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THE PEDAGOGY AND ETHICS OF IMPROVISATION USING THE HAROLD

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

### THE PEDAGOGY AND ETHICS OF IMPROVISATION USING THE HAROLD

By David Patton, M.Div, MFA

A Thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007

Major Director: Aaron Anderson  
Assistant Professor of Theatre

Scenic improvisation is dramatic performance without a script. Performers develop scenes in real time in front of an audience. They do this by submitting to a set of rules of relating on-stage which allow them, by mutual assent, to develop scenes and stories based on their relationships with one another. This methodology by which improvisers develop their scenes can give us a tangible vocabulary and model by which we can fulfill the requirements of love. The Harold, an improvisational form created by Del Close and Charna Halpern and taught and performed at IO (formerly ImprovOlympic), emphasizes this relational ethic as the means to create consistent and sustainable theatrical performances. This paper will examine the performance methodology and pedagogy of

long-form improvisation and particularly the Harold as a guide for ethical decision-making and behavior in our personal relationships.

## Prologue

I began improvising at ComedySportz in Richmond, VA around the same time I began studies at a Presbyterian seminary. While I was learning the rules of improvisation at night, I was studying humanity's ideas about God all day. I studied Reformed Theology (a particular school of theology tracing its roots to the Protestant reformation) from Calvin to Barth. The Reformed school is known for their systematic theology. That is systematic arguments about the nature of God, humanity and their relationship.

I found most arguments about the nature of God unconvincing. For me, any argument about who God is inevitably fails in the face of six words: "My God is bigger than that." That became my mantra. I only believed one other thing without reservation about the nature of God: "God is good". From these two postulates everything else descended.

Having satisfied myself that I knew what I needed to know about the nature of God, I turned my attention to the question of relationship, the God-human relationship, the human-God relationship and the human-human relationship. Quickly determined two things: 1) the nature of the God-human relationship is the definition of Love 2) In the relationships that I initiate (human-God, human-human) I should emulate God. In other words, the way that God acts towards us is the way we should seek to act towards God and each other. I should learn to Love! The problem was that I didn't know what that meant.

Love was the thing, but the word love has innumerable definitions, many of them problematic, from the Petrarchan ideal of chivalric love from afar to modern Hollywood ideas about romantic love between star-fated soul mates. All of these are pale reflections, feeble attempts at true perfect love. The love I was seeking is the love of our neighbors, the love implicit in the Golden Rule. I was looking for love the writer of the Gospel of John spoke of when he said, "God is Love" or the love Paul speaks of in his letter to the Corinthians when he said, "Love never fails." Love is the truest reflection and expression of the divine in us. In spite of the tawdry emotionality of attached to the word, there is still no other work in English large enough to hold this concept. For the Greeks the word *agape* comes close. In Hebrew, we might try *hesed*. In English, the word is love.

I looked to modern stories about love. I read sacred texts from a variety of traditions. I read innumerable ethics texts. I asked the people I most trusted. No one had a satisfactory answer for me. It seemed everyone knew what it was, but nobody could put it to words. I quickly discovered that the answer I was looking for had nothing to do with love as a feeling. I was concerned with love as an action.

By this time, my final year of seminary, I was teaching improv at ComedySportz and performing several times a week. I was also teaching acting through improvisation at a local private middle school, Seven Hills School for Boys. I needed to put words to the act of improv.

I began looking for help from the masters of improvisation. First I read Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theatre*, a classic training manual for improvisation. In her introduction, Spolin lays out her techniques for leading a workshop. To me, it read like an

ethics handbook. It was all about how the teacher and students were to live together in the workshops. The rules of behavior, she outlined were underlying basis for much of what I had learned and was now teaching in my improv workshops.

I read Del Close' and Charna Halpern's *Truth in Comedy*. I saw that a lot of the time they weren't talking so much about how to do a show. They were discussing how the performers were to behave with each other. If they treated each other well on stage, they would have a show. I discovered that improvisation is an ethic.

Ethics, as I am using the word here, is not a matter of right and wrong. That is morality. Ethics is the study of the values and practices of a particular group. This particular use of ethics is often termed descriptive ethics. They may think of the ethic in terms of right and wrong, but that is a matter of social conditioning, not a statement about the inherent rightness of the value system. Ethics describes the customs to which a specific group of people consciously or unconsciously ascribe. Ethicists often point out unchallenged modes of behavior within a group, which may manifest as an aesthetic or a system of etiquette. An ethic is simply a code of behavior designed to act out a particular value set.

An ethic may be based on a morality, but it could be an ethic based on a negative morality. For example, honor among thieves may be the morality underlying a no-snitch ethic in prisons. Who hasn't questioned the morality of the lawyer's ethic?

In my case, the moral compass was the ideal of love, but I had no idea practically what that meant. How was I to determine what was loving and what was a function of desire, or possessiveness or fear? All of which sometimes disguise themselves as love. I

needed the ethic, the code of behavior, the system of values, to learn how to live in loving relationships with the rest of humanity. Furthermore, I wanted something tangible, testable and teachable.

This revelation that improvisation is first and foremost an ethic of how to work together was the defining moment in my career. The ethic implicit in improvisation had already become a way of life for me. I suddenly realized that I had finally found in improv a practical way to begin to practice love in my life. I intuited how the process of improvisation I had been studying could translate from the stage and classroom into life. I felt how the improvisational process resonated with what I knew about the actions of God towards humanity. In order to answer my questions, I needed to describe and codify the ethic of improvisation. From that, I might be able to extrapolate an ethic of love.

Upon completing my Master of Divinity, I applied to a number of Master and PhD programs in ethics and theatre. I was offered a full ride at a terrific school in my hometown, Virginia Commonwealth University, and I began studying for a Master of Fine Arts.

After completing my course work I headed to Chicago, the Mecca of Improvisation, to study with the great teachers of improvisation. When I first visited Chicago, I approached Charna Halpern, co-author of *Truth in Comedy* and founder of IO (formerly ImprovOlympic), before a show at her theatre. She encouraged me to come to Chicago and to study improv. She even suggested that I apply for a night manger position in her theatre before realizing that I was just visiting.

That summer I arrived in Chicago and began studying in earnest at both IO and Second City, the other major improv theatre in Chicago. I was also working part-time at

The Second City. I began working with them on developing this project, an ethic of improvisation. I was certain that since improv began at the Second City, I could learn what I needed there.

However, I was quickly disillusioned with the corporate politics and ego-driven back biting that seemed to permeate the culture there. With some exceptions, the primary ideal there was that improvisation was a tool for creating a product. As such, it was carefully contained and separate from the culture of the Second City.

At the same time I studied at IO where the process is the product. Many of the performers I worked with at Second City credited their training at IO for their place in the improv community and their jobs at Second City. Most of them never studied at Second City. Repeatedly, I heard variations on the maxim, “IO for love; Second City for money.”

When the time came for auditions for the coveted positions on the Second City touring company, I got to hang around backstage. Over and over, I heard the casting directors say, “How much IO does he/she have?” If the performance arm of the company didn’t value the Second City training, it occurred to me that I might be looking in the wrong place.

Thinking back to that first meeting I had with Charna the year before and considering the different tenor of my classes at IO, I decided to investigate the Harold. Immediately the connections between stage and life, which I’d struggled to make at the Second City, were obvious with the Harold. The ideals underlying the Harold were the ideals I was trying to grasp. The rest of the project quickly fell into place.

I began to interview, many of the top teachers at IO. Based on list of skills necessary to improvise that I got from Jessica Rogers, a teacher at IO and the coach of my team, Yorrick, I was able to enumerate five principles for behavior between actors in the Harold: listening, regard for the other, authenticity, agreement and risk-taking. Using those principles, the ethic of improvisation, as a guide for relationships, I was able to begin to develop an ethic for love, a means for acting with love toward the other people in our lives even when we don't like them or they don't like us.

This paper outlines the history and nature of the Harold and the IO training center. Next, it outlines an ethic of improvisation, i.e. the code of behavior implicit in improvisation that is applicable to our daily lives. The final chapter is an attempt to apply the ethic of improvisation to the problem of love to create a set of standards we can use to guide us towards loving interactions with an often unloving and cruel world. This has truly been a labor of love. Although the idea for this project arose from a particular understanding about who God is and who we are, it is not necessary to hold those beliefs to find the ethics outlined here practical and usable. The guidelines for behavior outlined here equally applicable regardless of our theological beliefs or lack thereof. Loving behavior does not require any particular beliefs.

## **Introduction**

*The small man builds cages  
wherever he goes, while the sage  
who must duck his head  
while the moon is low  
drops keys all night long  
for the beautiful rowdy prisoners.*

-14<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet Hafiz  
As recited by Holly Laurent to her Harold classes

There is a border in the middle of Cyprus with a Greek side and Turkish side. Several years ago, Cyprus wanted to join the European Union, so they needed to get the barrier down. The animosity on both sides ran deep. Charna Halpern, co-author of *Truth in Comedy* and founder of IO (formerly ImprovOlympic), was brought in by the American embassy to teach agreement as an attempt to quiet some of that hostility.

The first week she taught classes in schools and theatres, as well as to business people and prominent leaders on each side of the line, Greek and Turkish. Then people on both sides of the line were brought together for the second and third weeks. Charna couldn't speak with them and the interpreters were awful. Charna got rid of them. She called Susan Messing, a teacher at IO who developed the curriculum for the very physical Level 2, to get some of her physical exercises, which she relied on for that first week. Then somehow everyone began to understand each other. They began doing physical and verbal scenes. "It was kind of mystical. Somehow we started to understand each other.

They were all talking in their own languages, but we all knew what we were saying” (Halpern, Personal Interview). Greeks and Turks were playing together in Cyprus, because after lifetimes of disagreement and rancor, they were taught to agree.

The last day, some of the people from the Greek and the Turkish theatre came to Charna and asked, “Now what? You’ve given us something we love, but now what?” Cyprus joined the EU in 2004, but today Cyprus is still divided. Nevertheless, a small group on both sides carries around the memory of playing with their enemy.

The State Department believed that Halpern’s teachings could affect the attitudes and behavior of the Cyprians. Corporations, from the Fortune 500 on down, pay exorbitant rates to improvisers to teach them these skills, because the skills of improvisation are the skills necessary to succeed in business.

Charna Halpern is the founder of the world famous IO Theatre (formerly ImprovOlympic) and along with her partner, Del Close, she codified The Harold. The Harold is a long form format that allowed improvisers to consistently create performance quality improvisation for the first time. As Holly Laurent, one of IO’s Harold teachers, says, “It’s a bunch of fundamentals that make long form look genius” (Personal Interview). The Harold is perhaps the most important theatrical innovation since the American Musical and established long-form improvisation, along with the musical, as one of the only distinctly American theatrical forms.

Beyond its theatrical value, its practitioners will tell you that improvisation is a way of life. Halpern herself says,

The tools of improvisation are a philosophy for life as well as the stage. It really is. It is about listening and working together and being in agreement and being

positive finding a way for everyone to succeed, making each other look good. It's all of those religious beliefs. Do unto others as you would have them do unto you. They follow laws of physics. The whole is greater than the sum of the parts. Making order out of chaos. These are the things we're talking about. It all works in life. It really does. (Personal Interview)

One list of life lessons offered by the Harold comes from veteran improv performer and teacher, Susan Messing:

Learning how to get along with the other kids. Playing nicely. Sharing your toys. Learning how to make your friends feel important. Knowing that even though it's about you, it's not about you. Learning how to check your ego at the door. Learning how to support other people. It goes back to children's precepts. (Personal Interview)

These are just a few of the ethics for behavior taught by improvisation. This paper will examine the performance methodology and pedagogy of long-form improvisation and particularly the Harold as a guide for ethical decision-making and behavior in our personal relationships.

## CHAPTER 1

### History of the Harold

### Or The Harold's Heralds

*Art is created by people perceiving it as art.*

-Jason Chin

*At the very heart of improvisation is play.*

-Mick Napier (Liber 120)

Play is at the heart of all improvisation. Yet as much as we may enjoy it, we rarely improvise for improvisation's sake. In order to justify our play, we have used improvisation to train, educate and develop material. Improvisational theatre began a new era with the codification of the Harold long-form format and its subsequent popularization by Charna Halpern and Del Close at ImprovOlympics (now IO Theatre). Twenty-five years ago, Bernie Sahlins, Second City director and co-founder, argued vehemently and publicly that the public would not pay for improvisation as a full evening's entertainment. Yet with the Harold at IO, Del Close and Halpern proved once and for all the commercial and artistic feasibility of improvisation for improvisation's

sake and set the stage for “the most important theatrical movement in Chicago in thirty years” (Kozlowski 24).

There are those who claim that practically all long-form improvisation is simply “the Harold with a new coat of paint” (Kozlowski 69). In its present form, the basic Harold consists primarily of three sets of three inter-related scenes created on the spot. By developing themes and patterns in the process the performers discover a unified whole. In the words of its creators, “Skilled Harold players take all of these disparate ingredients and build something much greater than the sum of its parts” (Halpern, et al. 18). The success of IO has led to the creation of hundreds of other long-forms and dozens of theatres and troupes in Chicago alone. Yet the Harold did not spring full grown like Athena from the head of Zeus.

When the Harold is performed it is presaged by an opening game, which allows the performers to explore the possibilities, to develop their ideas and to create the “group mind”, the ephemeral mental bond amongst the group. Similarly, the creation of the Harold was heralded by three overlapping developments. Modern Improvisation began as games used by sociologist Neva Boyd to help non-theatre, at-risk children to learn general socialization, communication and leadership skills. Improv still serves this function in the form of modern corporate training in improvisation offered by companies like ComedySportz and the Chicago Comedy Company. Second, Theatre Games and Improvisation were used to train actors and directors for the traditional theatre, evident in today’s universities and acting schools. Third, Improvisation was used to develop material for performance in other formats. One can still see this in modern sketch

television like *Saturday Night Live* and *Mad TV* and in the revues performed by Second City. In each of these stages in its evolution, Improvisation was in service to another end. Finally, with the Harold, Improvisation became an artistic end in itself.

Although Improvisation certainly has her classical roots in Commedia Dell'arte and her modern foundation in American Vaudeville, the first glimmer of what would become modern Improvisation was seen when Viola Spolin developed her theatre games. She was trained by Neva L. Boyd, a sociologist at Northwestern University, working at the Recreational Training School at Chicago's Hull in the 1920s. Boyd used games as a mean of "jump-starting imaginative play" in inner city and immigrant children (Christiansen 99). Boyd's games used recreation to socialize the young people to help them develop leadership skills.

As the drama supervisor for the New Deal's Works Progress Administration (WPA) Recreation Project in 1939-41, Spolin saw the potential for the games. In her own words, the Recreation Project "provided the opportunity for my first direct experiments in teaching drama, from which developed a non-verbal, non-psychological approach" (Spolin xlvi). Most of her adult students had no background in either teaching or theatre. Yet Spolin's task was to equip them to be teacher/directors in their own neighborhoods. She also trained a small troupe of child improvisers who took suggestions from audiences in order to demonstrate how the games worked.

By 1945, Spolin had created and was directing the Young Actors Company in Hollywood. She was continuing to use the games in theatre workshops and to rehearse traditional plays. Although she acknowledges the influence of Constantin Stanislavsky

(Spolin xlvii), she was developing an entirely new system of performing. “Gradually the word ‘player’ was introduced to replace ‘actor’ and ‘physicalizing’ to replace ‘feeling’” (Spolin 1).

The form was primarily to train actors for formal theatre. The improvised scenes were merely to free the players from the constraints of a written script, so that they were “freed to receive the stage conventions” (Spolin 1). Each game presented a problem or objective, often called the “point of concentration,” that distilled a complicated theatre convention or technique. Using the basic “Who, Where, What” structure (in which players quickly establish who they are, where they are and what’s going on) to create scenes, they concentrated on the problems in each exercise. This taught them to be present in the reality of the scene and freed them from presentational self-consciousness, while indoctrinating them in the mechanics of the dramatic arts. The games focused on physicalization, spontaneity, intuition, transformation and audience participation. Spolin says, “The idea is to hurtle you into the present time, which is something other than clock time. You are not waiting for. You are in waiting. . . The outcome of the present time is as yet unknown, as yet an undiscovered probability” (McCrohan 44).

In 1963, Spolin and her son, Paul Sills codified her games into *Improvisation for the Theatre*. As Mick Napier points out, “It is a book of games to be used to teach children. It is a book of games. At the very heart of improvisation is play” (Libera 120). The book, now in its third edition, is considered the “Bible” of Second City Improvisation and Spolin is often called the Grandmother of American Improvisation. If so, then, Sills, Second City co-founder, is its father. He played his mother’s games as a

child and used them throughout his directing career. They were instrumental in his work developing Improvisation with the Compass Players, a troupe founded by Sills and other University of Chicago students, and their heirs at Second City.

Sills began his theatre career in 1953 as student at the University of Chicago by directing the American premiere of Jean Cocteau's *The Typewriter* followed by the Chicago premiere and the second production ever of Bertolt Brecht's *Caucasian Chalk Circle*. During those productions at the University Theatre, Sheldon Patinkin, one of the original University Players and Second City player and director, says, "With the talk getting stronger, a bunch of us got together every Saturday afternoon during much of the 1952-53 school year, and Paul Sills taught us the improvisational games and exercises he learned from his mother" (Patinkin 4). This training, in the service of the traditional theatre productions, was the first introduction to improvisation for many of the ensemble that would eventually work together at Playwrights Theatre Club and later Second City.

Sills soon joined up with David Shepherd, a young New Yorker with a vision of a populist theatre for the masses and eight thousand dollars to invest. Together they founded the Playwrights Theatre Club. They were soon joined by Bernard (Bernie) Sahlins. A business savvy theatre lover, Sahlins became the producer for Playwrights or as he quips, "the chairman of the board without any board" (Christiansen 102). Together with the Playwrights ensemble, which included future star Ed Asner and future Mrs. Sills, Barbara Harris, they made theatre magic. They produced close to thirty classical and avant-garde shows, including Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and *Romeo and Juliet*, Ibsen's *Peer Gynt* and Brecht/Weil's *The Threepenny Opera*, as well as original pieces by Sills

and Shepherd. They were partial to works outside of the commercial mainstream including Beckett, Buchner, Eliot and Strindberg (Christiansen 104). Shows ran for an average of three weeks with one show closing on Sunday and the next opening on Tuesday (Patinkin 8). Their stellar performances and short production times led credence to the value of the games as a tool in traditional theatre.

Despite rave reviews and a subscriber list of over two thousand, Playwrights never fulfilled Shepherd's dream of a working class theatre. He wrote in his journal, "In a year and a half, I have helped build a self-centered arts club which talks over the heads of its bourgeois members at the same time as it licks their feet for patronage" (Christiansen 104).

While these concerns may have led to the demise of Playwrights, ultimately fate took a hand and the doors were shut in February 1955 by the fire department. They were ostensibly enforcing stringent fire codes established after a fire at the Iroquois Theatre. However, many Playwrights members contend that, while the two-hundred seat theatre was in fact in violation of rules established for large proscenium houses, the real issue was that the Playwrights were perceived as having left leaning politics in the wake of Cold War McCarthyism.

Shepherd pursued his dream of a cabaret for the people with the Compass Players. Sills and many of the Playwrights alumni joined him. He believed that a fast-paced script performed by a small ensemble each portraying multiple roles could stand up to the rowdy, blue collar environment he envisioned. However, he discovered that the scripts did not exist. He wanted scripts that were "more efficient, theatrical, poetic and morally

aware than the current product” (Kozlowski 13). Thus, the Scenario Plays were born. Performers were given Stanislavsky-style internal motivations to drive them through commedia dell’arte-esque predetermined beats. Roger Bowen said, “The Compass scenarios all seemed to have a theme in common - how society molds people into the shape it wants them to take” (Patinkin 27). The rigor of a new play created every week soon began to wear on the players and each scenario was given longer runs. Soon the scenario plays gave way to shorter independent scenes.

In addition to the scenario plays, all of the Compass shows began with roughly twenty minutes of the “Living News,” loosely based on the “Living Newspaper” plays of the 1930's Federal Theatre Project (Christiansen 106). While the “Living Newspaper” plays were docu-dramas outlining the nature and origin of a social problem while offering a specific solution, the Compass’ “Living News” consisted of “improvs on and narrated re-enactments of articles in that days paper” (Patinkin 13). The players would then do a set of more free-style improvisation at the end of the show based on audience suggestions. These improvisations would often form the basis of later scenarios.

The Compass is heralded as the first improvisational theatre, because this was the first modern use of improvisation in a professional performance. Some claim that the scenario plays are the first improvised long-form (Kozlowski 13). However, scenario plays are qualitatively different from long-forms based on the Harold. While the scenario plays provide commedia-like beats which lead the players through a particular plot-line, the long-form structures offer a framework in which any story could be told on a given night. However, the Compass can safely be called the birthplace of modern short-form

improv. For the first time professional performers regularly played improvisational games in front of an audience. The performance of scripted/semi-scripted material alongside improvisation for performance and material development provided the proto-structure for the sketch revue and third act improv still used at Second City today.

By the winter of 1956/57 the Compass due to poor business practices was finished in Chicago. However, before its demise, the Compass had colonized St. Louis. At the Compass St. Louis, a young man named Del Close would begin a theatre career that would eventually lead him to Second City Chicago and ultimately to change the face of American Theatre.

For the next few years, former members of Playwrights and the Compass were involved in various short-lived and ill-fated theatre ventures until, one of the great events of American Comedy occurred: In a refurbished Chinese laundry on Dec 16, 1959, Second City, under Paul Sills' leadership, performed their first revue. They were an instant success. Within two years, they were performing in New York and LA. In the 70's, Second City Television and Saturday Night Live, whose cast consisted of primarily Second City alumni, made Second City a household name. Today their alumni list reads like the comedians' society page and the techniques of improvisation and sketch development created in, around, and for them are the basis of much of the comedy done in America today. Although Second City did not popularize improvisation per se, it did push improvisationally trained performers and smart improvisationally developed material into the mainstream.

Similar to the Compass, the main Second City format since the early days has consisted of a two-act sketch revue with music. The revue today is followed by a third act of improvisation based on audience suggestions. The sketches have always been developed based on characters and situations discovered by the players in improvisations. For The Second City, improvisation was, and still is, the process by which the product was created. The rough and tumble of pure improvisation is honed and polished, re-improvised and scripted into slick and commercially viable sketch revues.

Second City set the standards to which improvisers hold themselves today. Roger Bowen says,

To restate the difference between Compass and the original Second City group on the one hand and television on the other, I would say that we did what we wanted and hoped there would be an audience for it. Television writers and performers do the opposite. This seems, to me, to be difference between artists (even bad ones) and entertainers (even good ones). (MacCrohan 61)

Their material was smart and timely taking on the major political issues of the day. They also incisively indicted everyday social conventions and shattered taboos.

However, they never went for the cheap laugh. Jokes block spontaneity and cut off the other players. You may get a laugh, but at the cost of the scene. Sills said,

Improvisation is play. Play brings an immediate response, which is not gasps of horror, but identification with the actor's play, which is naturally laughter - not necessarily laughter at a joke, but laughter with the playing. . . I'm not interested in having influenced joke-making. When you have dialogue, improvisational dialogue, you're going to get your humor. (McCrohan 48)

This attitude at Second City is foundational to the approach of the Harold. In the book which presented the Harold, *Truth in Comedy* (the title of which is homage to the

concept), Close and Halpern devote the entire chapter, “But Seriously Folks. . .”, to not going for the laugh. They state, “The only way to do a comedy scene is to play it straight” (25). They later elaborate saying, “Jokes are not necessary; they are a complete waste of time and energy better spent developing the scene” (26).

Second City also changed the face of Chicago theatre. That same week it opened three shows were being performed in downtown Chicago; *The Music Man*, *West Side Story* and *A Mighty Man is He* (Christiansen 97). The first two were long running Broadway touring companies and the last was bound to be a Broadway flop. Second City began a renaissance in Chicago theatre, which provided the space for the creation of IO in the Nineteen Eighties and dozens of improvisational theatres since. On December 16, 2005 over 80 professional productions were being performed in Chicago. The vast majority of them were local Chicago productions and many of them were improvisationally performed or developed.

In the early 1980s, David Shepherd, still pursuing his dream of a theatre for the working class, opened ImprovOlympics (recently changed to IO due to a legal settlement with the U.S. Olympics Committee) alongside an alumna of the training center at Second City, Charna Halpern. ImprovOlympic started with David Shepherd using Second City games initially employed to teach theatrical skills. For example, the game, “conducted story” ( a game in which a team of student-performers tells a story together as if they were one story-teller and the teacher conducts it by pointing out who is to speak at any given time), taught students how to be “in the moment”. The format consisted of ten short-form games played competitively by two teams. After little more than a year,

Shepherd once again became disenchanted and moved on. Halpern too was unimpressed with the show saying, “It was beginning to look like a replica of Second City which I want to avoid. Second City was already doing Second City quite well” (Halpern et al. 3). She began looking for a new partner to breath life into the ImprovOlympics.

That breath came from Del Close. Close had begun his theatre career with the Compass in St. Louis. He had gone on to have an on-again, off-again relationship as a player and director for Second City that would span over twenty years. It was during one of these off times in the late Sixties that Close developed the long form that would be known as the Harold. “Del had been working on something in the 60s with the Committee called the Harold. It never really worked. He couldn’t teach it and he couldn’t play it because there was no structure” (Halpern, Personal Interview). It was originally “a way of loosely improvising around a theme introducing characters and ideas that would later be honed into sketches for performance. [Close] wanted to turn this method of developing material in a workshop into a performance piece that would be dependable enough to run as a show” (Libera 110). He brought it with him to Chicago and Second City.

Prior to this time, improv consisted mainly of games or unconnected short scenes. Close envisioned an improvisational sonata where characters and situations would reappear; themes and patterns would emerge and be re-incorporated. Eventually, the disparate parts would give the appearance of a whole piece greater than the sum of its parts.

Del would put 20, 30, 40 people on stage and he’d see “Jason” play a plumber and later on a father, but it would turn out that the father was the plumber. He

thought, why don't I tell people to look for those connections. The Harold became a way to easily teach the long-form. (Chin, Personal Interview)

As Charna says,

How to build a scene, how to make connection, how to build a group mind, see the pattern, and how to follow the patterns and see the sign posts because patterns always want to show you where you are. Also every time something comes back it gets a laugh and every time it comes back it gets funnier and funnier. It gets more and more important. (Personal Interview)

This building of patterns is what pulls the disparate parts of the Harold into one piece. It is also what defines the Harold as a new and unique form.

Early on, Close had no real idea of how to shape the Harold. It shaped itself based on the suggestion. An early player, Tim Kazurinski, who studied the Harold with Close at Second City, recalls:

What seemed like a dopey little scenario early in the piece now started to take shape, as other people started joining the scene, and it became a recurring scene or 'runner.' When it was really humming, they would all mesh, and make a statement that was more of a tableau. Everything that you had done to that point was synthesized in that final scene or conglomeration of scenes. What had washed over the audience was a really fascinating 20- or 30-scene barrage about this topic. (Halpern et. al. 21)

At some point during his time in California, Del was asked what the name of his form was. The Beatles were known for their floppy haircut. When they were asked what it was called, Ringo very glibly answered, "I don't know. . . Arthur." So inspired by the Beatles, Del answered his questioner, "I don't know. . . Harold." Del regretted that moment of arbitrary petulance as the name stuck and his greatest creation is known as the "Harold" (Mason, Personal Interview).

Ultimately, Close left Second City in 1983 because of his belief in the artistic value and commercial viability of the Harold. For over a decade, he and long-time Second City producer/director, Bernie Sahlins, had debated as to whether improvisation was merely a tool for workshops and rehearsals to develop performers' skills and new material or whether it could stand alone as its own performed art form. "Close believed that in order for Second City to evolve past its tried-and true tradition, it needed to accept the idea that improv could be performed in front of an audience. . . Long-form improvisation would work and people would be willing to pay to see it" (Kozlowski 30). Sahlins didn't think that Second City needed to change. Finally, the disagreement festered to the point where the two could not work together, and in 1983, Del Close was fired from Second City.

He soon partnered with Charna Halpern and the IO we know today was born. Halpern had trained in Chicago at the Player's workshop with Jo Forsberg. She had met Del while taking classes at Second City. She says, "I took a year at Player's workshop and thought I knew everything. Then when I got to [Del], I thought, "Oh my God! I know nothing!" (Halpern, Personal Interview).

Charna had been extremely successful at ImprovOlympic with her short form games. She had teams of players from a particular with a common bond called identity teams. She had a team of rabbis called "The God Squad," a group of psychologists called the "Freudian Slippers" and a troupe of lawyers called "The Court Jesters." Despite her success, Charna was dissatisfied with the product. She was bored with the same games and gags. She knew that improv had more to offer.

She said as much when she approached Del about helping her at ImprovOlympic. “I said, ‘There’s got to be more than this.’ He answered me, and this has got to be my favorite answer ever. He said, ‘Maybe you’re not such a twit after all.’ We went on to change the face of improvisational comedy. (Halpern, Personal Interview)

Del suggested combining his loose Harold form with an IO game called Time Dash, which is:

a three part scene, beginning, middle and end. I [Halpern] would take a suggestion for an event, “an exorcism,” then how long before the “exorcism,” during the exorcism and how long after the exorcism. Del said, “what if we take three time dashes and break them up vertically.” (Halpern, Personal Interview)

The modern Harold was born. With it, they proved once and for all that Improvisation could stand alone as an evening’s entertainment.

To make money to support IO, Halpern and Close quickly developed a means of using the Harold to train improvisers, from beginner to the most advanced, lay persons and professional actors alike. “Harold was the basis for learning long-form improvisation. Scenes return and connect. Things are called back. We take each others ideas and make them important every time they come back” (Messing, Personal Interview). They soon codified the Harold into its present performance structure: three sets of three scenes with a group game at the beginning, end and between each set. By 1984-85, teams were performing the reworked Harold competitively in front of paying audiences.

Initially everyone was studying with Del. But Del quickly tired of teaching the basics to newcomers. Halpern says,

But the basic ideas for improvisation were just Del’s. And then I just sat and watched him. He would say, “Now you need to teach this.” He would teach all of us, then he said, “You need to teach some of the newer people because I don’t

want to have to keep teaching *this* and *this*. By the time they get to me they'd better be able to do *this*." (Halpern Personal Interview)

In 1994 Halpern and Close published *Truth in Comedy*, which became the manifesto of ImprovOlympic improvisation, in much the same way as Viola Spolin's *Theatre Games* represents Second City improv. Speaking on Del's teachings Charna said,

There's no reason to reinvent it. This is definitely the truth. So we carry that on. The Truth is so obvious when it hits you in the face. That's why my book is called *Truth in Comedy*, because anybody who studies with us, anybody who reads this is going to go "Oh yeah, this makes sense. This has got to be right. (Personal Interview)

Today, in addition to the approaches offered by Second City and IO, there is a third major school of improvisation in Chicago, the Annoyance Theatre, with its own holy text, Mick Napier's *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out*. These three schools provide the basis for most of the improvisational performance, theory and pedagogy in the world today.

Ironically, in 1978, Close said, "You know, at the beginning in Compass and in the first days at Second City, we had a definite sense of being part of the process of history in the making - hanging ten out in front of something forging away into the unknown. Now to some degree, the thrill of discovery is gone" (Kozlowski 38). Clearly, Close and Halpern made history again with the Harold at IO. As Kozlowski says, "Not every improv theatre that sprouted in the next fifteen years came directly from IO, but many of them would not have happened if not for Close and Halpern" (46).

Today improvisational theatre stands on the cusp to a new era. It continues to gain a mainline audience for improvisation with TV shows like *Who's Line Is It Anyway?* and MTV's *Wild 'N Out*, which offer entire shows of short-form games. It stands on the edge of gaining recognition in the University Academy and has pioneered a new world of corporate training. If we hope to see single income, professional improvisers, improvisation must establish its place academically, commercially and artistically.

We know that in a scene we cannot know where we are or where we are going unless we have paid attention to where we have been. A century ago, many educators considered theatre only valuable as literature and, all too often, it was only staged in schools to teach English classes. Similarly, Improvisation today is often perceived to be most valuable in service to other ends. At this critical juncture, we must ask, "Is improvisation simply a tool for training traditional actors, motivating non-theatre people or developing comedic sketch material?" Each of these uses of improv was dominant at one point in the development of Improvisation and, as such, each is a valuable and viable form of improvisational expression. The Harold itself has been used in each of these capacities. However, as Halpern and Close said, "When [improvisation] is properly considered a public art form, the question, 'What is it used for?' no longer applies" (Halpern et al. 14). When asked what the Harold "was for", Del would reply, "What is ballet for?" (Halpern, Personal Interview) While validating these other values, we must strive to establish the understanding that Improvisation is an art form in its own right. Next we will examine the Harold as a form of artistic expression and as a way of life.

“Del wanted the audience and the cast to learn a lesson at the end of [a Harold]” (Mason Personal Interview). Improvisation itself has become that lesson for many performers. Over and over in the improv community in Chicago, improv’s Mecca, one hears “Improvisers are better people.” Bill Arnett, a teacher at IO, said, “It’s no coincidence that the best improvisers are very approachable and very nice people” (Personal Interview). What is it about improvisation that makes people better or kinder or nicer? In upcoming chapters, we will examine the ethics inherent in improvisational performance as taught in the Harold at IO. We will demonstrate how those ethics can be used in intentional relational decision making by presenting an improvisational ethic of love.

## Chapter 2

### What is Improvisation?

#### Or Mrs. Close, can Del come out and play?

*Life is more interesting when you say yes.*

-Charna Halpern

Scenic improvisation is dramatic performance without a script. Performers develop scenes in real time in front of an audience. They do this by submitting to a set of rules of relating on-stage which allow them, by mutual assent, to develop scenes and stories based on their relationships with one another. This methodology by which improvisers develop their scenes can give us a tangible vocabulary and model for ethical decision-making.

Improvisers create scenes and games in dialogue with each other as each performer adds small elements of reality to their imagined world. Each of these elements, verbal and non verbal, may be called “offers”. In order for the process to move forward, everybody, including the audience, must assent to the reality of each of these offers. As the offers are stacked, each on the next, a textured and complex world can emerge.

Scenic improvisers are trained to accept offers and heighten them. Together, this is commonly called “the Yes-And attitude.” Yes-And is the basic ethic of improvisation upon which other improvisational theories are built. Yes-And is Improv short hand for “Yes, what you say (verbally and non-verbally) is true. And I add this.” This rule of Improv, while it demands a great deal of its practitioners, provides a powerful creative process and a productive way to live together in community.

Accepting offers is the Yes in Yes-And. An offer is an invitation to play and to co-create a new reality. Anything said or done on-stage is considered an offer. The improviser’s job is to create a shared reality, called the group mind, with the other performers. This is done by communicating and accepting offers. Assumptions about environment and character underlie every speech and action. Accepting the offer means accepting as true those underlying assumptions.

For example, the first performer might say, “Johnny, I know you don’t like shots, but I promise to make it quick.” In this offer, we learn that the speaker is about to give a shot of some sort to another performer whose name is Johnny and who does not like shots. In order to accept the offer, the other performer must assent to these things as facts in the shared reality. Johnny might say in a whiny childlike voice, “It’s ‘cause they hurt!” This is a fairly obvious acceptance of the facts the first speaker offered.

Alternatively, the second speaker might say, “Lorenzo, why are you talking about shots when we have a floor to clean. And stop calling me Johnny, you weirdo!” This is what is called “denying” or “blocking”. The performer denied the reality implicit in the first statement. Denial is a primary sin in improvisation. By denying, performers destroy

whatever reality has been created in favor of their own ideas. However, the reality is only broken when participants choose to leave it. They may be enticed, even driven, out of the dramatic reality, but in the final analysis, one only leaves by one's own choice.

Any player may "justify" even the most egregious denial. To "justify" is to fit something that may seem out of place into the existing reality. The first player may justify his partner's seeming gaff by saying something like, "That's OK. I'm done playing 'Doctor' anyway. Let's play 'Cowboys and Janitors.'" He accepts his partner's offer while justifying it with his own previous offers.

The improviser's goal is to accept and justify every offer. By the continuous process of making and accepting offers the group mind develops wherein performers have a shared understanding of who each character is, where they are and what they are doing. The group mind can include an enormous amount of detail as performers create invisible furniture and objects and complex and dynamic relationships.

This created reality is fragile and must be maintained by audience and performers alike. It takes very little for the outside world to encroach upon and destroy the reality of the drama. A baby crying or an inadvertent stage entrance is sometimes all it takes to draw participants out of the dramatic reality, out of engagement and into observation. However, these setbacks and more can be overcome so long as participants continue to accept and justify each other's offers.

Learning to say "yes" instead of "no," to accept instead of to deny, is a surprisingly hard thing for new improvisers to learn. "There is a part of us that says, 'Yeah, but. . .'" (Messing Personal Interview). As a culture, we like to know where we

are going, to have a plan. The act of improvisation is an act of extreme courage and trust. We are taught to rely on ourselves and our own ability to make things happen, but the rule of Improv demands that each must depend on the other. In order to accept the offer, one has to let go of any plans or expectations and pay attention to what is. The scene develops like a rock soup with each person adding little pieces to the shared whole. “When we put something onstage it’s fascinating. It’s not our job to decide what’s interesting or not. It’s our job to do” (Messing, Personal Interview).

In addition to accepting the other offers, each improviser must make offers of his or her own, adding to the reality being created. This heightening is the ‘And’ part of the formulation. Heightening means that one adds more information to the shared reality. In the previous example, Johnny accepted the offer, but he didn’t add much to their relationship. In order to heighten, he might have said, “You know Doc, an extra lollipop might keep me from screaming . . . ,” while pointing to a corner of the stage. We now know that the first speaker is a doctor and what he hopes to avoid. We also know what Johnny hopes to accomplish. Because Johnny pointed, we also know where the suckers reside in the office. In improvisation, offers are made both verbally and with every available nonverbal cue. Johnny may have shifted his physicality or voice to indicate that he is a child. The doctor might accept the offer by giving Johnny the sucker. In which case, Johnny could demand bigger and bigger concessions from the doctor to prevent his screaming. The doctor could also refuse to give him the sucker forcing Johnny to greater and greater lengths to get his lolly. On the face, this may seem like a denial, but it is not, because he accepts that Johnny wants the sucker. He simply makes the offer that the

doctor doesn't give extra suckers. In either case, the scene progresses by the cycle of offer and acceptance, which can be called the Yes-And process.

## Chapter 3

### What is the Harold?

### Or A Pirate Ship in Search of Gold

*The Harold makes the banal extraordinary and the extraordinary commonplace.*

-Jason Chin

At face value, the Harold is the structure for an improvisational performance piece. The whole is more than the sum of its parts. It is the original long form. Previous to the Harold, performance improv was either short form games or Second City style material development. The structure of the Harold for the first time allowed performers to consistently create performance quality pieces.

Jessica Rogers, a teacher at both IO and Second City, says “The Harold is an ensemblic exploration of ideas, patterns, and connections, inspired by a single suggestion from the audience” (Rogers, Personal Interview).

Rachael Mason, a long time teacher and head of the training center, says, “The Harold is a crucible, or a test tube, a science experiment, a grand adventure, pirates in a ship setting out to find gold” (Personal Interview).

Susan Messing, who teaches at IO and the Annoyance and who created IO's level 2 curriculum while high in her bathtub, describes the Harold saying, "The Harold is the prettiest thing I've ever seen.

When a Harold is beautiful and people don't give up, there is no form that's prettier in its simplicity. Because it allows you to create something that you would never have created on your own. You have to listen to your friends. You have to listen to everybody and elevate their ideas. (Personal Interview)

Holly Laurent, another IO teacher, says, "It's a 'Sleeping Beauty', but you don't know what the personality is going to be when it wakes up. But just kiss the f--- out of it" (Laurent, Personal Interview).

Furthermore, in its simplicity, the Harold encapsulates the entirety of long-form performance. Like the Eastern strategy game "Go", it takes a minute to learn and a lifetime to master. The skills inherent in the Harold allow the Harold practitioner to competently perform any long form improvisation. It therefore has become the basic tool of long-form pedagogy at IO. "[The Harold] pulls out the best and the worst in you as a human being and a performer" (Messing, Personal Interview).

Originally the Harold was just a series of scenes derived from a single suggestion. However, with no more structure than that, it was ponderous and often difficult to follow. The genius that forged the legendary partnership of Charna Halpern and Del Close was the introduction of the "Time Dash" into the Harold structure.

Before Del Close, ImprovOlympic was a competitive short form theatre similar to the modern day ComedySportz. One of their games, the "Time Dash", consisted of a three beat scene separated by time jumps. At the end of the each beat, the action would jump either into the future or the past furthering the story of the first beat.

Similarly, the structure of the Harold consists of three beats. The piece begins with an opening which explores the suggestion followed by the first beat, which consists of three unrelated scenes based on the information generated in the opening. The second beat begins with a game which further explores the suggestion and the nascent themes that are developing, then three scenes inspired by the first beat scenes. The third is the same as the second, further exploring the themes. Each scene in the later beats is directly related to a scene in the first beat. That is, the first scene in the first beat (1A) corresponds to the first scene in the second beat (2A) and the first scene in the third beat (3A). It is only as the whole Harold unfolds that one looks back and sees the interrelatedness of the piece. So the full structure looks like:

Opening  
 1A  
 1B  
 1C  
 Group Game  
 2A  
 2B  
 2C  
 Group Game  
 3A  
 3B  
 3C

(Halpern et al)

Messing says,

The opening is where you guys get to all hang out together and take [that suggestion] butterfly and turn it into anything but butterfly. Almost as if you're creating a poem. ABC [the first beat of scenes] is the opportunity to take all of the tiny little elements that are flying around and put them in there. Then I trust that they'll be used. The game is the opportunity for everyone to hang out together, because we've missed each other and to remind the audience how far we've come from the suggestion and butterfly. (Personal Interview)

Jessica Rogers, describes the opening saying,

It's like when you go to a musical and the first thing you hear is the overture. The overture is filled with little pieces of all of the songs. Then when the show actually starts, we get to all of the little pieces as full songs with words and the actors and the scenery. You get all these little snippets that we call back throughout the piece with greater complexity. (Personal Interview)

Jason Chin, a longtime performer and teacher at IO, describes the opening as poetry. "Any suggestion can be made into a poem. From proctology it can be fear of medicine or fear of getting old. It takes off the pressure of being funny. I'd rather have a nice poem than a funny line" (Personal Interview).

The opening accomplishes three things in the Harold: 1) It generates material for the piece 2) It build the connection between the players, the Group Mind 3) It educates the audience about the performance they are about to be a part of.

However, the opening can be intimidating. Holly Laurent says, 'I remember teachers saying, "Here's how you get through the opening.' I remember thinking, 'Oh, the opening is something you have to get through.' After years of thinking, 'Just get through the opening,' I fell in love with it" (Laurent Personal Interview).

Almost anything can be an opening or a game. Some common ones are monologues, machines, and improvised dance or movement pieces, like Susan Messing's famous Buzby Berkley game, (a dance game based on Berkley's choreography, in which players create improvised dances using a loose structure and mirroring techniques).

Some are very structured like the invocation as described by Jessica Rogers. First as an ensemble you describe the specific object using the phrase "It is..." If the

suggestion was cup, we might hear “It is chipped” or “It is ceramic.” Once the group is comfortable with the description they move on to “You are....” “You are...” establishes a personal connection with the object and us. They are adding feelings and emotions to the visual. “You are the cup I took my first sip out of” or “You are the cup I broke when my mother died.” Then the ensemble moves on to the “Thou art. . .” which is the “Shakespearean” poetic description. Here the ensemble is looking for the universal qualities of this cup, how everyone can relate to it. “Thou art the quencher of my thirst on a summer’s night.” Finally comes the “I am....” Up until now the team has been invoking the cup. Now they become it. Now they ask what does the cup represent? “I am first times” based on the first sip or “I am heart break.” Here the team sums up the information that has been presented. Now instead of just a cup, the team has all of the information that has been created.

The invocation was created by Del Close. During his time at Second City, Del would sometimes hold highly ritualized invocations in full pagan regalia in the basement. Rumor has it that this sort of behavior was sternly frowned on at corporate minded Second City. It was endemic of the conflict between Del Close and Bernie Sahlins, who ran Second City at the time. Del’s instinct for experimentation was incompatible with Bernie’s staid ways, a conflict which ultimately led to Del’s being let go.

On the opposite extreme from the invocation, some openings have almost no structure at all. Often called the organic opening, Messing describes it saying, “Sometimes the game just starts with an initiation. You have no idea what the game is. I call that ‘the ambiguous game.’ The trust is that there is a game there. Through

heightening and doing more of what you're doing you'll find out what the game is" (Personal Interview).

Ultimately though, whatever form they take, the opening and the games are vital. Holly Laurent says, "[They are] the artist's palette. It's the colors of the upcoming painting. You're educating your audience in how to watch the piece" (Laurent Personal Interview).

The "painting" is comprised of three beats of three scenes created with the colors found in the opening and group games. Initially the three beats of any given A, B, or C scene would, if performed separately from the Harold, look like a "Time Dash". Very quickly, the relation of the Time Dash became only one weapon in the improvisers' arsenal for relating the three scenes. They may be only related by theme. They may follow one character through a variety of interactions. They might replay the same scene from different points of view. The possibilities are only limited by the imagination of the performers.

In the end the Harold is the tool of the performers. Laurent says, "I used to think the Harold was imposing this structure, but now I see it as just potential. . . I'm in conversation with the living Harold" (Laurent Personal Interview). It is this unbridled potential for creation that keeps the Harold a vibrant and living form in spite of thousands upon thousands of performances in the last decades. "Del knew that this is an art of transformation and it would transform again. What I love about the Harold is that it's still poised for greatness, for transformation. We're in a renaissance now" (Mason, Personal Interview).

## Chapter 4

### **Learning and Teaching the Harold: The IO Training Center**

#### **Or A Little Horny, Nerdy Utopia**

*I was lucky enough to be taught by people who were passionate and excited about their craft.*

-Holly Laurent

Today the IO theatre sits on Clark St. in Chicago just steps away from the world famous Wrigley Field. There are two theatres. Upstairs is the Del Close theatre with rows of traditional seating. Downstairs is the Cabaret with cabaret style seating packed in so close that when the house is full you are literally elbow to elbow with your fellow patrons.

The IO community of performers and students is about 500-600 people. Rachael Mason describes it as “A little horny, nerdy utopia” (Personal Interview). Bill Arnett, one IO teacher and performer, lovingly describes the community as a “caste system” with House teams, and then Harold teams on down to the newest students (Personal Interview). Ultimately, “The tenets of improv, yes-and, agreement, seeing possibility in

other people's ideas when even they may not see it creates a community that values other people" (Arnett Personal Interview). IO is certainly a community that values people.

Originally at the ImprovOlympic, there were only shows on weekend nights and Mondays (because the IO alumni who were ruling The Second City's Main Stage at the time were off on Mondays). Today there are shows in both theatres every night of the week.

When Jason Chin took over the training center as a part time job in the early 90's there were four levels and 3-4 classes per level. Today, Rachael Mason, the full time head of the training center, presides over six levels and 5-6 classes per level (Chin, Personal Interview)

Originally the Training Center was just Del Close. As he tired of teaching the basics, beginning students were taught by Charna and her top performers. "My first teachers were my top performers, and they still are. Once they've learned it from me and Del and you knew they knew the truth and you knew they believed the truth, then they could go and spread the word" (Halpern, Personal Interview).

This passion for the "truth" and performance is one significant mark that distinguishes IO:

The difference between Second City and IO is that when I went through the training center there, I was taught by a bunch of people who weren't playing. At IO, I was taught by the generation of performers right before me. I was lucky enough to be taught by people who were passionate and excited about their craft. (Laurent, Personal Interview)

In the old days, once a student got to Del, she studied with Del until he graduated you. Jason Chin, who was in Del's class for over a year, describes the class saying,

Del would talk for half an hour, then it would turn out that what he was talking about was what we were doing for class. If you weren't paying attention, you were screwed. There'd be half an hour of what would seem like a rant, then Del would say something like "What if... we were to play people like that on stage?" Then he'd always say, 'Let's see what kind of trouble we can get into.' I always loved that. He didn't really play games. Del's class was the lab. By the time you got to Del you had hopefully garnered enough knowledge that he could just f--- with you. (Personal Interview)

Originally most of the teachers had studied with Del. However, Del passed away in 1999. "It's . . . now getting to where the teachers haven't studied with Del" (Halpern Personal Interview). Over the years Charna has perfected the process of grooming her teachers. "The teachers that haven't studied with Del first start out coaching. Then they sit in with me for a whole session. Then I let them run a session under supervision" (Halpern, Personal Interview).

"It used to be 5 levels and then Del. On paper it said 1-5 then 'Del.' When Noah took it over, he was asked should it be called Noah or 6. He said, 'No. Del didn't have a number and nobody is higher or better than Del. Let's call it 5B and there will never be class higher than 5'" (Chin, Personal Interview). Today there are five eight week levels plus the performance level called 5B.

The curriculum now is:

Level 1 – Introduction – Patterns, Theory and Connections.

Level 2 – Teamwork, Character and Environment

Level 3 – Scene Work

Level 4 – The Harold

Level 5 - Other Forms

Level 5B – Performance

Recently the Harold class was moved from level 2 to level 4. Rachael Mason, the head of the training center, said “People used to come here because they already knew the Harold, so it was much more free form. Now about 60% of the people who come don’t come from an improv background, so they slowed it down” (Personal Interview). This also highlights a major challenge facing IO teachers, expressed by Jessica Rogers, “I have to be aware that there are various experience levels and various performance levels. I have to take care of the person who’s been doing this for ten years and for the person whose never done this before” (Personal Interview).

Today, IO teaches the long-form by teaching towards the Harold. “The Harold is a codified way to teach long form. You get abstract group work, two person relationship scenes, connections, hopefully metaphors. It was designed to be taught” (Chin, Personal Interview).

IO’s pedagogy has a number of basic tactics. The first is based on isolation, then synthesis. “It’s like a golf swing; you’re doing 30, 40, 50 different things and obviously you can’t think of all of them at once. So you isolate each thing and practice it until it becomes muscle memory” (Laurent, Personal Interview). Often a class at IO begins with the phrase, “The improv muscle we’re going to work today is...”

Jessica Rogers highlights “providing constructive feedback and constructive criticism as well as finding opportunities to build them up, to compliment them on the work that they’re doing. There has to be a balance” (Personal Interview).

Alongside this, Jason Chin points to the need to teach by example:

Making connections is taught by the teacher making the connections for them. For instance, around Halloween a class was doing a show with Frankenstein’s

monster and the Garden of Eden. I pointed out that Frankenstein gave the monster a name. Does anyone know it? Adam. You don't need to know it, but I as an audience member know it. If you take it seriously and don't make a joke of it, I'll think you did it on purpose. If you treat it as art, it will be treated as art. (Chin Personal Interview)

In addition to the actual performance of the exercise, the teacher's critique (or decision not to critique) is the most powerful teaching tool.

This leads to a form of "via negativa", a theatrical teaching method popularized by Jerzy Grotowsky, where the teacher isolates and removes impediments in the student, thus releasing a wider range of performance potential. "As a teacher, I can quickly and effectively get rid of the bad patterns, and really get those lessons to stick. Rather than being home run hitters, getting them to be good contact hitters, getting someone on base, getting things started. The top end will come" (Bill Arnett, Personal Interview).

Through isolation in exercises and expert critique, bad habits replaced with better ones.

However, Charna attests, "We walk such a fine line, because part of what we're teaching is that there are no mistakes, that whatever you or your partner does is rife with possibility. However there are choices that are more productive, more active, more connected, choices that are more apt to create good scene work." Charna believes that there are people who are fantastic performers who cannot teach *because* they are such great improvisers. They cannot correct a class because they don't see the error another teacher sees. They just see the opportunities.

The first three levels are primarily exercises which isolate a particular "improv muscle." By level 4, students are regularly performing full Harolds. In level 5, they

study the historic forms derived from the Harold. In 5B they develop their own form and perform it on the IO stage.

Each level has a specific curriculum with specific exercises and goals for each session:

The mark of a good teacher is that you leave the curriculum to do what the class really needs. Sometimes you have a class that doesn't get there yet and that I have to take a side step and show them something they need. Sometimes you have a class that is progressing so fast that I get through the curriculum in six weeks [of eight] and then we can really experiment and really get in there. That's really fun. (Halpern, Personal Interview)

Bill Arnett says, "The level one curriculum is fairly set in stone. It gets a little broader the further you go up. But even in the level 1, you have to do the exercise, but the exercise will teach the lesson I want it to teach" (Personal Interview). As an example, he cites a simple exercise called "Sevens" in which you point at someone and name a category, (e.g. shampoo brands, Eddie Murphy movies). That person must name seven things in that category. Some people do it while clapping in rhythm, which teaches presence and spontaneity and avoiding judgment and over thinking. Arnett teaches it where students have as much time as they need and try to get it as correct as possible. He's teaching that you have time in a scene and you can take your time.

Describing Level 1, Arnett says, "Of all the intro classes in town, level 1 really seems to hit the ground running. It moves really quickly" (Personal Interview). Charna says, "We're bringing real slices of life to the stage. That's what I teach in the first level, how to do that."

Arnett offers two strategies for teaching level 1: 1) Establish the language. 2) Start every class with something simple and easy, so students know what's expected of them.

I design exercises either where it's very open ended or where success is judged by a very simple easily defined right or wrong. Everybody stand up. You're still sitting. You did it wrong. I really try to design them so they're that moronically simple. As things go along I get more open ended and subjective. Students know when they didn't do it, when the laughs aren't coming or their partner looks at them funny and does know what to do with it. (Personal Interview)

By the end of Level 1, students are expected to have grasped the rudiments of improvisation. "In the first level I want them to know all of the basics of improvisation, how to listen, how to agree. You'd be amazed at how hard that is. We also introduce the Harold, but they're not mastering it. They're just learning it" (Halpern Personal Interview). In their last class of level 1, students have the opportunity to perform a Harold together.

Level 2 was developed by Susan Messing (according to her, high in her bathtub):

I was watching people standing around saying clever things. I thought could listen to this [show] on the radio. I started thinking what do I like watching, people doing things, people being in the moment. Level 2 is character, environment and teamwork, because you can stick those things in any form" (Personal Interview).

She proposed her ideas to Charna. Charna remembers, "She said, here's the hole in the curriculum. We have something great here, but there's something missing" (Personal Interview). Charna says it was the best prepared presentation she'd ever seen and immediately saw the need that Messing was addressing:

I didn't feel like we did something wrong. Del and I were never big on character. We encouraged people to be themselves and they always managed to find their own voice, their own characters. I did know that we needed more environment. She showed me some of her exercises with being symmetrical on stage and I thought, 'That really will help the Harold.' It wasn't like we're missing something; so much as I can see what this is going to add. (Halpern Personal Interview)

The level 2 curriculum has definitely had an effect. Charna comments on how often she sees something brilliant onstage and immediately identifies it as the result of Messing's level 2 teaching. Messing says, "I get people back into the world" (Personal Interview).

Level three studies the scene. Students do scene exercises which isolate particular improv muscles to build the performers skill set. Students are challenged to do a scene as seriously as possible in a clichéd comic situation, like being pulled over by the police or a break up. In another, students are taught to listen to their partner by being forced to repeat their partner's line before they speak.

A: You're the first to know. I'm pregnant.

B: You're pregnant? That's amazing!

A: That is amazing! And I'm pretty sure it's yours!

B: You're pretty sure? . . .

In another, students are taught to make everything their partner says important by starting every line with either the words, "It's really important you said that because..." or

"When you say that it make me feel...."

A: You're the first to know. I'm pregnant.

B: It's really important you said that to me because it lets me know that you value our friendship as much as I do.

A: When you say that it makes me feel comforted to know my child will have you in her life.

B: It's really important that you said that because I was offered a job overseas, but now I'm really torn. . .

While the syntax may be cumbersome, it slows performers down so that they listen and react to their partner's offers. In some cases, brilliant, funny and emotionally rich scenes will be created. However, the point of these exercises is not fully fleshed scenes, but simply concentrating on a particular skill.

In level 4, everything that has come before comes together as students delve into the Harold. On teaching Level 4, Jason Chin says,

I teach the Harold in chronological order. First I teach patterns, those openings. My trick is that I don't call them openings. I call them performance art. For some reason it frees people up. Then I teach scene work, then group games. You can't teach the Harold piecemeal. In order to make the connections at the end you have to teach it in order (Personal Interview).

All three of the level 4 teachers consulted for this article, Jason Chin, Bill Arnett, and Holly Laurent, emphasized the importance of having students actually performing the Harold as soon as possible. "The last day I give them the option that I can give them notes like I would a team that I coach, which is a lot meaner. I'm more forgiving in class until week 5 or 6. By then I tell them I shouldn't be giving the same note" (Chin Personal Interview).

In level 4, Chin marks the student progress by using the same ten suggestions, “so that at the end they do Harold with that same suggestion and we can see that growth” (Personal Interview).

When asked the difference between his level 1 classes and level 4 classes, Bill Arnett said the biggest one was that they knew the language: “I’ve had level 1 classes with higher top ends than some level 4 classes, but the level 4’s bottom ends are higher. Arnett adds:

After teaching for a number of years I’ve noticed a number of trends. One is that you get better at improv very slowly. It takes years to get really good. Even the A+ students in my classes, who are the constant object of praise from their classmates, have holes in their game. The second trend is that while students get better slowly, they tend to lose bad habits pretty quickly. By simply listening and playing the context you can do solid, serviceable work. Hilarious? Maybe not. (Arnett, Blog)

Level five is an investigation of other forms, some that are currently popular (like the “deconstruction” and other archaic forms like the “movie”, which was revitalized by Jason Chin), and some that are no longer done. Students get the opportunity to see the malleability of their education in the Harold. “Harold is Latin and other forms are the Romance languages. If you learn Harold well, all of the other forms are easy” (Chin Personal Interview).

In Level 5B students develop and perform their own form. The head of the training center, Rachael Mason says, “Even Del realized that there was something beyond the Harold. We learn the rules to break them. The Harold is the basis of everything but the last step is to f--- with the form” (Personal Interview).

After graduating, a few students will be chosen for Harold teams with regular weekly performances at IO. It used to be that half or more would make teams, but now less than 5% make it. If they don't, there are innumerable opportunities for performance in Chicago. With practice they will get better, then they may audition for a Harold team.

What does all of this training and practice gain the student-performer? One does not necessarily walk out of the training center as great improviser, as anyone who has seen level 5 shows can attest. However, the student walks out with the skills to grow as a performer. She has good habits in place and a solid base of critical knowledge. All she needs is to keep working and practicing. Eventually, "We get to a place where our own natural gifts and instincts can shine through. I don't think that my sense of humor has changed in the last 20 years. But I'm able to portray it more" (Arnett Personal Interview).

## Chapter 5

### The Ethics of Improv

### Or How Improv Changed My Life

*It's totally a parallel universe for me. Everything you learn here is a philosophy for life.*

-Charna Halpern

When we talk about learning and teaching improv, we talk about learning and teaching the rules. There are a variety of versions of these “rules.” While commenting on teaching the rules in the IO curriculum, Rachael Mason, head of the training center listed: “Yes-and your partner. Make your partner look good. Give your partner a gift. Give yourself a gift. Be ready to help. Be ready to edit.” Del Close in unpublished notes on the Harold describes the following General Principles:

1. You are all supporting actors
- 2 Always check your impulses.
- 3 Never enter a scene unless you are needed.
- 4 Save your fellow actor, don't worry about the piece.
- 5 Your prime responsibility is to support.
- 6 Work at the top of your brains at all times.
- 7 Never underestimate or condescend to your audience.
- 8 No jokes (unless it is tipped in front that it is a joke.)
- 9 Trust...trust your fellow actors to support you; trust them to come through if you lay something heavy on them; trust yourself.
- 10 Avoid judging what is going down in terms of whether it needs help (either by entering or cutting), what can best follow, or how you can support it imaginatively if your support is called for.
- 11 LISTEN

In each case, with the exception of a bit of theatrical jargon and a rule or two about stage mechanics, these rules seem more like a code of conduct than a description of a theatrical form. This is because the key to good Harold work, and improvisation in general, lies in the way we interact with our partners, not in the inherent cleverness or value of what we have to say. As Holly Laurent says simply, “Improv is taking on the mantle of service. I am going to be of service to my partner, to this scene, to this piece and to this art form” (Personal Interview).

A skilled Harold improviser has internalized a variety of skills and ideas: yes-and, listening, give and take, playing at the top of one’s intelligence, group mind, recognizing and playing status, originality, recognizing patterns, character, object work, remembering information, challenging oneself, recognizing the shortcomings of the ‘bit, to list just a few. These skills can be broken down into two major categories.

The first are the story-telling and staging skills. These are the skills and rules that govern the way the characters interact to make for a good theatre. For example, Mason’s admonition to be ready to edit or Close’s Principle #8 about jokes. We can also point to status play and status reversals which make for good story telling, but happen at the level of the character, not between the actors. When your servant has humiliated your partner’s master character, you have not humiliated your partner. In fact you have done your partner a service by giving her a variety of circumstance to react to and explore her character.

The other type we might term as “ethical skills” since they have both an ethical and a skill based element. These are the skills we are referring to when we discuss

knowing the “rules.” These are behaviors that are at play between the actors, that is to say the people who are on stage. Furthermore, upon deeper examination, we see that many of these skills are, in fact, decisions to behave in certain ways. This is an important point because decision-making can be taught and learned. Not every one can be quick and clever onstage, but anyone can choose to listen and react honestly. Nevertheless, awareness of and the ability to consistently choose the productive course requires training and develops with practice. When one steps onstage to improvise one must adopt a particular ethical stance towards the other players.

In essence, “There’re two things going on in the Harold. One thing is a group of people working together and on the other level is this show, this piece you’re trying to create” (Arnett, Personal Interview). The story-telling skills guide us in creating the show and the ethical skills guide us in dealing with the group.

It is important to note that when we refer to ethics we mean a code of behavior. This is not a moral discussion of right and wrong. We are simply trying to identify the systems of behavior that improvisers endeavor to enact. So "ethical skills" means “skills which enable us to behave in certain ways together”. These intertwined ethical skills will be explored more fully in subsequent sections. They include:

Listening

Regard for the other

Agreement

Authenticity

Taking risks

Without doubt there are innumerable other factors at play in successful improvisation, but a commitment to these five principles as a performer are necessary for a successful and fulfilling career as an improviser. Furthermore, we will see how many of the axiomatic standards of improvisation derive directly from these ideals. While it is true that one may enjoy a limited short term success while ignoring one or even several of these ethical skills, inevitably one will plateau. These taken together comprise a sort of ethic of improv. Only by fully committing to this ethic can one continue to grow and excel as an improviser.

These are the skills that are applicable regardless of our reasons for teaching and learning improvisation. This is why businesses pay very well to have improvisers teach their employees. They are the skills sought by the traditional actor hoping to further his acting, as well as the improviser hoping to make it on to an IO Harold team. It is these skills that make improvisation as appropriate in Sunday school as in the Cabaret, in the ethics classroom and trade conventions as the theatre workshop. Charna says, “I tell people that I have a great scam going here; you’re paying me to learn how to do things that you already know how to do. You just don’t realize it.” (Personal Interview)

Most improvisers have a story or two about how the skills they learned in improvisation changed their lives for the better. As Jessica Rogers says, “If you can master it onstage, you can master it in real life” (Personal Interview). Susan Messing says simply, “I get along better with people. I have more compassion” (Personal Interview).

Jason Chin describes a scene in Del's class where a young woman was breaking up with his character. He says he was just playing around and Del stopped him. Del asked him to play it as he would in real life. Jason replied, "That's probably what I would do in real life." Del said, "Well, that's sad. Let's see some real emotions. If you can't do it in real life, do it on stage and pretty soon you'll find that you're doing it in real life." Chin attests, "That's true. Now I can do it on stage and in real life." (Chin, Personal Interview)

Holly Laurent says, "I just notice a lot when I'm dealing with life situations that a lot of my ways of dealing with and processing things, I'll notice, 'Hey that's improv language'" (Personal Interview). She tells this story:

I was talking to Charna recently about relationships. I was saying, 'I think I want to be in a relationship so badly that I'm forcing things. I keep asking too many questions, like, what is this? What are we? Where is this going?' She was like, 'Well, that's funny, because in relationship scenes, you would tell your students, don't talk about the relationship. Just be in it.' I was like, 'That's just what I need to do in my relationships is just be in them. Stop talking about it. Just look at each other and trust and respond.' (Personal Interview)

Charna recently got stopped for running a stop sign while talking on a cell phone. Not only did she not get a ticket, the officer is doing the monologues for the Armando Diaz, a weekly show with guest artists who give true life monologues. By using the skills developed from almost 30 years of performing and teaching improv, Charna was able to affect a real life relationship, even when it seemed adversarial. "It's just communication, not arguing, just working together, no negativity. I'm telling you we could save our corner of the world. When this man stopped me, he was pissed" (Personal Interview).

## **The Prime Directive**

The improvisational ethic begins with the ethical Prime Directive: the only thing that I can control is myself. The improviser must know that she cannot control her audience, her partners or anything else, except her own body and voice and what she does with them. As long as the improviser struggles to control things which are out of her control, she will be frustrated. Susan Messing says, “The only thing I own is my body. Everything else is discovered by me and my partner” (Personal Interview). This realization is the beginning of the ethical life.

A good ethic must be based solely in one’s own action and cannot be dependent on the other. It cannot be the business of “I will behave this way so long as you do too.” That is not ethics, but negotiation. This is not to say that the ethic is not responsive to the action of the other. One does not take the same action in the face of action within the ethic and behavior outside the ethic. The different action is simply a function of the ethic being applied differently.

For example, if my partner is showboating, making everything about him, I could abandon my ethic and fight with him over who is the focus of the scene in which case the scene would crumble around our ears and we’d both look foolish. Alternatively, I could make him look good to the best of my ability. We would then be working towards the same goal, making him look good. Knowing that his showboating was annoying me, I would also know it is annoying the audience. I would react honestly and tell him how I was feeling about his hot-dogging. The audience would feel like they were spoken for and he would then have the chance to react to my authentic expression. He might find

some humility, resulting in a fun status reversal or he might bluster even more resulting in a heightened next beat. Either way, we'd both come off looking great. By listening and reacting to what was there, I would have created the opportunity for a successful scene where trying to out-showboat the show boater would have ruined the scene.

## **Listening**

Listening in improvisation is a more inclusive idea than simply hearing your partner. To listen we must hear every aspect of what is said, not simply the words, but every nuance of the voice, face and body. When we are truly in the moment, listening to our partners, everything becomes important. Susan Messing says, "Being in the moment just means smelling, touching, tasting, feeling, NOW! If we're in the moment and I say it smells like sulphur, after a while we all smell it too. You can't help it. It's contagious. Joy is contagious and hell is contagious" (Personal Interview).

We have to learn to listen to our partner, not necessarily as a character, but as an actor. Sometimes what the character is saying to us is the opposite of what the actor is saying to us. Charna Halpern tells the story of a scene where she is curled up on the stage cowering from her partner. She cries out in a desperate voice, "Please, give me some food. Please." She will then ask her students if her partner should give her food. Inevitably, the responses are mixed. She then points out that although the character is begging for the food, the actor is asking that the food be denied. The cringing and tone of voice, even the question itself, suggest an abuse situation. The actor is asking her partner to take on the role of the abuser. To grant her verbal request for food is to deny the

actor's request, physically communicated. Ironically, sometimes listening to the actor requires not listening to the character.

Only by listening do we discover who and where we are. Charna says, "It's about what's going on between us and that's what we teach you to find. We find that out by listening to each other in the first three lines" (Personal Interview). With each offer from the actors onstage we receive gifts of information about ourselves, them and our shared circumstances. Only by fully listening do we learn what gifts we are being given.

Listening is a surprisingly difficult to learn onstage. Charna describes the phenomena, saying,

You can do it in real life but you get on stage and for some reason you forget how to listen. He'll walk onstage and say, 'I killed your cat. What's for dinner?' and she'll say, "Steak and fries and..." I'll say "Did you hear him just say, 'I killed your cat?'" and she'll say, 'No. I didn't hear that.' Everyone else heard it. It's just amazing. (Personal Interview)

Holly Laurent says, "We are generally just waiting to say our piece, not truly listening. If we are truly listening, we are truly improvising. We can really be affected by what was just said and we end up saying something different than what we would have" (Laurent, Personal Interview). She suggests that not listening is caused by our desire to "look good" and have something "good" ready to say, so the cure is to shift our focus from ourselves and what we are going to say to our partner and what they are saying, which brings us to our next point.

**Regard for the other**

Perhaps the most commonly repeated phrase amongst the teachers at IO is “We treat each other like artists, poets and geniuses.” This maxim of Del Close is foundational to the IO way of life and to IO performance. The implications run deep for the improviser. Rachael Mason says, “Treating people like artists, poets and geniuses just means loving somebody. It means understanding somebody, loving somebody for who they are, appreciating what they bring to the table. It’s the best f-----g thing in the whole world.” Or as Charna simply puts it, “It means respecting their ideas” (Halpern, Personal Interview).

This means, for instance, that whatever our partner says onstage is brilliant. We must suspend judgment and know that whatever offers are given are exactly right. It means that everything becomes important, no matter how seemingly insignificant. Messing says, “Sometimes somebody will make a joke and you will spend the rest of your scene justifying that so that it doesn’t sit there like a piece of poo-poo. You want to make it as pretty as you can” (Personal Interview).

Sometimes, a tiny thing made important is all we need for an inspired scene. A colleague of mine, Deb Fialko, once demonstrated this brilliantly in clowning class we both took. We were doing improvised solo scenes, which in clowning means that the environment is your partner. We all fumbled around trying to find something interesting to do with some practice blocks and chairs. Finally, it was Deb’s turn. She was, if anything, more scared than the rest of us, tentatively pushing the block around hoping that something would happen. Suddenly, a bird sang outside the open window. Deb

heard it and froze. We all laughed at her noticing. She went back to the boxes and we thought it was over. Then we saw her thinking (because you can always see a clown thinking). She left the boxes and started looking for the bird. She couldn't find it, so she whistled for it. Unbelievably, the bird whistled back. She froze and we all laughed. They commenced to singing back and forth to each other. Finally, the bird bored of the game and stopped singing back. We got to see Deb's clown react to the loss. It was without a doubt the most memorable scene from the whole semester long class. It never would have happened if Deb had not made a single tiny detail from her partner, the environment, supremely important. She then made everything the bird, her new partner, did central and went on to create one of the funniest, most compelling scenes I've ever seen.

We can do the same thing with our living partners. A single look or twitch or word, something that the person delivering might not even know they did, can take on prime significance.

You can take somebody's idea and turn it into the most important thing on earth, even though they just meant it as a brush off. You're like, 'Nope. I can turn that into a game. That's brilliant. I love what you said.' That's kind of nice to have your friends elevate you to an artist when you're just talking out of you're a--. That is a pleasure" (Messing, Personal Interview).

This elevation becomes a safety line for us as we navigate our way together through the scene.

By assigning meaning to the meaningless, we are building the world in which our characters live. "The Harold is bigger than the individual. What you are saying at the end of it is bigger than any of the individuals in it" (Mason, Personal Interview).

One of the easiest ways to make our partner important is to mirror them. We see our partner is holding a sword, so we mirror them on the other side of the stage. We have created a nice stage picture and world full of soldiers. Messing adds, “It gives you something to do and now your friend doesn’t look like an a—hole” (Personal Interview).

If we are not enjoying our partners we are judging them. Put another way, Laurent says, “The more you judge something the sh---ier you feel. The more you commit to something the better you feel” (Personal Interview). One of the easiest ways to enjoy whatever your partner does is to find the commonalities, to seek agreement, onstage or at home. Charna reminds us of the Biblical maxim, “Judge not, lest ye be judged” (Halpern, Personal Interview).

### **Agreement**

Agreement is about learning to say “Yes” to the actor, not to the character and it is by listening that we learn which is which. “To recognize the difference between ‘Yes-and’ and just saying the word ‘yes’ just to say ‘yes’ is a huge thing” (Rogers Personal Interview). Sometimes a “yes” to the character would mean a “no” to the actor, as illustrated in Charna’s story of the abused child asking for food.

Agreement is more than Yes-And. It is also finding a way not to argue, finding our commonalities, not our differences. We must agree on what the subject of the matter is. Charna Halpern described teaching agreement, saying:

I would teach agreement with conflict scenes, scenes that might normally cause conflict, but today we are going to find the agreement in the situation, because it’s not about the conflict. You and I are on a date and we both want to pick up the check. But we’re not going to fight about that because it not about the check. It’s

about us, what comes out from us listening. You say, “It’s because I’m the man.” What!?! Now it’s about women’s lib. It’s about equality. It’s not about the check. I’ve seen scenes come to a screeching halt because they think it’s about what to order on the pizza. No it’s not about that, it’s about “why don’t you want meat?” Because you don’t want to kill animals. It’s about that. It’s about religion. It’s about something greater. (Personal Interview)

Neither is agreement simply doing whatever the other players tell you to do. It is treating as true the reality they are offering, and then acting in a manner consistent with the reality of your character. This is commonly referred to as “holding onto your stuff.” Holding onto your stuff is the other side of acceptance in that the performer is accepting his or her own offers. This does not mean that performers hold onto all of their ideas about their characters or the story, but that they maintain all of the realities that have been presented on-stage. Messing describes it saying, “I don’t lead with plot, I lead with people. If I start the scene [with my stomach out and making a face] and you tell me I’m your lawyer. This is the lawyer you’re going to get. I don’t drop everything to become the most appropriate lawyer ever” (Personal Interview).

Herein lays the true challenge for the improviser. How does one accept every offer, while holding onto one’s stuff?

Refusing offers can happen in two ways, refusing the offer of another (blocking) or refusing one’s own offer (losing your stuff). The former may be seen in performers who steal the focus or upstage their fellows. The latter is apparent in tentative performers who allow their focus to be stolen. In essence, the performer’s job is to believe what one says about oneself and what others say about themselves, thus inviting the audience to believe you all. Every improviser must find a way between losing your stuff and

blocking. Losing your stuff manifests as a submissive self-negation and blocking is a dominating overvaluing of self. The task is to find a healthy sense of self, which allows one to interact with and be changed by other performers while still maintaining one's own integrity.

On the one hand, the temptation is to accept every offer without heightening. This performer becomes little more than a prop, subject to the will of all the other performers. He is not denying, so he may appear to be functioning in the group. But by not holding onto his stuff, he is not adding to the reality. He is making the rest of the group do his work. This improviser maintains no identity aside from that with which others imbue him. "Holding on to our stuff" is a life skill. "Learn to love your choices, and maybe in the big picture you'll learn to love your life" (Messing Personal Interview).

On the other hand is the improviser who holds onto her stuff too tightly. She refuses to let go of her plans and accept offers from other performers. She becomes the director demanding that all of the performers fit into her vision of the reality. She pushes forward toward her vision expecting the others to let of their stuff in order to accept her offers.

Jessica Rogers tells this story:

You have to have an open mind to be successful. You have to have an open mind to take a suggestion from the audience and really delve deep and find more. I had a kid in my class that was pretty alright aside from his cockiness. He came to me the last day of class saying "I've done this since college, and I wasn't really expecting to learn anything. I did and I wanted to thank you." An attitude like that is going to be detrimental to his success. He's established that he's not a team player. You don't have to be an amazing performer to be successful. You have to have an open mind and be willing to learn and try new stuff out (Personal Interview).

Agreement is about being of service to our partners, our scene and our show.

Holly Laurent suggests “being in service to a scene you’re not even in, tossing real sweet underhanded pitches so they can knock something out of the park. Getting the assist, not the goal” (Personal Interview).

Ultimately, “Scenes are about support. If I put on a jet pack, someone will come out and make me fly” (Mason, Personal Interview). Our job is to support our team whether by putting on and keeping our jet pack or by helping our friend fly.

Agreement is one of the most valuable skills an improviser learns. It is the skill most commonly taught by improvisers to non-improvisers.

The magic happens the day that you give up your idea and add to what’s already there. There is no better idea than what’s already there. That’s why they pay improvisers to go into Fortune 500 companies, because what happens even in [certain theatres], is that as you get up in the power structure, you think, “It is my ability to say No and stop all this that shows how powerful I am.” But I’m thinking, “What did you create?” (Messing, Personal Interview)

### **Authenticity**

Improvisers strive to genuinely react to our partners from our own experience. This genuine reaction is the “Truth” in “*Truth in Comedy*”. But as Susan Messing says,

There were no characters because we kept saying “*Truth in Comedy*”. I kept saying, “I didn’t start this just to be me.” Everything is still an extension of us. It’s still going to have our brain following. So what’s a hip way to get characters without looking boinky or stereotypical? I always say just dial it up or dial it down depending on the building you’re in. (Personal Interview)

In improvisation, as in traditional scripted acting, performers run into the challenge of how to authentically play characters that are quite different from who we

are. Charna Halpern says that a character is just like you or an aspect of you in the given circumstances:

[Performers] need to slow down, be themselves, be as intelligent as they are. It's just like being your other self. Be real, be honest and we'll get something we can relate to. It will at least be interesting. If you can't be funny, at least be interesting." (Personal Interview)

Traditional actor training provides a variety of means by which an actor can prepare herself to create an authentic character by discovering links between the inner life of the character and her own experience. However the improviser does not have any prep time. Therefore the process is reversed. The improviser must simply become the character and discover as she goes where the character's reality and her own intersect. As Messing puts it, "I don't think, 'It would be funny to be an old lady.' I think, 'It would be fun at age 43 to try on a lady whose hips don't work and all of that.' It's a safe place" (Personal Interview).

We can imagine our psyche as a series of overlapping masks. These masks are also referred to as ego- or self-definitions. For instance one mask a person might wear is "I am a liberal," which for her means "I take care of all people." Behind that she might wear "I am Kind," then "I am Good. Behind that we might find "I am Loveable" leading to "I am Lonely." We could continue to unmask until we reach a place where we are not liberal or conservative, kind or cruel, good or bad. We simply are. There is no judgment, simply being. This is the face that wear's the masks.

This is not to say that the masks are untrue. Jacques Lecoq describes three types of masks; "the mask you think you are, the mask you really are and the mask we all share

in common”. Each of these is true in its own way, but the closer we get to the “face”, to the place of being, the deeper the truth of the mask. However, all of the masks that we choose as our own, indeed that we define ourselves by, are authentic masks. Even the lies we tell reveal our truths.

Traditional acting rifles through our deck of authentic masks to find one upon which can be built a structure that will lead to the character mask. The actor will show the mask the character wants to show the people around him. The great actor will let the masks behind the mask, the things the character tries to hide or doesn't know about himself, show through the cracks. The various masks in this structure are referred to as character history or motivations. The actor builds his structure of masks, and then based on that structure takes actions in the scene.

In contrast, the improviser simply puts on the character mask and moment-to-moment discovers the masks behind it. The improviser will take action, and will building and revealing the structure of masks behind masks simultaneously based on discoveries in the actions of the character – the actor's process in reverse. Put another way, a traditional actor will search through his memories and experiences in order to create a particular emotion or character. The improviser will simply portray an emotion or character and discover as the scene unravels the why and wherefore. In either case, she cannot hold the mask at arms length, but must don it and look through its eyes. This is the difference between acting and “acting at.”

Practically what does this mean? It means that our task, if we are playing a character with a point of view different from our own, is to discover the commonalities

between us and that character. For instance, a liberal is playing a staunch conservative. An inauthentic (but all too common) approach would be to use the character as a mouthpiece for the actor's viewpoints on the failure of the conservative viewpoint. The character could stupidly portray every liberal stereotype of the conservative view. Alternatively, the actor might live in the character moment to moment asking herself why might I subscribe to this worldview. She might discover that the character has a family with several small children. This could prompt the discovery that she believes that the conservative body politic will best protect her children's long term interests. The actor could still critique the conservative view by having her world collapse as she protects her family to the detriment of those around her. This would provide a much more poignant and effective critique as long as her genuine desire to protect her children, a need the actor can relate to, is at the forefront of the performance.

In other words, we react to our partners not saying, "What would a conservative do here?" Rather we ask, "What would I do if I were a conservative?" Ultimately, improvisation is more like than unlike traditional acting:

With theatre you have that research. You have to make those connections with the character in order to portray the author's words accurately. You have to really, really know who you are. You have to really, really know why you are saying what you are saying. You have to know why you are reacting the way you are. It's the same thing in improv. You have to understand who you are in order to react honestly to your partner. Truth in Comedy" (Rogers, Personal Interview).

Messing adds, "So often, we say, 'I'll dance really bad and that will be funny.' I say, 'Dance to the best of your ability.' At the best we'll say 'That's gorgeous'. At least,

we'll say, 'You danced to the best of your ability and that was still awful.' And you're still protected by the banner of comedy" (Personal Interview).

### **Taking risks**

"Go big or go home!" yelled out Matt during the "what have we learned" portion of Rachael Mason's level 2 class at IO. This quickly became the motto of our class. "Go big or go home" embodies the ideal of risk-taking. "Del used to literally jump off the bar into the arms of his students. That's the kind of risk we're allowed to take. I can say, "Meanwhile, in Brazil. . ." and it will happen" (Mason Personal Interview).

Improv stages are cluttered with performers speaking in a third person, ironic voice distancing themselves from their work as if to say to the audience, "Don't judge me. It's only improv." Yet, this apologetic attitude is anathema to any kind of authentic or engaged improvisation because the performer is judging what is occurring on stage, his works and his partners' work. He is protecting himself from feeling foolish by creating distance between himself and the work. However, as Bill Arnett points out, "One of the goals for students is to get comfortable enough to make strong choices" (Personal Interview).

Susan Messing also says, "In improv if you do something really well you should have warning bells going off saying, 'Now what? Now what? Now what?' The day that you take a risk is the day something happens." If we are only doing what we are good at we aren't growing as performers. As Messing says, "The day I stop growing is the day I stop dying" (Personal Interview).

The improviser, indeed any performer, must be willing to look silly, to be vulnerable. Vulnerability is space in which creation happens. The more vulnerability we are capable of, the more creative options we have. Taking risks, being vulnerable means many things in improv. It means trying something different every time. It means fully committing to what we are doing. Susan Messing says, “Comedy in this building comes from commitment to your world not from saying funny things” (Personal Interview).

Sometimes taking a risk just means doing something. Del Close famously said, “If you don’t know what to do, just fall down and figure out why on the way down.” The cardinal sin of improvisation is doing nothing. Anything can be turned into gold by an ensemble that is listening and making everything important.

Bill Arnett says, “The value of a choice is more in what the group does with it than the choice itself. I’ve seen people come out and weakly say something and the group jumps on it, thinks it’s hilarious. You see, you shouldn’t have been so weak about it. I was a good choice. ‘I guess, in retrospect it was’ they’ll say” (Personal Interview).

Messing tells the story of a scene where she didn’t know what to do, so she came out a laid down in the middle of the stage. Her partner began to open a locker. She asked him out. Another ensemble member came out and asked, “Why is Sally lying in s—t?” She went on doing what she’d been doing, but from then on she was the pathetic girl trying to flirt while lying in her own excrement. Messing said “a brilliant scene happened because I decided to lie down on stage” (Personal Interview).

Fear limits us. It can manifest in any number of ways, not just in stage paralysis. Fear can be a reliance on stock characters. It can manifest a snarky cleverness and bits.

It can be seen in false representational emotions. But all of its manifestations still boil down to fear of looking stupid, which is to some extent a false fear on the improv stage.

Messing says,

Improvisation is about overcoming fear, having to trust people that they might not know. Making yourself vulnerable is not going to put yourself in a vulnerable position, but only add to the fodder. Because even if you do look stupid, you do everything to the best of your ability and you still look stupid, you are still protected under the banner of comedy. It's a tough life. You are always protected. Real tough. (Personal Interview)

Holly Laurent says:

If you were to follow the Gospel of Improv, you'd be a better person. You'd be listening before speaking. You'd be looking for the best and believing the best about other people, and about yourself, first and foremost. Instead of abandoning ideas because they don't immediately please the audience, you invest in an idea because you believe in it. Instead of wearing a million different hats, you're believing in your choice. (Personal Interview)

The practice of improvisation develops in us these ethical skills including Listening, Regard for the Other, Agreement, Authenticity, and Taking risks. By exercising this ethic onstage it grows into our offstage lives. The way that we behave toward the people we play and improvise with transforms the way we treat the people we live with. "I have watched people be hateful when they come into my class, be rude, not listen, not care and they learn to listen and care and all of those things" (Messing Personal Interview).

## Chapter 6

### **An Improvisational Ethic for Love**

#### **Or Offers to our Beloved**

*Improv is taking on the mantle of service.*

-Holly Laurent

Have you ever been in love and wondered how to show that love? Have you ever watched a son or daughter suffer from mistakes you know how to avoid, not knowing whether to step in is the most loving action? Have you ever been in a relationship that made you feel small and known that love should not make you feel this way? We are told by religion and popular morality to “Love our fellows.” Yet we must wonder, “What is a loving response in a world that is often deeply unloving, even cruel?” Beneath all of this lies the question, “How do we love?” There can be no more fruitful endeavor than to investigate what we mean by love and how that affects our lives.

The rules of relationship devised by scenic improvisers for their art, the ethical skills identified in the last chapter, provide a powerful ethic by which we can guide our own loving interactions. There is a reason the State Department sought out Charna Halpern to assist with the reunification efforts in Cyprus. They understood that there is something about improvisation that allows people to live together in a more harmonious, more productive way.

In order to begin to define the improv ethic of love, I will use an ontological understanding of what one means by love, and an ethic of love built upon that understanding derived from an innovative understanding of love based on “process theology,” developed fully by Daniel Day Williams in *The Spirit and the Forms of Love*,

Because this is an ethic of love, the emphasis is on the subject, not the object of love; on the lover not the loved. As in improv, the prime directive in ethics is that the only thing we can control is our own action. The action of the other is their purview. The subject (us) takes action and can benefit from ethical reflection, whereas the object (our partner) is simply acted upon. From his or her own standpoint, the object of love may be also the subject of love. However, from any given relativistic stance we are only ethically concerned here with the actions of the lover. The beloved is responsible for his or her own choices. Since in actuality each of us can only truly change our own actions, this position is imperative for a realistic ethic of love.

Much work has been done to understand love by her various types. Often using the Greek designations, *Eros*, *Agape* and *Filia*, scholars and lay persons alike have developed definitions, often conflicting, of the various manifestations of love. While that work may be valuable, those differences are based on the nature of the object of love, that is who is the beloved.

Here we are concerned with the subject, the one who loves; I intend to look to the actions and decisions of love which transcends the relationship types. This is not specifically about romantic love or any other type of love. This is about love as a way of

life that reflects what is best, some may say divine, in us all. What I say here will be as applicable to a romantic relationship as to a parent-child relationship.

Williams understands the desire for communion, the capacity for love, as that part of humanity that is created in God's image. By investigating historical and Biblical understandings of love in terms of human relations, God-human relations and human-God relations, he proposed a set of five categories which he suggests are requisite for love to be "Love." Those defining characteristics are: 1) individuality, and taking account of the other; 2) freedom; 3) action and suffering; 4) Causality; 5) impartial judgment in loving concern for the other.

Each of these categories encapsulates a stance taken by the lover toward the beloved. These are the postures which any ethic of love must allow one to take. Each of the requirements expects that the lover allows for the possibility for the beloved to love. So, implicit in every stance is the necessity that the lover leaves room for the beloved to take that stance toward him or her. While being loved is not a requirement of love, the possibility to be loved is. By establishing oneself firmly in these ideals, one can begin to make ethically loving decisions and action in relation to one's beloved.

Williams' first proposition is that love requires "individuality and taking account of the other" (115). There must be two individuals in order for there to be love. The lover must see the beloved as an entity separate from himself or herself. Furthermore, the lover must acknowledge that both are capable of original thought and action. That is to say that the lover must be fully present to any encounter with the beloved. The lover cannot assume that the beloved is representative of any type, even a type derived from the

beloved's previous actions. Every encounter must be a real and present encounter rather than a predictive script leading to a foregone conclusion.

Secondly, love means freedom. This manifests in two ways. Firstly, the lover has the freedom to choose to love or not. Inasmuch as freedom exists in a world of natural and nurtured reactions, the lover must make the choice to love. While the initial impulse to love, the attraction, may be involuntary, the process and growth of love must be freely entered into. Knowing the dangers and risks of love, the lover may choose to abandon love, as a matter of self-protection. Secondly, the lover must affirm and accept the freedom of the beloved. The lover must understand that the beloved makes his or her decisions, even and especially the decision whether to love. Since the choice to love is an ontological necessity of love, love can never be coerced or manipulated. One can think of the archetypal love potion, and the inevitable disappointment of the object of that artificial love. One of the most important aspects of being loved is the knowledge that we are freely chosen. Without that, love is not love, but farce.

Next, love requires "Action and Suffering." From an ethical standpoint, love is an action. It involves feeling, emotions, desires etc., but it is by actions that it exists. In turn, love allows the possibility to be acted upon by the beloved. Therefore, action creates the possibility of transformation or suffering at the hand of the beloved. For example, implicit in the beloved's freedom to choose love is the possibility that he or she will choose not to love. That choice will cause suffering for the one who loves him or her. In essence, love is a risk. When we are immobilized by our fear for our own emotional safety, we are not acting in love. Fear is the antithesis of love, even as love's

requirements incite it. We must, if we are to love, face and move through our fear in order to enter into communion with our beloved.

Action and suffering imply causality. Actions made by the lover or the beloved must have the possibility of changing the other. Williams says that this means that coercion may be operative in love:

We restrain one another, oppose our wills to the other's use of his freedom. We set conditions, pass judgments and make demands. All these are aspects of human relationships which are intensified where there is love. But so long as love is present all such demands and conditions are intended for the sake of the other and for the growth of love. Certainly the condition 'so long as love is present' is supremely difficult. Much of sin gets into the human spirit under the guise of love. (119)

In contrast to Williams, I believe that when we coerce the beloved love has failed. If our love is invested in the response of the other, then our love is conditional. However, Williams is right in that we must take into account our loving attempts to act upon the beloved. The essence of Williams' argument is that love cannot exist without the possibility of transformation in the light of that love. In order to maintain that possibility for change, but address the assault on freedom implicit in any coercive love, I propose that we understand our actions toward transformation of the beloved as invitations. These invitations in love would always be toward the greater good of the beloved and of love itself. However, the lover's love would not be invested in whether the invitations are accepted. Love would continue regardless of the response of the beloved. In this way, we can fully respect the freedom of the beloved and perhaps begin to close the ethical chink in the armor whereby lovingly intended coercion becomes sin.

Williams' final requirement is of "impartial judgment in loving concern for the other." Often we hear that love is blind. However, if we do not truly see the other person, we cannot

love them. We love some construct of our own devising. Williams says, “Consider that if love is concern for the other as he really is, then objective knowledge must enter the experience of what it means to commit oneself to the other” (121). Williams also points out that only by objective knowledge of the other can we see and perhaps meet their needs. Only by honest and impartial understanding of what is actually there can we be in relation with the other.

Far from answering all of the questions, Williams’ schema presents a web of apparently conflicting interests. As previously discussed, freedom is in tension with causality. If impartial judgment were the sole ruler of love, we would likely never justify the risks inherent in taking action and the possibility of suffering. However, only by allowing ourselves the risks, can we trust ourselves to not destroy ourselves in the name of love. In essence, our needs as an individual come into conflict with the needs of the beloved. In love, we can discard neither and must account for both sets of needs. We must maintain a balance between self-affirmation and self-giving, never allowing ourselves to stray too far into their extreme manifestations, self-service or self-destruction.

These requirements of love provide the ontological frame work upon which this ethic of love is built. These are the ideals which the ethic is designed to fulfill. An improvisational understanding of relationships allows one to apprehend and implement this powerful understanding of love. The basic rules of Improv, encapsulated in the mantras, “Yes-And” and “Hold onto your stuff,” when practiced diligently provide a practical means to balance self-giving with self-affirmation.

This is the framework within which we can build an ethic of love. Love is to believe both my own reality and yours. By both of us choosing to be fully who we are, we create a new reality into which we can invite others. When we love someone, we must both be ourselves and

allow them to be themselves. The struggle between accepting and holding onto my stuff is the ageless tension between self-affirmation and self-giving.

Samuel Wells, in *Improvisation: The Drama of Christian Ethics*, calls this middle road “overaccepting.” Wells sees every offer as a gift where it is the receiver’s duty to find a use for the gift. “It is not a question of what a gift is *supposed* to be: it is a question of what a gift *can* be” (130). It is this overacceptance that is embodied in the oft-quoted Del Close admonition that “We treat each other as poets, artists and geniuses.”

In this way, one can accept any offer and hold it against our own “stuff” to discover what the offer can be. Accepting offers can no longer be confused with becoming what we are *supposed* to be. Instead the offer becomes an invitation to be who we *can* be. “It’s not people pleasing in lieu of yourself. Compromising is great. Compromising yourself is not” (Messing Personal Interview). When overacceptance becomes a way of life, the needs of love are fulfilled.

Each of the requirements outlined previously is met in the act of overaccepting. Those requirements were 1) individuality, and taking account of the other; 2) freedom; 3) action and suffering; 4) causality; 5) impartial judgment in loving concern for the other.

In order to overaccept the offer, the improviser must acknowledge and accept the individual creativity both within himself or herself and within the partner. They take account of the other as they must also be fully present, responding to the offer that is made, not the offer they expect. Improvisers are trained to let go of the past and future and be completely present for every offer. They then respond to that offer for what it is, not what they expected. In our relationships, we often respond to others as we expect them to be, based on our past experiences, not as they are in this moment. In love, we must engage our beloved where they are, not where we wish or expect them to be.

The improviser and the partner are obviously both free to act. In fact they must act.

Rachael Mason says, “The only mistake in improv is to do nothing. Anything else can be turned into gold” (Mason Personal Interview). Jessica Rogers adds, ““When you’re up there on that stage, you have to act, in order to react” (Personal Interview).

They may choose to follow or ignore the rules of Improv, with the understanding that to follow the rules moves the team closer to communion and true improvisation. Freedom to love is also implicit in the act of “holding onto one’s stuff.” Since loving is an act of being who we are, the choice to follow the rules is similarly an act of “holding onto one’s stuff” independent of the partner’s response. Holly Laurent says, “I think trust is at the base of group work, but it’s also trusting yourself so that you can trust other people (Laurent, Personal Interview).

Offer acceptance is not transactional. For a trained improviser, accepting another improviser’s offer is not contingent on his own offer being accepted. He accepts offers as a function of who he is as an improviser. In the example of denial above, the first speaker could continue to insist that he is a doctor, denying his partner’s reality so that they get into a contest which neither can win until the other surrenders over whose plan to follow. On the other hand, he could accept the new offer saying something like, “But Steve, I want so badly to be a doctor and get out of this janitor’s life.” In doing so he both accepts his partner’s offer and keeps his own offer on the table, exercising his own freedom while protecting his partner’s.

Both parties must take action and be acted upon in order to drive the scene forward, and each must be ready to suffer by letting go of their expectations of the scene. Rachael Mason points out, “You have to acknowledge the frustration that you have to give up your ideas.” (Messing, Personal Interview) Improv is a risky art. The first lesson taught to beginning improvisers is to accept failure. Failure is as inherent to Improv as suffering is to love. Yet out

of failure, breakdowns in the ethic of Improv, arise some of the best Improv moments. An apparently off-the-wall offer can sometime force performers out of the mundane into much more interesting realms of exploration. Similarly out of the breakdowns in the love ethic, the moments of suffering, arise some of the most loving moments of our lives. Suffering in love need not be a bad thing. It serves as an early warning sign of trouble and as a catalyst to growth often leading to truer and deeper communion.

Every offer is an invitation to transformation and greater communion. As offers are exchanged on the stage, improvisers shift and change their direction, moving with each offer closer in line with the other. The goal is to find a perfectly parallel path where all of the performers are moving together in the same direction, one step at a time, shifting and turning in unison. The same is true in love. As we accept and overaccept each offer we move closer to our beloved and invite them closer to us. We learn one another's values and ways and we are transformed by them. The goal is not to become as they are, but to grow closer and find a parallel direction.

Finally, in order to overaccept the offer, one must know what the offer is, and evaluate it in order to know what the overacceptance might be. We must pay attention to every offer as a new thing, and evaluate what it is and what it lacks. In the simplest terms, an improviser might hear an offer and find that the offer tells him who he is, but not where he is. He might then respond, that is Yes-And, with an exotic location to push the scene forward. Similarly, we need to listen to and appraise the offers from our beloved for what they are. We cannot be responsible for the clarity with which our beloved makes offers, but we can respond to each one with the fullest of our capabilities. We can ask what is here and what is needed here. This can lead us to finding the loving action to take.

How could this ethic practically guide us in our relationships? For a moment let's examine a specifically romantic relationship. I'm in love with a woman, let's say. She doesn't know whether she loves me or wants to be with me. Maybe she's angry with things in the past or she's afraid of losing herself in me. Maybe she just doesn't like who I am or what I bring to the table. If to truly love is to seek perfect communion, how could I act lovingly with someone who may or may not love me? Hollywood, popular literature and traditional theologies will commonly offer one of two options, the self-effacing love with no thought of reward or the intense and romantic seduction.

In the first case, I could serve her completely, attempt to meet her every need, with no regard for whether she loves me or not, perhaps never letting her know how I feel. I could do everything in my power to keep her from ever suffering while holding out no thought of reward for myself. This type of action might be held up as ideal within certain paradigms of selfless love, but this is clearly not holding on to my stuff. In my self-sacrificing act of eschewing the possibility of mutual love, I am also taking from my beloved the chance to love me and to know that she is loved. I may be offering "Yes," but I have no "And."

Although this plan may seem selfless, the real motivating factor is my attempt to control the situation and my beloved. I have chosen how our relationship will function, and although I have sacrificed the possibility of really being where I want to be, I have gained the security of always knowing where I am. This is not communion, but two independent people wherein one has sublimated himself or herself to the other. This is ultimately self-destruction and cannot be true love.

I could seduce her, make her love me. I could flatter her and make her feel needed. I could shower her with gifts and appear to be who she wants me to be. In all likelihood with a bit

of sensitivity, some finesse and a complete disregard for the truth, I could probably succeed in convincing her to choose me. However, in this scenario, she did not freely choose me. I manipulated her affections and emotions, in essence, to force her to make the choice I would have her choose. Even if I could do such a thing without sacrificing my integrity, would her choice to love me have any value, any weight? The factor of compulsion would always taint our relationship and love's needs could not be fulfilled. This is not communion, but one person in their own need subsuming the other, self service of the worst kind.

Jason Chin said, "All the things I heard in class like, 'Stop. Tell him exactly what you're feeling right now,' wouldn't it be great if everybody did that?" (Personal Interview) So, what if I was to act in love as I would in a scene? Suppose that I tell her how I feel with complete candor. I then allow her honest response. Whatever that response, I understand that it is not the final word. I hear the offer and evaluate it. I accept and overaccept it, transforming the offer, whatever it is, into a loving act on my part.

I may listen and watch carefully for opportunities to act on her behalf. I often wait for invitations, even when I could solve her problems, in order to allow her to be who she is and not arouse resentment. When the offer is to not help, I accept that offer, but watchfully and lovingly, not sullenly or resentfully. Sometimes I will not act even when invited, because I must continue to be who I am. For me to be other than myself does violence to the possibility of love as surely as coercing her to be other than herself. The only possibility of love arises in the true selfhood of both persons. Regardless of whether I act or not, I remind her that my choice is made out of my love for her, using every entry point into her life that she offers as an invitation to deeper communion.

Since, in this paradigm, I continue to act from my own nature regardless of her responses, I may seem unaffected by her choices. However, the lover is always loving as the improviser is always listening, even when there is no obvious action. I may be deeply gratified when she chooses communion and as deeply hurt when she rejects it. However, my love, my desire for communion with her, is not dependent upon her acceptance or rejection of it. I am holding onto my stuff and living by Yes-And. However, regardless of the offers my beloved gives, it is imperative that I clearly communicate my invitation to communion in all of my offers. It is this explicit invitation that separates this course of action from a course of pure self-protection. Hiding one's needs and desires serves neither the lover nor the beloved. The course to communion, the path to love, must be forthrightly presented.

This is just one small illustration of how the improvisational ethic can improve our lives and our relationships. At some point when the time is right, in all of her level 4 classes, Holly Laurent recites this poem by 14<sup>th</sup> century Sufi poet Hafiz:

*The small man builds cages  
wherever he goes, while the sage  
who must duck his head  
while the moon is low  
drops keys all night long  
for the beautiful rowdy prisoners.*

It then becomes a part of the lexicon of the class. They begin talk about “dropping keys”, to refer to each other as “rowdy prisoners” (Personal Interview). Like the Cyprians that Charna taught, we often find ourselves in cages of our own making. The great sages of improv are in the business of dropping keys. Improv helps us become better people. Susan Messing said:

I don't try to change the world one person at a time. I teach people to improvise and trust that it will support them. I find that business managers become a little more empathetic and compassionate to their employees. I find that lawyer are little more specific and more glib on the stand and more comfortable being in that vulnerable position. I find that doctors might have a little more compassion for their patients, might listen a little better. It ekes out in mysterious little ways that become concrete (Personal Interview).

Or as Charna Halpern told me, "It's a pretty spiritual business" (Personal Interview)

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## VITA

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