the improviser avoid preconceived notions. Getting too locked in to an idea can cause trouble on the improv stage. It makes it more difficult to adjust if someone makes an unexpected move. These authors advise improvisers that one’s “grasp on such a thought must be loose, and dropped quickly if the scene takes a turn that contradicts his plans (Close et. al 1994).” Staying away from the preconceived ideas helps improvisers stay present. Both of these ideas, listening to everything, and avoiding preconceived ideas, come up prominently in the interviews.

When responding to the question of what ideas or concepts are central to his practice of improv, Dave Pasquesi² states, “The one element I think that’s most important, that I think is most important, to keep up front, is to just pay extra close attention, to listen, to pay attention...I think that informs everything else...try to pay attention, try to pay attention. That’s to me the single most important element of it (Pasquesi, 2011).” Pasquesi is not the only improviser to link the idea of listening to paying attention. TJ Jagodowski,³ Dave’s compatriot in the renowned show “TJ and Dave”, makes this link more explicitly when building on a previous comment about central ideas in improv: “(T)enants of improvisation like listening, really paying

² Dave Pasquesi has been a prominent Chicago improviser since the early 1980’s. He learned from Del Close and performed with Barron’s Barracudas through the 80’s and into the 90’s. He is now a part of what is widely considered the best improv show in Chicago, TJ and Dave.

³ Forming the other half of the TJ and Dave tandem, TJ Jagodowski has been performing in several different shows at the various Chicago comedy clubs for about 20 years, presently including Carl and the Passions, The Scene, and The Armando Diaz Experience (A show with a rotating cast of many experienced players). He can also regularly be seen in the Sonic Drive-In commercials.

attention you know of trying to stay present, of reminding yourself that the future is too big to bend to your will so you may as well just stay right now (Jagodowski, 2011).” Jagodowski builds on Pasquesi’s comment in bringing up the idea of being “present,” or as Dina Facklis⁴ puts it, being “in the moment” when she discusses listening:

When I play it's definitely listen, because there's so much. When I teach I always say there's so much stuff we're not listening to that's un-mined gold. We throw away things, we get attached to ideas, so with me, listening and being in the moment and listening to what's happening in the moment is, are the rules that I govern by, like reacting, you know because that's where you're going to find the most gold to mine for a scene...sometimes you'll have an audience (with) agents there or you'll have these people are coming to scout, or you'll have friends that you really want to impress, so you're like ‘Oh, I'm gonna try this character tonight,’ that never works out. But if I say to myself a billion times before I go on stage, ‘Listen listen listen listen,’ I'm always in a better place (Facklis, 2011).

These three improvisers demonstrate some links being formed between the ideas of listening, paying attention, and being present/in the moment. Jagodowski and Facklis mention the notion that if one is trying to get ahead of the moment then one is not listening, and therefore probably going to be less successful with the scene because of one’s inability to shape the uncertain future before dealing with the present. Facklis explores the idea of preconceived notions a little more directly as being a harmful practice for an improviser to engage in, recalling *Truth in Comedy* more directly. Listening seems to be that crucial first step toward spontaneity as these improvisors are getting at the idea that without focused attention centered on listening, the quality of the interaction is going to suffer. Facklis makes this connection overtly when she notes that whenever she tries to bring a character into the show that she planned in advance, it

⁴ Dina Facklis has been in the Chicago improv scene for over a decade. She can regularly be seen in the group Virgin Daquiri and The Armando Diaz Experience. She also teaches classes at the IO Theater.

fails, presumably because doing so implies that she is not listening and therefore not in the moment, in effect not acting spontaneously.

Clearly these improvisors think that listening is very important on stage, that it keeps them present and in the moment, but this element of improv is not exclusively tied to the stage. When asked about improv's translatability to everyday life, listening emerged as a common theme once again. Paul Grondy⁵ discussed listening with a focus on his own communication practices:

It's just to be an open person. To be an open person without unnecessary judgment. To be able to suspend your judgment, not get rid of it completely...but to suspend your judgment, to keep open, and be accepting first, you learn that your first instinct, when someone speaks to you, is to accept what their saying, not agree with it, but listen to it, and accept it, that you're gonna talk about this thing. It keeps you completely open as a communicator, and it just, it just opens you up and you know you feel like you are supported and bolstered by, by your confidence in yourself. Because you know that being an open communicator and an open listener, it works on the improv stage, it makes funny things happen and intelligent things happen and you realize as soon as you have a number of conversations where you're open and listening, those conversations go easier, you feel better having them, you feel better after them, and that's all from being open. And that goes everywhere, work, interpersonally. When you are a listener, and a confident speaker, I think that's the key to communicating (Grondy, 2011).

Grondy makes an interesting link here as well, that in order to dedicate oneself to listening, immediate judgment needs to be suspended. For Grondy, judgment suspension gives space for acceptance, which allows the patience to listen, which in turn builds his own confidence as a

⁵ Paul Grondy has been improvising in Chicago since 1990. He currently performs with Carl and the Passions and The Armando Diaz Experience. He also teaches improv at The IO Theater.

speaker.⁶ Being open and being able to take everything in before responding translates into communicative success. Bill Arnett⁷ elaborates:

Listening is something that gets thrown around as the most important thing in improv is listening, and it's more than just hearing, you have to listen and react, you have to use what you heard. Umm, it's certainly helped me a lot in life, just paying hyper attention to everything that's going on and being much more aware of what people are saying, and what they're really saying, people's attitudes, people's subtext, what are they really saying, when they're saying it, and *doing* something about it, not just hearing that this person is really angry but try to do something about it, you know? Or respond to it, or let the person know that I know that they're angry or upset or something. That's helped me a lot (to) smooth situations over, it's helped me a lot in customer service situations where, ah, you know customer service people, they have an agenda when you're talking to them, they wanna get you off the phone you know they have a definite thing you know, and your job as someone who's been wronged in some regard to get your money back or get that credit or something. So being that much more hyper-aware of what's going on in those situations helps a lot (Arnett, 2011).

For Arnett, the focus and effort that he puts into listening pays off in empathy, being able to see things from the perspective of others and adjust to their needs and expectations which helps him make the communication transaction go as smoothly as possible. For Arnett, listening is not simply about what is being spoken, but paying close attention to every detail that the correspondent offers. Andy Carey concurs, “You listen to them harder because like onstage you have to listen otherwise you might miss something. I think you listen to somebody's words harder and you listen to their intent a little bit more too so you can kinda, you're not just hearing the words but you're hearing what's behind them a little bit more (Carey, 2011).” Thus, Carey

⁶ These two ideas, judgment suspension and acceptance, are also two significant ideas in improv, and I will return to them later in this chapter.

⁷ Bill Arnett has been performing improv for about 20 years. He is currently the director of the IO Training Center. He can currently be seen on stage with the group 3033 and The Armando Diaz Experience.

further contributes to the notion that every piece of information available needs to be recognized, interpreted, and utilized to get as much out of the communication transaction as possible.

Evan Makela⁸ also discusses the skill of listening with reference not just to everyday life communication practice, but specifically in a business environment:

(T)o be successful you're being open to the people that you're on stage with. You're listening to their ideas, you're supporting their ideas, and you're building something together with them, and I think that's, I think that kind of attitude toward life is very helpful to have. Like I think, I have that attitude towards life and I think I am happier as a result. I work with plenty of people who are unhappy and stressed out about a variety of different things, and when you start looking at their attitude toward life they tend to be...I see from like a management perspective, people complain about micro-managers, you know not trusting other people, sniping at other people behind their back, these things that are kind of poison in a business culture, umm, are the type of things that would be poison on the improv stage too, so if you can, if you can learn through improv to be more open to other people, listen to them, support their ideas and build things together and not worry about having to control everything and make everything happen a certain way, then that's great, then that's the way that improv can contribute to the world. And when you hear about different improv training in corporations and stuff like that, you know hopefully that's what their trying to do, just trying to get people to be more open and accepting of each other (Makela, 2011).

In addition to how this type of listening fosters a supportive attitude that enables the practitioners to more easily build on each other's ideas in a collaborative sense, Makela makes a couple new associations with the type of active listening developed through improv with his discussion of happiness and satisfaction with life.⁹ His notion of the issue of micro-managers and their attendant problems is also interesting. In this idea he basically makes the proposition that a micro-manager, who in practice violate the guidelines of improv, creates problems in much the

⁸ Evan Makela has been improvising for about 20 years. He has taught at the IO Theater and performed most recently with the group Black's Law.

⁹ Actually testing personal happiness and satisfaction with life is beyond the scope of this project. Therefore, I will accept Mr. Makela's assertion at face value as being his valid perspective and save further problematization for possible future inquiry.

same way that engaging in those behaviors creates problems in an improv scene. He also reiterates the point made earlier by Jagodowski and Facklis about control and Grondy's point on openness.

Lyndsay Hailey¹⁰ brings many of these thoughts together nicely:

10 minds are better than 1, really listening to people...the art of listening I think is something that we could all practice and be better at, and I know I work on really listening, everyday, and improv in general is the art of staying in the present tense, so again I think all those go hand in hand. But one of my favorite things in corporate training...to impart on people is that we only listen to 10% of what is said to us, (and) that the other 90% of the time we're planning our response, so like you could start asking me a question and then I'd be in my head about how to respond to it instead of really hearing like, maybe, your intention, and if you're a real good improviser, you sit on it, you digest everything that was said to you and then you respond, thoughtfully, with a 'Yes, &...' you know (Hailey, 2011)?

Hailey brings these threads together well. The nuance of sitting on an idea, listening to it and digesting it before responding provides a good metaphor for the notion of acceptance discussed above.

Listening is clearly a priority for improvisers, both on stage and off. It requires a high level of focus - not just hearing words but seeking what is behind them, the subtext, the motivation for the words. This also includes paying attention to physical hints that offer further information as to what is going on in any given moment. Listening is about absorbing as much information as possible about a situation before acting on it. This requires patience and a willingness to build on the ideas of others. Two improvisers noted another way of thinking about listening, the idea of being interested. Bill Arnett describes this as an attitude or a desire, that in order to do anything the improviser needs to engage:

¹⁰ Lyndsay Hailey has been improvising for about a decade. She teaches at the IO Theater, performs in her 1 woman variety show, The Deltones musical improv group, and tours with the Second City touring company.

At some point when you're improvising you have to see value in other people's ideas, you have to...see value in the ideas of others. There it is twice. You've got to put your brick on top of the last guy's brick, or you're not going to get anywhere. And it's the same thing in life, we all know those sour people who do not see the value in others, who do not see that they need to in any way participate with what's going on in a larger sense, and they're generally boorish people that we don't like dealing with. Sometimes, or not sometimes, all the time the best improvisers are actually pretty interesting people. As good as they are they can't fake being interested in people, and some of the best improvisers are **genuinely interested** in the minutiae of life and they are turned on by people and are interested in people in general and want to talk to people and want to hear from people and want to be fed ideas you know, and they're on stage 'just please give me something, I would love to have something to work with (Arnett, 2011).'

For Arnett, a part of what it takes to listen is the orientation to being interested in what is going on in the moment. Looking for details and ideas upon which to build are of great importance.

Noah Gregoropoulos¹¹ gets at this from a different angle:

The idea of connectivity, I think, is something that's specific to our work, within improv, the idea that disparate things aren't really disparate, seeing pattern in chaos, seeing the consilience of different schools of thought, different ideas, it makes for a more receptive way of living in some ways in that you don't necessarily see, you know, art and science and religion and politics as antithetical types of things, that they all sort of are trying to get air in the same airless room...I think that people are for example let themselves be bored by things they don't understand rather than fascinated by them. That they are, you know the most artistic, irrational impulse is related to the most orderly, scientific take on the universe, indirectly so, and I think that ah, that is both fascinating and liberating and comforting in a weird way, that I think the people who are best at this work are open to a lot, and they're not easily bored. I've always found boredom to be a failing of the bored, and that nothing is inherently boring (Gregoropoulos, 2011).

What Gregoropoulos is intimating here is that connections are everywhere to be made, and it is up to the improviser to find those connections and do something with them. The status of

¹¹ Noah Gregoropoulos has been doing improv in Chicago since early 1980's. He currently teaches the final level of the IO Training Center, a role he took over upon the passing of Del Close in 1999. He performs with Carl and the Passions and The Armando Diaz Experience. He also does improvised plays at The Annoyance Theater with the group Almost Atlanta.

boredom is the result of not applying the energy to take interest in something or someone, which has the likely consequence of a reduction of listening, thus rendering the individual unable to make those meaningful connections that build ideas and spur action forward. Listening, and the willingness to listen, is the key that opens the individual to truly improvise and communicate according to the methods of improvisation.

Now that the concept of listening has been established, we can turn to an idea brought up within a couple of the improvisers' responses, and that is the principle of acceptance, agreement, and "Yes, &...". I place these three together because as I will demonstrate, their use is highly interconnected to the point of practical interchangeability.

Johnstone's theory of acceptance and blocking argues that we are taught from a young age to block, rather than accept. Johnstone is adamantly against blocking, saying that it is "a form of aggression (1979)." He continues a little later writing:

The motto of scared improvisers is 'when in doubt, say "NO".' We use this in life as a way of blocking action. Then we go to the theater, and at all points where we would say 'No' in life we want to see the actors yield, and say 'Yes'. Then the action we would suppress if it happened in life begins to develop on the stage...Bad improvisers block action...Good improvisers develop action (1979).

Similarly in *Truth in Comedy*, the first and only unbreakable rule in improv is agreement. The principle of "Yes...&." Conflict is, in improv, an arbitrary convention that need not be respected. Early on, the shapers of improvisation discovered very quickly that arguing on stage accomplished very little aside from delaying action. Close writes, "It's too easy to find ways to disagree. It strikes me that a more interesting thing for the art form - and for the planet - is to look for ways to agree rather than disagree (Close et. al 1994)." Therefore, Close tells us, "The 'Yes, &...' rule simply means that whenever two actors are on stage, they agree with each other to the Nth degree. If one asks the other a question, the other must respond positively, and then

provide additional information, no matter how small: ‘Yes, you’re right, and I also think we should...’ Answering ‘No’ leads to nowhere in a scene (Close et. al 1994).”

This is a point that resonates very strongly with improvisors. Paul Grondy introduces this idea rather simply, “Obviously to say, ‘Yes’, to people’s ideas, to accept them. Not to say yes to agree with what they are talking about, but to accept that we will talk about it (Grondy, 2011).” In this opening remark about “Yes, &...” Grondy describes saying yes as being something that goes a little deeper than simply building on the other person’s ideas. His idea is that saying yes is an opening requirement for any action at all, that it is an acknowledgement and acceptance of the underlying premise and motive for the moment at hand as much as it is about any simple addition to a proposed idea. Andy Carey¹² elaborates on this concept of agreement as being:

[S]uch an all-encompassing thing that it just has to go with everything, like you just have to immediately accept the world that you’re in, so I think it’s less of ‘you said something and I agree with it and I add to it,’ it’s more like, *Anything you do has to be honored because it’s there and it’s real ...* you have to agree with it so whole-heartedly and you can’t ever apologize for what your doing, or feel embarrassed about it, or say, or sort of wink at the audience and say, ‘I know what I’m doing is goofy,’ you have to embrace that so hard (Carey, 2011).

Carey clearly has taken Close’s suggestion of agreeing to the “Nth degree” to heart. It is central to his practice and performance of improv. Carey sees a connection between “Yes, &...” and agreement, one that is fairly profound. Building on Grondy, Carey describes this concept in all-encompassing terms. “Yes, &...” is an absolute commitment to the reality created on the stage and the particulars of the form being performed.

Jagodowski takes this commitment to agreement just as seriously:

I try to keep in mind that what we’re saying is happening is actually

¹² Andy Carey has been improvising for more than a decade. He teaches at the IO Theater. He performs with the Improvised Shakespeare Company. He also performs with Chrysalis Clark, The Big Yellow Bus, Homey Loves Chachi, and The Beatbox.

happening and that it's not so much that we're doing a show, but that we are actually portraying what it is that we say we are doing. We are, you know, bakers and best friends trying to get a new business off the ground, trying to be responsible to that (Jagodowski, 2011).

He embraces the invented reality so hard that for him the reality created on stage might as well be real life. This is a rather incredible statement. Jagadowski's commitment to agreement is so strong that he wants his scenes to be as real and believable as life outside the theater, and that he can create that on stage is a testament to the potential that can be found in improv for extra-theatrical application.

Lyndsay Hailey adds nuance to the fullness of saying yes when describing how she teaches "Yes, &..." to her students:

'For me specifically and what I really try to impart on my classes is first of all "Yes, &..." and the philosophy of "Yes, &..." is super important to improv so you have to teach what that means, but a lot of times that means yes to the intention of your scene partner or your group. So I try to teach, like, saying yes to exactly what you're stage partner or ensemble is asking for in that moment (Hailey, 2011).

In this passage, Hailey reaffirms the commitment to the depth of the meaning in "Yes, &..." that both Carey and Grondy discussed. She adds the nuance of saying yes to intentions, which ties back to the previous discussion of listening and paying attention; not just hearing the words but finding their deeper meanings and recognizing many of the smaller things that one's scene partners are doing.

Thinking about intentions, Grondy introduces a unique nuance to agreement that can add to our understanding:

The thing that I'm trying to remember and have for a while is the idea of joining. Joining my energies, joining my choices, as far as what I'm going to be making up that night. Joining the idea, my idea with the other person on stage with me. So as opposed to initiating a comedy contrast, contrast is funny in comedy, and conflict can be funny in arguments and stuff like that, I, more and more as I've been doing it longer and longer

realize that to have two people enjoying, hating, or jealous of the same exact thing gets to a more energetic humor, that is more positive and open, then that's the kind of humor that I like to see. So that's the kind of humor that I like to do in improvisation. So I think aside from accepting your scene partners at all costs, joining their energy (Grondy, 2011).

Grondy here discloses that improv for him goes best when he fully joins the attitude of the scene, not just saying yes to a proposal, or accepting that that proposal is what will be played with, but fully embracing the scene partner's attitude toward that thing and amplifying it, allowing it to grow and build energy. I would agree with his pseudo caveats though that in improv it is not necessarily necessary to take the perspective and attitude of a scene partner every time, contrasting a perspective or attitude can work as well. This is useful to consider as a communication practice; the idea that at times it can be an excellent choice to join the perspective of another, at the very least in order to gain further insight into the issue at hand that one might not take without the other there to join. It creates an opportunity to practice greater empathy.

Dina Facklis also discusses agreement:

[I]mprov's all about, like in life you make bold moves, but you need a support network, you hope for a support network and if it's gonna go through like the way you want it to, you have to have people saying 'yes, &...' to it. And to be able to make a big move like that and not have people be lazy about it on stage or. That's the best, it's the biggest 'Yes you can' like when people say yes to you, even if it's just agreeing, like I tell my students, 'Just by agreeing what room you're on, you're already on the right path to 'Yes', and that's gonna make this a better scene, because you're gonna immediately trust each other. Or doing mirroring exercises, you taking what the other person is doing as a valid thing, so it's just like when you have a big group, like, a couple weeks ago we all went out, like the Thursday night before I was like, 'Let's all go out tomorrow night,' I thought like 5 people would show up, like 25 people showed up and it made me feel amazing, because you're like, we just decided to have this spontaneous night, and now all these people are a part of it, it just makes you feel more valid and it, it just heightens your confidence to achieve more, whether it be in a show setting or a life setting (Facklis, 2011).

For Facklis, saying yes and finding agreement leads directly to spontaneity. She also notes that following the “Yes, &...” principle results in increased trust between improvisers. This is likely due to the fact that when you know your comrades will accept your idea no matter what and do something with it, just as you do with theirs, group confidence builds, and as confidence in each other builds, trust builds along with it.

Noah Gregoropoulos also notes that through saying yes improv allows people to experience:

The idea of connectivity, I think, is something that's specific to our work, within improv, the idea that disparate things aren't really disparate, seeing pattern in chaos, seeing the consilience of different schools of thought, different ideas, it makes for a more receptive way of living in some ways in that you don't necessarily see, you know, art and science and religion and politics as antithetical types of things, that they all sort of are trying to get air in the same airless room (Gregoropoulos, 2011).

“Yes, &...” is about moving forward, about making connections and supporting the ideas of others. Of particular note in this last quote is the idea of being able to see “pattern in chaos.” This is a unique comment within the interviews and the books. What Gregoropolous is getting at here is that when people abide by “Yes, &...” they open themselves up to the possibilities of making fresh and interesting connections between things that might otherwise have been considered too far apart to be related. In the spontaneous moment, order is actually created and maintained through this connection, or seeing of patterns, between previously disparate ideas. It opens people up to possibilities that they may have otherwise been more inclined to dismiss out of hand. It forces the player to remain in the moment and as such requires the player to listen so that these connections can be made.

For Close, when improvising it is of great importance to stay in the moment. It is not good to start thinking ahead, because if that happens then the performer will no longer be

present. “For example, two actors are on stage talking about ordering a pizza, when a third player decides to enter the scene as a pizza delivery man. If one of the actors greets him with, ‘I see the new manhole covers have arrived,’ then his pizzas have *immediately* turned into manhole covers. He must be light enough on his feet to spring from moment to moment, according to the needs of the scene (Close et. al 1994).” If one is incapable of making this quick change of ideas, that person is likely to block or stifle a scene, which we learned from Johnstone is a major crime in improv.

Due to this practice of “Yes, &...”, the practice of agreement and the willingness to explore new ideas or possibilities, experienced improvisers develop a strong sensitivity to people who are blockers.¹³ Lyndsay Hailey describes this sensitivity to blocking that has an effect to a certain extent on the amount of time and energy she invests in certain people:

(Improv)'s actually provided me with a filter I suppose, of like, the types of people, I'll call them toxic people, but anyone who says no or stifles your creativity you know or for me anyone who doesn't empower me as a woman, you know, specific to dating men...like not letting their negativity affect you as much and taking everything with a grain of salt. Whereas I think before I found improv, things really bothered me more, I let other people stress and affect me more and now I can even say yes to like, ‘Oh well that's how they are and that's their perception, let me just keep doing what I do and get real cozy and comfortable with myself,’ you know I mean that, how could that philosophy be wrong, how could the philosophy of saying yes and empowering people and not judging be wrong? ... So I can say 'thank you' you know but you're only allowed this close to me and you're allowed to be my best friend 'cause you're nothing but good, you know (Hailey, 2011).

The practice of improv has clearly had a pretty profound effect on Hailey’s view of relationships and how she deals with people in practice. She seeks out people who are supportive, who say

¹³ In their discussion of blocking, the examples the various improvisers chose to describe their experience with it were largely out of everyday life situations. My hunch is, and I think this can be inferred from the interviews, is that because experienced improvisers encounter it so rarely in the theater their only point of reference for it is in examples from outside the theater.

“Yes, &...” and limits exposure to those that stifle. Elaborating on this idea she describes a specific instance where she felt creatively blocked which led to the end of a romantic relationship:

I have had a lot of relationships that essentially end...because the men have said 'no' to me in some regard. ... I had a boyfriend (who wanted to go to a) Halloween party, I wasn't feeling particularly well, but...I really want(ed) to go anyway, so he was like, 'Ok I'll pick you up in 10 minutes,' and I just had to slap a costume together...I knew he and his guy friends were going as the gold-medal swim team 'cause it was the year that we did so well in the Olympics...I was like, "Well, I've got these khaki pants and some Spanish moss, and a hot glue gun, I'm gonna be Team USA's back hair...I'll just wear a sign, and make a little costume.' So I answered the door thinking it's the funniest thing I could have ever come up with in 10 minutes, and he's truly mortified by it...that's a silly example but, because of this I've really found and surrounded myself with the most beautiful people in the world who constantly say yes and fuel creativity versus stifling that. So... yeah it definitely creeps into every aspect of my life (Hailey, 2011).

We should note that she does not mean to imply that she is a brat who is unable to handle someone saying no to her, but rather her sensitivity is to when someone rejects some aspect of who she is, or her creative expression of herself. As a result of her improv training she is keener on affirmation and denial.

Evan Makela notices another type of blocking frequently at his job:

[W]e need to do things to help the business grow, I mean develop new projects, products, have projects, and so frequently I see when people start bringing up ideas, the first reaction of a lot of people is to say why you can't do something, which is fine, that's like part of life, I mean if you're going to successfully launch a product you gotta understand the risks like that, but it's very difficult, there's a lot of people whose approach to life is not to be supportive but to be sort of like, to prove that their smarter by telling you why you can't do something. Like I can think of, you had this great idea, but I'm smart and I know why it won't work (Makela, 2011).

For both Makela and Hailey, blocking is not taking a supportive approach to new ideas. While Makela certainly demonstrates that he understands that not all new ideas are actionable, he is

averse to those who seem to just put down ideas in a casual, off-hand manner, or in an effort to try to make themselves artificially look good by playing some kind of political game. Both find value in at least playing with an idea and giving it some room to breathe, even if it might be a bit off the wall, before making a final decision about it.

Jagodowski is averse to the casual rejection of ideas as well:

I was at, I forget what friend's house it was, but I was there for like dinner, or an overnight you know it was like the type of thing where it was like 'Hey, come up to the cabin,' or whatever, and I realized just how often they were first willing to say 'No', before they even thought about why whatever it was couldn't work, you know like, 'Well you know we could go fishing in the morning.' 'Nah,' you know like 'Why?' You know and I was real sensitive to that, you know, and I think it's from being around people who are trained or who are kind and open enough to first try to figure out why this is a great idea, why this can absolutely work, than first and foremost why this is not going to happen, this is not going to work. And so that word rings in my head, especially an uninformed no, just that off the cuff no, it really leaves a weird feel in my head because I guess I just don't realize I don't hear that all that much anymore, people are like 'ah maybe' you know at the worst it's like, 'Maybe, we'll see,' you know? Improvisors look for ways to make things work first (Jagodowski, 2011).

Saying 'yes' and having an aversion to blocking are elements of improv that have a strong impact on the approach improvisors take to communication. They become much more interested in hearing ideas out and offering support than they are in judging and stifling, especially if those judgments are premature. And this should come as no surprise since a major tenant of improvisation is to not judge, or to reserve judgment at the very least.

Reserving judgment has been a significant element of improv from its beginning. Viola Spolin's goal was to unlock the potential for creative and intuitive spontaneity, and in so doing she identified a major roadblock to achieving this end: the dialectic of Approval/Disapproval. Spolin identifies this dialectic as being the primary inhibitor of freedom and spontaneity writing:

Our simplest move out into the environment is interrupted by our need for favorable comment or interpretation by established authority. We either

fear that we will not get approval, or we accept outside comment and interpretation unquestionably. In a culture where approval/disapproval has become the predominant regulator of effort and position, and often the substitute for love, our personal freedoms are dissipated. Abandoned to the whims of others, we must wander daily through the wish to be loved and the fear of rejection before we can be productive. Categorized ‘good’ or ‘bad’ from birth (a good baby does not cry too much) we become so enmeshed with the tenuous threads of approval/disapproval that we are creatively paralyzed. We see with others’ eyes and smell with others’ noses (Spolin, 1999).

Remaining entrenched in this dialectic is very counterproductive to success in improvisation. It maintains an attitude of judgment rather than openness. Lyndsay Hailey discusses it as a skill in constant need of attention:

No judgment is a huge thing that I really try to work on, and also for me getting out of your head, umm, and I think those go hand in hand, like, I really want my classes to embrace this idea of like, ‘Who cares, go out there and have fun, this is the 3 hours of your week where people won't say no to you and they won't judge you and they're paying to actually say yes, so enjoy that and revel in it, because there's so much hard stuff out in the world. Come in here and really have a ball, do everything you would never do out there, so see what it's like and try on your alter-egos and your different personalities.’ So, my main thing, no judgment of others, no judgment of yourself, say yes, and have fun (Hailey, 2011).

Hailey links the idea of being in one’s head to judgment, insinuating that if the improviser is being in his/her head then that improviser is thinking too much, probably judging his/her own ideas too much and is therefore stifling him/herself. Stopping the judgment allows the improviser to respond more intuitively and thus get more out of the scene.

This goes for the director as well as the student as Hailey intimates, which brings us back to Spolin, who writes, “Judging on the part of the teacher-director limits our own experiencing as well as students’, for in judging, we keep ourselves from a fresh moment of experience and rarely go beyond what we already know (Spolin, 1999).”

Paul Grundy offers his take on judgment as well,

It's just to be an open person. To be an open person without unnecessary judgment. To be able to suspend your judgment, not get rid of it completely, not be an idiot, a village idiot, but to suspend your judgment, to keep open, and be accepting first, you learn that your first instinct, when someone speaks to you, is to accept what their saying, not agree with it, but listen to it, and accept it, that you're gonna talk about this thing. It keeps you completely open as a communicator, and it just, it just opens you up and you know you feel like you are supported and bolstered by, by your confidence in yourself (Grondy, 2011).

Grondy is careful here to add that improv is not teaching the complete abandonment of all judgment, but rather to reserve it and act on other tenants of improv first, and probably for as long as possible before rendering any type of judgment.

We can see through these clusters both the inter-relatedness of the action oriented concepts of listening, agreement, and judgment suspension and that the improvisers implement the teachings of the texts, sometimes in direct ways and at times more creatively. They certainly expand on - while maintaining continuity between the theory in the books with their practical experience - what the texts offer and grow the general understanding of what improv is and does communicatively.

CHAPTER THREE

Truth and Honesty, Problem Solving, Learning Methods, Personal Growth, and Potential Applicability

This chapter primarily deals with those ideas that were less universal within the corpus of interview material and that can be seen as more or less resultant from applying the action concepts of the previous chapter. I will start with ideas that a few shared, and then move on to those that are more and more individually unique. Some of these concepts will add nuance to some of the larger ideas, others will be more unique to that individual. I will move through them with a logic that demonstrates some of the ways in which they might be connected with other ideas that are more broadly shared. This chapter will close with some of their broader commentary on what improv does and some of its potential for application as a communicative tool.

I will start this chapter with an element of improv that is both a practice, and has an effect on how improvisers communicate more generally, that element is honesty, or telling the truth. After that we will examine the issue of improv being helpful for overcoming fear and gaining confidence in the individual's communicative prowess and perspective. Moving on we will come to spontaneous problem solving. From there we will look at how improv asks the participant to learn in a way that is very different from how people are generally taught to learn in most normal school contexts. Connecting from the assertion that many traditional schooling situations can work against the growth of the whole person we will look at the assertion that improv awakens and grows the "total person". I will end with a remarkable anecdote on the potential of improv, when all of these elements in both the previous and present chapters are realized has the potential to effect an incredible difference in the lives of people who had no

interest in performance but rather used it specifically to open up communication and overcome massive political strife.

We can easily see the importance of honesty with one look at the cover the book, *Truth in Comedy*. Del Close and Charna Halpern considered this concept to be of central importance. They open their book with this idea, “The truth is funny (Close et. al 1994).” They then go on to elaborate, writing, “Honest discovery, observation, and reaction is better than contrived invention. After all, we’re funniest when we’re just being ourselves...(W)hen we’re simply opening ourselves up to each other and being honest, we’re usually funniest...The freshest, most interesting comedy is not based on mother-in-law jokes or Jack Nicholson impressions, but on exposing our own personalities...Real humor does not come from sacrificing the reality of a moment in order to crack a cheap joke, but in finding the joke in the reality of the moment. Simply put, in comedy, honesty is the best policy (Close et. al 1994).”

Four of the improvisers I interviewed discussed this idea. Craig Uhlir¹⁴ expanded on what is written in *Truth in Comedy* when he discussed honesty:

All we're doing in improv is trying to pretend the things that are outside of improv. So, we're always trying to produce things that are relatable to the people watching us. So when we go to the things outside of the stage, we still need to bring them back on the stage. So, yeah, we're always making it personal, the best improv is personal. And the best improv I do, my most fulfilling improv I do is when I'm able to fold my real life situations into the context of a scene I'm in. So no matter what, if it's a beach scene, bringing something from my actual experiences on a beach into the scene with me, like chairs that are really low so my butt's touching the sand, bring that into the scene 'cause I know what I'm talking about. Instead of trying to create stuff I don't know what I'm talking about, and that's where I get, you know we all get hung up. How much can I pretend until I don't understand my own pretending anymore? Basically, how many lies can

¹⁴ Craig Uhlir has been improvising in Chicago for nearly 20 years. He currently teaches in the IO Training Center. He currently performs in Middle Aged Comeback, Deep Schwa, and The Armando Diaz Experience.

you tell before you forget the original lie that started it all, right (Uhlir, 2011)?

Uhlir, clearly echoing Close, agrees that playing honestly, which we might understand as not trying to contrive ideas out of nothing but rather bring what is known from personal experience into the scene, is the way to best do improv. When one is practicing the concepts from the previous chapter it actually becomes very difficult for the improviser to be anything other than honest. The time does not exist in the course of a scene to constantly contrive so the only thing the player is left with is something more genuinely of themselves.

As a result of learning this lesson through practice in improv, we can see that improvisers tend to apply it elsewhere. Paul Grondy explicitly discussed his own effort to lead an honest life as a result of his improv training, both in terms of his own practice, and in how he raises his son.

My personal stance is one of honesty and truth. I'm not gonna be Atticus Finch and always do the right moral thing, but I will always try to be as honest as possible, and that's a framework from which I come at all situations. I'll save someone's feelings, and I'll not be honest in those hopefully helpful and harmless ways, but in every other way, my framework comes from being truthful and honest, be truthful and be honest, and that's actually something I've tried to foster in my 3 1/2 year old son, which we always tell him, tell the truth and we'll never get mad, and whenever he tells the truth we always praise him for it, even though it's the truth about him doing something wrong, we always tell him he was so right on the money to tell the truth (Grondy, 2011).

This is particularly interesting for Grondy, because he relates his current desire for being honest to his past fear of honesty. Through the following story he relates how improv now gives him the courage to not be afraid of telling the truth as he sees it:

I'm not a very big guy on confrontation, and to the point, in these small arguments that I would get into, even up into my late teens up into my early twenties, I would tear up at conflict and argument, or something like that. I would rarely get myself in them and when I would I would start to cry. It would get me so worked up, but as soon as I started to learn how to

improvise and just kinda realized that whatever was on the top of your head, go ahead and say it, and you can have trust that your point of view is going to be a perfectly fine point of view, then I was able to voice that point of view without any fear...So when the fear goes away with a verbal conflict...I have confidence and I have trust and I no longer have fear in my point of view. So when that started happening, I would sometimes lie at work out of nervousness and embarrassment, lying went away. You know even like getting in trouble in work, you know what I mean. A great example of, I used to be a manager of a Blockbuster video, I was smoking in the back room out the back door. And the district manager came in and he smelled the smoke, he was like, 'Were you smoking in here?' I was, 'No, no I wasn't,' out of absolute fear and embarrassment that I was, but, literally after improv classes I'd be like, 'Yeah, absolutely, sorry man, I smoked, I'll try not to do it again,' you know, with absolute confidence and no fear of any sort of, of any negativity, and so improv strengthened my point of view, gave me courage to express my point of view (Grondy, 2011).

Improv helped Grondy overcome fears of being honest, but this experience is not unique to just him. Evan Makela discusses honesty in the context of his work environment where he does not see it all that often; he insinuates that improv training for his co-workers could be helpful in creating a more honest environment,

Honesty I think is another difficult thing for people to do in their life is to react honestly to something, and in improv...it's about reacting honestly because if you react to something honestly you should keep things pretty close, and what I find in the business world people don't react honestly, they think they're playing a political game and they go back and they talk to other people about how they really feel about something, and it's sort of like, 'Why are we wasting all this time and energy?' Like, going through all these back channels, talking so we can get, can tell each other what we're really thinking without having to sit there and look someone in the eye and tell them what you really think. And it doesn't, it wastes a lot of time. A lack of honesty, like honest reaction, getting things out there, so I think that's very important (Makela, 2011).

Makela likes to boil his teaching of improv down to four key words, one of which is honest. The other three are simple, focused, and supportive.¹⁵ When he talks about “reacting honestly because if you react to something honestly you should keep things pretty close,” he is specifically referencing simple and focused. Honesty allows those in the communicative setting to more easily remain focused on the issue at hand, and in doing so helps keep the issue relatively simple. Making dishonest moves muddies the focus and makes things more complicated than need be. Noah Gregoropoulos summarizes the issue rather succinctly saying, “I prefer people just say something, and take their lumps (Gregoropoulos, 2011).”

But as Paul Grundy suggested earlier, fear can induce people to be less than honest. Most people prefer not to take their lumps. As a result, the issue of overcoming fear and developing confidence become a part of what happens through doing improv.¹⁶ Dave Pasquesi sees dealing with fear as an essential part of what it is to do improv. For Pasquesi, it is good to be a little afraid, because that gives the performer somewhere to go, he says,

(T)here's another phrase that is bandied about, 'follow the fear,' and that's what I've been thinking about lately...It's a weird balance between being comfortable, and confident, and being afraid, because I think that's part of the job, is to be uncomfortable, but you have to be in a comfortable enough position to risk being uncomfortable, so it's this really weird, to me anyway, it's a strange walk, to be both (comfortable and

¹⁵ Makela lays these four elements out as follows, “I kind of came up with these four words that I like to tell people which are simple, focused, honest, supportive. And I think whenever I try to think philosophically about improv I think if you are focused on those 4 concepts you will tend to do good improv. So, it's when I've taught and coached I've tried to get people to relax, calm down, just keep it simple, you don't need to make anything complicated, you don't need to come up with something in your head, just keep it simple, keep it focused on what's at hand, keep it honest 'cause a lot of times people try to throw in like the crazy wacky stuff. I find when I talk to people about honesty, like having honest reactions, they tend to keep away from those crazy things. And supportive, just always support other people's ideas.”

¹⁶ Fear is not an issue that is dealt with directly by any of the three books, though we could certainly understand that fear plays into the issue of judgment and the motivation for approval and not disapproval.

uncomfortable), to go into what is, makes one...uncomfortable and yet be confident enough that it's going to be fine even though one is uncomfortable (Pasquesi, 2011).

Pasquesi makes two important points in this excerpt; first that one needs to have some confidence in order to “follow the fear,” and second the trust that things will work out well even though it may be difficult to see how that could be possible in the moment. Charna Halpern¹⁷ expresses both of these sentiments as being traits that improv imbues upon its practitioners as well:

Well I think we've all realized that life is like a Harold, which is what our basic, signature piece is, and that there's no such thing as coincidences, things connect. So we're just a lot braver in life for one thing. Uh, we look for those connections in life, and um, we follow them we take them, so I think that, yeah I think we follow a bit of a different path than the normal person...We're a lot bolder...we're a lot more willing to try things because less fear...so I think you could do anything, so we're the first to say ‘yes’ to anything because we know it'll be fun. We know we'll follow the moment, we know it will lead us to the next thing (Halpern, 2011).

Recalling the theme of “Yes, &...”, Halpern gives insight into how improv lessens fear for people, by giving them confidence in the moment, and trust that connections will be made that will lead to the next thing. As a result of this confidence and trust, improvisers will feel they have more freedom to make the moves that are more honest, which, getting back to Makela’s point, allows things to move swiftly rather than getting bogged down in misdirection.

One of the areas in which improv helps in getting to the point of things is in problem solving. According to Spolin, one of the central features to playing improv games is learning how to problem solve:

¹⁷ Charna Halpern is the founder and Director of the IO Theater. She co-wrote *Truth in Comedy* and then later wrote a follow-up titled *Art by Committee*. She no longer performs regularly but occasionally teaches workshops.

Any game worth playing is highly social and has a problem that needs solving within it – an objective point in which each individual must become involved, whether it be to reach a goal or flip a chip into a glass. There must be group agreement on the rules of the game and group interaction moving towards the objective if the game is to be played. Players grow agile and alert, ready and eager for any unusual play as they respond to the many random happenings simultaneously. The personal capacity to involve one's self in the problem of the game and the effort put forth to handle the multiple stimuli the game provokes determine the extent of this growth (Spolin, 1999).

Recalling agreement as being necessary for game play, Spolin describes playing games as being essential to learning how to problem solve, because the very act of playing the game teaches the player problem solving skills:

Growth will occur without difficulty in students because the very games they play will aid them. The objective upon which the player must constantly focus and towards which every action must be directed provokes spontaneity (Spolin, 1999).

Spontaneity is the ultimate goal for Spolin, because it is when the players are spontaneous that truly creative solutions to problems will be discovered:

In this spontaneity, personal freedom is released, and the total person, physically, intellectually, and intuitively, is awakened. This causes enough excitement for the student to transcend himself or herself – he or she is freed to go out into the environment, to explore, adventure, and face all dangers unafraid (Spolin, 1999).

Andy Carey echoes Spolin's recognition of the problem solving skills that improv teaches and its application to other areas of life:

I think in problem solving it also helps, like 'Well, we can get this done, something will happen,' like you know if your car broke down we'll figure out a way to get out of it. We don't give in to despair. I say this because I have a family now, I have a child, and I'm married, so it's like a weekly crisis of some sort that you gotta figure out. My wife is an improviser too, so that helps (Carey, 2011).

Basically, Carey has found that he is better able to cope with challenges as a result of his time spent doing improv. He is able to maintain a more optimistic attitude and effectively deal with the challenges of parenthood.

Because the practice of improv is a process of learning through experiencing it, it has been observed that improv asks the improviser to learn in an entirely different way than how most people are taught to learn growing up. Craig Uhler discusses this with some detail, beginning with the observation, “I think the other hard thing about improv, hard thing as a human, is when you're learning it, it's so counter-intuitive to everything we do when we're learning.” To which I replied, “You mean like when we're growing up?” He then expanded his explanation:

Yeah, well, how we've been taught to learn. I learn the information, I study it, remember the information, take a test, reiterate the exact information again, I get judged on if I can remember things correctly. What we're doing here has no, ‘This is what you do every time this happens,’ there is no context like that, so as humans it's just daunting to have to learn from a place of, ‘I'm probably going to screw up to learn,’ as opposed to ‘I wanna nail it in front of these people.’ I don't want to look foolish and stupid in front of a room full of people, yet at the same time, I'm going to look foolish and stupid in front of a room full of people. So it's just that double-edged sword, it just goes against I think everything in our genetics, it just goes against the way we think. If something hurts, stop doing it. If you're bad at something, stop. In this you have to keep going, if I was bad as a race car driver I would not continue trying to be a race car driver to a certain degree, right? In improv it doesn't work that way. **And** you're never done, ask Noah Gregoropolous, ask Del (Close), like they're, we're never done! Well, you can't ask Del, but you're never done. I'm never done, just what am I focused on, what's the wild hare up my butt this week? That's my opinion right now! That's all it's going to come down to (Uhler, 2011).

Uhler is describing the process of learning through experience, rather than the more systematic methods we encounter in our youth. Spolin and Johnstone both concur with Uhler's understanding of the learning process in improv. Spolin would argue that that is exactly the

point. That finding those moments of spontaneity through improvisation “creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people’s findings (Spolin, 1999).” This is a challenge as there is risk in spontaneity, that is at least part of the reason why the environment in which improv training occurs needs to be so supportive, honest, and judgment free. Johnstone would echo that sentiment and broaden it to all educational settings. It is an ongoing theme throughout most of his book that people are often educated in ways that do violence to their individuality, creativity, and passion. Though he does not often write with much brevity on this issue, he does in one paragraph get at what he argues is a problem that can potentially be solved at least in part through what he does through his improv teaching which he first developed in teaching grade schoolers. “People think of good and bad teachers as engaged in the same activity, as if education was a *substance*, and that bad teachers supply a little of the substance, and good teachers supply a lot. This makes it difficult to understand that education can be a destructive process, and that bad teachers are wrecking talent, and that good and bad teachers are engaged in opposite activities (Johnstone, 1979).” For Johnstone, part of what improv does is it unwinds elements of people’s education that were destructive to their earlier development. He has several exercises specifically designed to reawaken senses that have been dulled over time.¹⁸ Without this process of unwinding people would never be able to let go of old frames of reference and other baggage that might serve to inhibit spontaneous action.

¹⁸ For instance, one of these exercises is designed to help people reawaken their sense of sight. He has his students run around a room for about a minute, and for every object they see in the room they are to yell at the top of their lungs a different word for it. So if one were to see a lamp, that person would yell “Blowfish” and this would continue for the minute. Upon ending the exercise the students will find that their vision is sharper, lines are more clearly defined, and colors are brighter.

Embedded in Spolin's discussion of problem solving through games is the issue of spontaneity awakening the total person. She writes that when people are being spontaneous:

Every part of the person functions together as a working unit, one small organic whole within the larger organic whole of the agreed environment which is the game structure. Out of the integrated experience, then, a total self in a total environment, comes a support and thus trust which allows the individual to open up and develop any skills that may be needed for the communication within the game. Furthermore, the acceptance of all the imposed limitations creates the playing, out of which the game appears, or as in theater, the scene. With no outside authority imposing itself upon the players, telling them what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, each player freely chooses self-discipline by accepting the *rules of the game* ('it's more fun that way') and enters into the group decisions with enthusiasm and trust. With no one to please or appease, the player can then focus full energy directly on the problem and learn what he or she has come to learn (Spolin, 1999).

Spontaneous communication, unlocked through all the levels of agreement previously discussed, in an absence of judgment from an outside authority, creates a space in which human growth and learning takes place. The absence of authority creates the space for the players to develop trust in each other and themselves. Several improvisers interviewed discussed this aspect of improv, which is of ultimate importance for making the argument that improv provides a useful method for improving communication practice for people in settings that are outside the theater or practice space.

TJ Jagodowski discussed the effect improv has had on him in terms of personal growth and can have on anybody else who chooses to engage in it:

(Improv) asks you, in the best way, it asks you, and it is why, basically why it's the religion that I like to practice, it doesn't ask you to sublimate any part of yourself. You hide nothing about yourself. All it wants is you, that's it. But it wants all of you, but that's it, all it wants is all of you. It says, you know, it says listen, it says pay attention, it says look around, you know? It says be now, it says all these things that when you trans...like, that, why wouldn't that work in the world? The world would be a better place if it was just littered with really good improvisors 'cause

they wanna be lookin' out for each other. It also translates really well in that, we're taught...that the least important thing going on right now is you. Everything else is more important; your partner, the show, the moment, the scene. And if that also translated, like, how cool would a world be where everyone's lookin' out for someone else, and meanwhile, everyone else is lookin' out for you. It would be a real cool, a real cool place, and I think that is why it translates, why it translates well and could translate better if more people knew about it (Jagodowski, 2011).

In this excerpt Jagodowski clearly draws a link between himself and Spolin when he discusses how improv asks its players to hide nothing about themselves. Jagodowski then makes a link between how improv brings out the full self, many of the basic concepts of improv, and how ultimately those practices should work very well in everyday practice and how if more people embraced those practices their communities would likely be better places. He later went on to elaborate:

(I)t's basically a big dork meeting mostly you know, like more often than not, the best improviser you see was not the coolest kid in high school, you know, it's all the fringe elements all coming together and everyone saying like, 'It's absolutely cool that you were way into Star Trek, that's awesome,' 'it's super cool that you skipped a ton of class more often than not gettin' stoned,' like, 'That's fine, that you were a math geek, that you were this, that you built models all day.' Cool, bring that now, don't hide that, bring that. So in that sense it offers a free place for you to let your whatever flag fly, so yeah I think it creates a safer place for that than most other environments in the world (Jagodowski, 2011).

Recalling the effort of improvisers to suspend judgment Jagodowski discusses how improv allows its players to be themselves, and as a result of being able to be themselves they can experience personal growth. Jagodowski describes this growth in his own life in terms of improv giving him a glimpse of who he really wants to be as human:

(T)he way that I think it translates, one of the ways that I think it helps me try and translate in the world is that when I improvise I feel like I'm a little closer to the person that I really want to be, that I'm a heightened better version of myself. And so it gives me a glimpse of the man that I actually

want to bring into the, into the real world. Someone who is as emotionally accessible, or as focused on something, as present and stuff, so it gives me just a little bit of a look as to like, 'man if I could just be this way all the time, that would be really really cool,' and I can feel it though I want to retain it, once the show is over, the scene is done, you just kinda come back to your unheightened sense of self (Jagodowski, 2011).

Improv gives Jagodowski a glimpse of who he really wants to be, but it is difficult to sustain that energy. I responded to him saying, “Right, well it takes a lot of energy...” which then prompted him to say:

Yeah, you know, but you know what, like, it's not, you don't feel spent. You know, it's an energy that creates itself. I don't know if you played, like, when you were a kid or just like hid in the woods or runnin' around with friends, and you're like crouched behind a bush or whatever, and you feel like you can see everything more clearly, and hear everything more clearly, it's like, all your senses are sort of heightened, that's what improvising feels like, like if I could just, hold on to that, and be that guy all the time I feel like I could be a better man (Jagodowski, 2011).

Here we see that improv gives Jagodowski something to strive for. The more he does it, the more he can be who he really wants to be. We can understand the practice of improv to be exactly that then, a type of practice for real life that can teach us through the playing of the game a better way to communicate, and better way to interact with those around us.

Andy Carey and Dina Facklis echo Jagodowski's claim of improv making the player a better version of him or herself. Carey says, “You trust yourself more. You panic a little less when something unexpected comes at you... you know that if you make a mistake you can move past it (Carey, 2011).” Facklis makes the claim that through the ensemble nature of improv that people can experience personal growth, “You know I think that improv just makes you a better, it makes you, it can make you a better person, if you are really willing to keep learning. I do think it has that ability, it teaches you to be a good team player (Facklis, 2011).” The social aspect of improv is key for Facklis. Jagodowski concurs that the ensemble nature of improv is a

key element to how improv can bring out the better qualities of people, “It's not a solo activity, it wasn't going to do stand-up, and get every laugh for yourself, it wasn't, sitting alone in a room writing a really wonderful book, it was stuff that needed and wanted to be done with other people (Jagodowski, 2011).” This aspect of improv is highly important, in fact, there would be little reason to study improv as a communicative method that has the potential to improve communication practice if it was not a group activity.

Charna Halpern finds improv to be incredibly useful in application to everyday life and that others are beginning to realize this as well:

People are starting to figure out that we're saving our corner of the world 'cause we're making better people. So I recognize that and I think that's what's so special about what we do. Umm, also in life I think that, I've discovered that if you're really listen and talk to people...I make them laugh, you know and you're just talking, you just ah, realized to say yes and not be not fighting and try to work with others, it really matters. It, we do, we make better people, so I find that my skills, in so many ways, help me in life (Halpern, 2011).

For Halpern, saying yes, listening, and finding agreement rather than conflict serves to make life significantly better and has served her well personally.

When all of these elements of improv are understood and properly applied, some pretty incredible things become possible. Perhaps the best example of the potential for the application of improv as a method for generating improved communication in a real world setting occurred when Charna Halpern was asked to go to Cyprus by the American Embassy to work with the feuding factions vying for control of the island at a time when they were looking for entry into the European Union.

Ok, so there was a border down that island and they couldn't budge, and they were trying to decide, the Greek Cypriots and the Turkish Cypriots had not gotten along. They asked me if I could come down and be there for 3 or 4 weeks, workin' with these sides, to see if we could bring these

sides together and find agreement so they could get along so we could raise the border, and I said, "Oh, that's very interesting, what a neat idea," and they said, "Oh, by the way, the Greeks don't speak the Turkish language, and the Turkish don't speak the Greek's language, and none of them speak English. Can you still do it?" Well, I, I didn't think I could but I wasn't gonna say no, to something like that. So I said, "Yeah." And you know, the thing is, it worked. I did it, it was wonderful, it was the most wonderful experience I ever had in my life. And, in fact they gave me translators, but in the beginning, I could see that the translators really weren't professional translators and they didn't even know English that well, so I mean, they were not translating exactly right. I started to realize, "What? What are you talking about? What did you say?" Somebody was talking about being in a building with a fire and she said, "Snakes came under the door," and she was saying all these weird things with like, "Snakes" and she was like, "Oh, smoke," and then it just got more and more wrong about things that would take you so long while people were talking and so I decided to get rid of that. And then we just started understanding each other with physical stuff and you could just tell, like you could just tell when things were working. And they did, they loved each other and we had this big meeting after the whole thing was over and they are all at the American Embassy now as one, now what, now that we're friends, now she's leaving what's going to happen now? And they raised the border (Halpern, 2011).

To this day, the American Embassy in Cyprus still will host improv workshops that bring Turkish Cypriots and Greek Cypriot children together from time to time.¹⁹

Clearly we can see that improv has something to offer. If feuding political factions with a long history who don't even speak the same language can be brought together, then surely it can work for those who have less to overcome.

In this chapter we have traversed many topoi between the improv texts and improvisers. We looked at the issues of honesty, overcoming fear and the development of greater confidence. We then looked at how improv encourages the improviser to problem solve using learning methods that are likely to be significantly different from what the player has grown accustomed

¹⁹ *Improvisation Expert James Bailey Conducts Theatre Workshops with Local Educators and Artists*. <http://cyprus.usembassy.gov/embatwork/improv08.html>

to in the past. Finally we looked at improv's potential to foster personal growth within the individuals who practice it and the potential it has for application in real world settings. The examination of these topoi has served to significantly expand our conception of what improv's capabilities are for communication practice and in the final chapter we will reflect on the implications and possibilities that lie within these capabilities.

CHAPTER FOUR

Conclusion

Findings and Implications

This study began with the knowledge that for some reason, improv training is being found useful in communication contexts outside the theater but that the underlying reasons for this effectiveness was lacking. Let us return to the two initial research questions.

RQ1: What are the communicative dynamics of improv that underlie its effectiveness?

RQ2: How are the methods and theories of improvisation enacted in everyday life as a communication practice?

Through the analysis of the interviews and texts, first, there is a strong correlation between the theory of writers and the practice and understanding of the improvisers. Where there are differences they are the result of expansions and adaptations upon the writers, rather than any kind of denial or repudiation of a particular idea. Second, we can see that rather than being a theory of communication, it would be more apt to call improv a communication method that seeks to solve a problem. In the way Spolin considers the role of improv games to be to give the players an open space to solve a problem, improv itself, through the practice of its own methods, serves to solve a problem. The problem is the lack of spontaneity in human interaction. People are apt to disguise or hold back on being more spontaneous largely because of fear of judgment; they are bound by the dialectic of Approval/Disapproval. If one is bound by these external factors, then that person is less likely to be as open about themselves or their ideas as they might like to be. The practices of listening, suspending judgment, approaching ideas and encounters with a “Yes, &...” attitude, and being honest bestow the confidence necessary to overcome the fear that inhibits the spontaneity that serves to reveal more about the individual

who is spontaneous and hence be more capable of solving problems as they arise. This is why businesses and organizations across the country are enlisting the help of improvisers to improve the communication environment within their institutions.

Improv is a method that over the course of its play serves to improve the trust between players through the removal of judgment and the knowledge that any and every idea will be accepted and worked with. As Evan Makela pointed out earlier, in the function of a business or organization not every idea is going to work, but the willingness to put ideas forward and allow the group to work with them to see where they might lead is essential. People do not always propose their ideas because they are afraid of looking stupid if somebody else, especially someone in a higher position within the organizational hierarchy just puts it down out of hand. Improv has the ability to put people on a more level playing field, especially within the work of an exercise or game. For instance, if you hypothetically put a CEO in a scene with a subordinate and told the CEO that he/she must accept and expand upon every idea offered while not judging the subordinate's ideas, there is a good possibility that a decently interesting scene will ensue. As this happens repeatedly, the CEO is more likely to trust the ideas of that subordinate in other situations, as well as be less prone to micromanage because of that trust.

But it is not just in business where these methods can be effective. Apparently, they can work in most other situations as well. Grondy and Carey discuss its application to their lives as parents. Carey discusses its usefulness in solving everyday problems like car trouble. Charna Halpern offers that it allows people to worry less because they can trust that the moment will lead to the next thing and is very forthcoming about her belief that improv substantially improves people's lives. The limit to which it can be applied is the limit to which practitioners can use it to solve problems.

Limitations

One of the challenges of this project was that the original interview protocol was designed to elicit responses about improv that I could use in discussion with Kenneth Burke's Comic Frame. After the interviews were completed it became apparent that writing that thesis required perhaps greater casuistic stretching than could be accommodated within the scope of this study. As a result, the interviews had to be re-framed and re-interpreted to answer the research questions put forth in this final version. If I were to expand on this project I would be inclined to reformulate the interview protocol to be better designed for the research questions that were chosen for this study.

Another limiting issue was my relative inexperience in interviewing. As a result I was less aggressive with follow-up questions than I would have liked to have been looking back on the interview process itself. Having the questions designed for these research questions also would have served me better in knowing when an improviser was getting at something I was specifically interested in that would have allowed for better follow-up questions.

Something else that might be helpful to this project would be interviewing improv students and not just well established professionals. Talking to students, especially if one could start at the beginning of their improv education and continue with them longitudinally over the course of for instance the IO Training Center curriculum which lasts about a year to see how improv has impacted their communication practices over that span of time.

The selection of texts and interviewees are also limiting factors. There are many more than three books written on the subject of improvisation. I chose the three represented here because they are from the three authors whom most improvisers would recognize to be the most influential teachers of the practice, Spolin, Close, and Johnstone. When it comes to who was

interviewed, these individuals are only a small fraction of the improvisers in Chicago, let alone America, who qualified for me as improvisers with the ample experience needed to be considered reliable for this study. Over those three weeks in the summer of 2011 I asked around 20 improvisers to do the interview with me and only 11 ended up participating. If I were to expand on those successfully interviewed I would want to add more women, people who tied more to some of the other clubs in Chicago, not just the IO Theater, though many of the interviewees here have performed or presently perform in theaters other than the IO, directors and house members of other clubs would add to the diversity of thought represented. Finding people who were around in the earlier periods would also be of potential benefit. Charna Halpern has been around the longest of any of those interviewed in this study, and she arrived on the scene in the late 1970's. Interviewing people who were around through some of the more formative stages of the art form could add some more depth to the study from an historical perspective.

Testing the issue of Approval/Disapproval might also serve well. It is an assertion based in experience for Spolin and it would probably be useful to try to unpack it more thoroughly in practice.

Lastly, it would probably be beneficial to study the rhetoric of improv instructors to get a sense of how they set up their classroom in order to foster this environment that is conducive to spontaneity through the removal of judgment and the adoption of the "Yes, &..." approach.

Final Thoughts

To return to Dramaturgy, we can see that unlike traditional theater, in the spontaneous creation of scenes that come out of the experiences of the improvisers, improv can actually serve

as a type of practice for real life. Where the script limits the response of the player, improv frees the player to respond according to the logic of his/her own perspective, thus providing the player confidence in that logic when the player finds it to work in the scene. Dave Pasquesi made this comparison rather directly when he said, “(A)cting techniques are to acting whereas improvisation I think is more, they're not, they're not technical behaviors, (the techniques of improv) are principles of behavior. And so they do translate because they're principles, so whereas (other acting methods) are specific to certain situations that only occur on-stage, these are principles which cross all those boundaries...at acting classes, you work only on acting...and in improvisation you don't just work on acting (Pasquesi, 2011).”

Improv is a communicative method, not just an acting technique, that has the unique ability to blend the stage with life in a way that allows the practitioner of improv to easily bring the communicative skills learned through the practice of improv into any and most every other situation they might find themselves in. As a result, it can be recommended as a tool to improve communication practice for businesses and organizations, as well as individuals for their own personal practice.

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APPENDIX

Individual Interview Protocol

1. What motivated you to start doing improv?
2. What are the primary concepts of improv that you try to keep central to your practice?
3. Have you found that any of those concepts have been of use to you in your personal life outside the theater like in work or interpersonal relationships?
4. Can you describe a particular instance or two where you know improv informed the way you interacted with a situation or event?
5. Why do you think improv translates as it does to everyday situations?
6. Do you think improv engenders a kind of attitude or a personal stance toward other things within people who practice it?
7. Are there any other thoughts, insights you'd like to share about that you may not have touched on already?