



PLAN TO IMPROVISE

BY BOB KODZIS

Imagine walking into a client meeting empty handed and being able to take your client's ideas and turn them into immediate flashes of brilliance. . . *Imagine* working with a creative team that never rejects your ideas, but instead elevates your concepts by adding value to each one. . . *Imagine* being fearless and blindingly creative in the face of the unknown and accepting whatever the universe throws at you with a sense of joy and humor.

Welcome to the world of professional improvisation where teamwork and fearlessness can lead you to success in any situation. The lessons of improv have helped to improve the way I approach brainstorming, creative teamwork, conflict and unexpected challenges.

“Helping people to learn to improvise often requires that we rewire the way they think, but not like in a cult.”

— Patrick Bristow,
Actor, Teacher, Master Improviser

Improviser

I first encountered the art of improvisation, or “improv,” more than a dozen years ago at SAK Comedy Lab in Orlando. Watching this gaggle of crazy people create laugh-out-loud comedy, armed with nothing more than suggestions from the audience, I was blown away. It was like watching creative spontaneous combustion. They passed ideas with the speed and pizzazz of the Harlem Globetrotters. By the end of the show, I was hooked. I took my first improv class at SAK in 1999, a short while before the TV show “Whose Line is it Anyway?” made improvisation a household word. I’ve been a student of the craft ever since.

During the last five years, I’ve learned that improv is much more than interactive theatre. It is both an art and a science, a skill set and a way of life. There is power in its principles.

To share that power with you, I tracked down eight extraordinary improvisers from three of the top improv theatres in the U.S.: SAK Comedy Lab in Orlando, The Second City in Chicago and the Groundlings in L.A. (The Groundlings have launched more incredible comedy careers than any other single improv venue. The list includes Laraine Newman, Lisa Kudrow, Chris Kattan, Will Ferrell and dozens of “Saturday Night Live” and “Mad TV” alumni.)

I hope that their wisdom will open some new doors in your creative psyche and allow you to reach farther than ever before.

Ultimate Creative Teamwork

“There’s often a higher level of teamwork in improv than in the corporate world because improv is about breaking down walls and status — the things that the corporate world is built on.”

— Greg Mills, *The Second City*

One of the most impressive elements of improv is the extraordinary level of creative teamwork that occurs on stage. The players seem to meld their minds to come up with each storyline and scene.

“Creative teamwork is what separates improv from stand-up comedy,” says SAK’s David Charles. “It’s about creating something together on the spot. When you watch improv, you are watching creativity in action.”

“As a team, we always look for the ‘yes and’ moments,” adds James Newport, a veteran of SAK’s stage. “Improv is about taking advantage of every opportunity that comes along and being hyper-aware of every word and every moment.”

“Yes and” refers to a cornerstone principle of improv. As David Jahn of the Groundlings explains it, “‘yes and’ means you accept whatever idea has been offered...you say ‘yes’ to it... ‘and’ you add to it. It’s not enough to just say yes. You must add something of value. Keep in mind it’s not ‘yes but,’ The word ‘but’ is a creativity killer.”

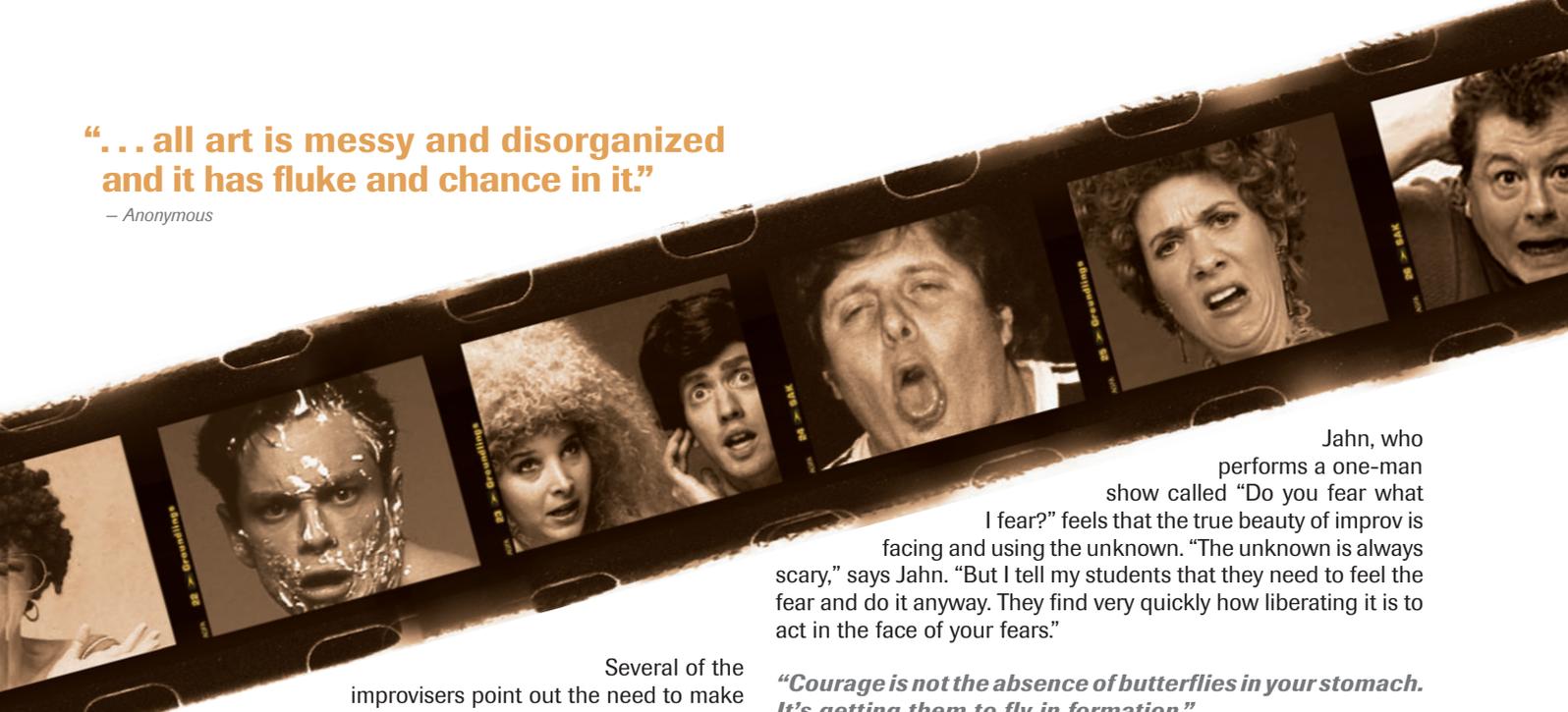
“Those who say ‘no’ are rewarded with lives of great security; those who say ‘yes’ are rewarded with lives of great adventure.”

— Keith Johnstone, *creator of improv*

“Be generous with your teammates,” says Mills of Second City. “If you want to be fed, you need to do some of the feeding.”

“... all art is messy and disorganized and it has fluke and chance in it.”

— Anonymous



Several of the improvisers point out the need to make a strong connection with your teammates through active listening and watching very closely. Jahn emphasizes, “Eye contact is extremely important: you are listening attentively with your eyes.” Patrick Bristow of the Groundlings recommends that all team members keep a great awareness, watching like a hawk for opportunities for originality.

Mills also points to the power of truth. “Truth is critical. Sometimes it hurts, but it is always essential.” The folks at SAK find the idea of truth so compelling, it’s a part of their three-word mission statement: Truth, Joy, Excellence.

There’s another word in SAK’s mission, on which all of the improvisers seem to agree: Joy. “Be joyous,” says Bristow. “Accept whatever your team offers with as sense of joy and wonder. So much of what we do revolves around finding the joy in every situation, in every scene, in life,” says SAK’s Dave Russell. “It’s really a well spring of creativity.”

Fearlessness in the Face of Failure

“Innovation and failure are sisters. If you show affection for one, you will surely find the other.”

— Thomas Alva Edison

If you’ve ever pitched a truly original idea to a client, you understand the role and the impact of fear in the creative process. It takes a lot of courage to get up on a stage in front of 200 strangers. It takes even more guts to get up there without a script or a plan.

“I haven’t overcome the fear,” says Russell. “Fear is just another energy opportunity to see where you might go. We don’t deny the existence of fear,” he says.

“Fear is only destructive if it paralyzes you,” says Lyle Moon. “Or if it makes you bleed,” adds Newport.

“Faith has a lot to do with how improvisers harness fear,” says Charles. “The audience wants us to succeed. My teammates want us to succeed. I have faith that if I’m on stage burning, somebody will throw themselves on the flames and put me out, or we’ll burn together and that’s okay, too, because misery loves company.”

Jahn, who performs a one-man show called “Do you fear what I fear?” feels that the true beauty of improv is facing and using the unknown. “The unknown is always scary,” says Jahn. “But I tell my students that they need to feel the fear and do it anyway. They find very quickly how liberating it is to act in the face of your fears.”

“Courage is not the absence of butterflies in your stomach. It’s getting them to fly in formation.”

— Anonymous

Since innovation and failure are so tightly intertwined, I ask the improvisers to share their views on the art of failure. Their answers give me hope. “Failure is not accomplishing a preplanned agenda or outcome,” says Newport. “If you accomplish something in another direction, it’s not a failure it’s just something different. The path has shifted. It only feels bad when you struggle against it. It’s not failure if you are loving the process of going down in flames.”

Charles suggests that failing has more to do with not reaching far enough: “In improv, and in life, failure isn’t falling. Failure is failing to risk. Playing it safe is failing. We need to push ourselves toward the edge of discovery.”

“We pretend that art is neat and pretty and tidy – but really all art is messy and disorganized and it has fluke and chance in it. In improv, rather than denying it, we embrace it.”

— David Charles

“You need to allow yourself to fail,” says Jahn. “Failure is a man-made concept and, in most cases, it is survivable. Once people realize that you can fail and survive, they are a lot more willing to take chances.”

Creative Spontaneous Combustion

Another major lesson that improv can offer to creative professionals is, “The art of spontaneous creativity.” While most creative thinkers and teams have the luxury of time away from the client to brainstorm their original concepts, improvisers are forced to come up with their brilliant, funny ideas on the spot, in front of a room full of strangers. It’s an impressive talent; one that is sure to knock any client’s socks off. It might even blow their shoes off.

In an effort to translate that skill from the stage to the studio, I asked the players to share some of the guidelines that allow their teams to ignite spontaneous creativity. Their recommendations form a solid foundation that can help any team of creative brains to think more quickly and effectively on their feet.

Suspend Judgment

Nothing spoils a great brainstorming session like preconceived notions. “Most of us can think very quickly on our feet,” says Bristow. “The problem is when we get caught up in our head and we start to judge our ideas and ourselves.”

“It’s important to put your ideas out there without hesitation,” says Tom Yorton. “We tend to edit ourselves when we brainstorm. The result is that we hold back vital energy and honesty.” All of the players acknowledge the value of judgment. However, they recommend that it be suspended until the creative process is finished.

Stay in the Moment

Almost every player mentions “staying in the moment” as an essential element of improv. The moment becomes even more critical when it comes to spontaneity. As Bristow puts it, “Become addicted to the moment and become passionate about exploration. Look forward to being thrown and make the unknown your friend.”

Become a Child

Most of the improvisers refer to minds of children with a sense of awe. To be a child is to be creative and free and spontaneous, unfettered by the constraints and the rules of adulthood. James Newport emerges as one of the strongest advocates of resurrecting the child inside. “If I have any advice, it’s be 5. Be a 5-year-old kid and play, play, play. Try to remember what it was like to be a child. If you can’t, drink a bottle of wine.”

Listen!

In the world of improv, it seems that all good things come to those who listen. Without exception, the improvisers point to listening as one of the most powerful tools of improv. It provides the vital connection through which amazing collaborative ideas can emerge.

It’s About Our Connection to Each Other

Improvisers contend that the connection they share on stage is a reflection of how life was intended to be lived. “We were designed to relate to each other,” says Russell. “That’s why connecting with each other feels so right.” Charles adds, “It’s not about how we stand alone. A human isn’t defined by who he or she is, but how he or she connects with everyone else.”

Exercise Your Mind

Like any skill worth having, improv requires that we practice and exercise our minds to ensure maximum capacity and flexibility. Jahn recommends reading a lot. “Fill your head,” he suggests, “You will be amazed at how that information comes to light.” Russell recommends that we also exercise our creative muscles on a regular basis, by playing games that challenge our minds to perform.

Yes and...!

This cornerstone concept comes up again and again throughout the interview process. “Yes” allows us to take advantage of every opportunity that life has to offer. It’s clearly a way of life for improvisers (as it should be for all of us). This principle makes it clear that if we want to generate spontaneous creativity, we need to keep our “no’s” and our “but’s” to ourselves.

Fearlessness in the Face of Failure

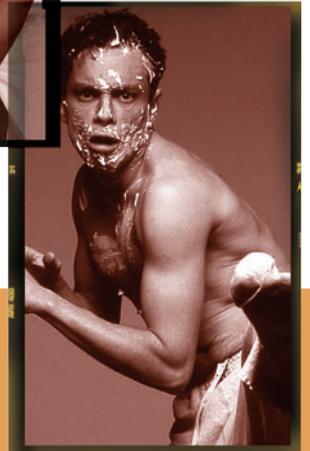
Once again the issue of fear raises its ugly head as an impediment to the creative flow. In addition to the recommendations identified in “Fearlessness in the Face of Failure,” both Bristow and Charles point out that improvisation is really nothing to fear as we use this skill every day in conversation. “Don’t panic,” says Bristow. “We improvise on a daily basis; every time someone asks us a question and we have to come up with an answer. The key is to not let the fear keep the ideas from flowing.”

Dare to be Stupid

James Newport wants to liberate creative minds from worrying about what other people are thinking. “You’ve got to be willing to take chances even if they make you look like an idiot,” he says. “To quote the great philosopher Weird Al Yankovich, ‘Dare to be Stupid.’”



Above: Jim Rash and Jordan Black (Groundlings)
Right: Chris Kattan (Groundlings)



“SAK” images courtesy of Donavon Deering
“Groundlings” images courtesy of Natalie Young

How to Kill the Creative Connection

Here are the top creative teamwork killers:

David Charles

- Refusal to participate
- Judgment in the moment, including self-judgment. You need to suspend the judgment from the creation of the art
- Forgetting that you are a part of a team

David Jahn

- Mean people
- Failure to listen to each other
- Thinking ahead. Focusing on the results rather than the moment

Lyle Moon

- Lack of commitment and lack of trust
- Blame. It almost always kills teamwork

Patrick Bristow

- The “me first” attitude. It spreads like a virus and creates a desperate vibe. The result looks like a fight for food at the buffet

James Newport

- Failure to change

Hopefully, by understanding how to kill the creative connection, we can better understand how to preserve it and make it stronger.

Thanks...

These amazing performers have given us a lot of great ideas to help us keep the creativity flowing. Thanks so much to the improvisers at SAK, Second City and the Groundlings for their amazing insights and their incredible generosity. Through their collective wisdom, they have shown us a path to a higher level of creative collaboration and spontaneous creativity. They’ve proven that if we want to make the most out of the challenges that life throws our way, we better plan to improvise.

Until next time....stay inspired!
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