

PREFACE

The following is a book of opinions. Take the ones you want, leave the ones you don't. Like a buffet. I remember the first breakfast buffet I saw as a kid. The idea that you were allowed as much bacon as you wanted? Amazing. My mother had a "two strips maximum" policy. It was like another world.

Sorry, went off on a tangent. Do you like tangents? There will be tangents. Autobiographical stories loosely connected to broad philosophies that I might feel differently about tomorrow? You got it!

What I'm going to try to do is lay down a few basic ideas and let you know about land mines that improvisers and artists in general tend to step on—the biggest being the temptation to listen to anyone to the point where you start turning their ideas into your religion. There are dozens of easy, addictive traps that will distract you from becoming the performer and person you want to be. My philosophy is that there are a million roads to get where you're going. Anyone who tells you there's just one path is trying to sell you something. As a performer, someone will always be trying to sell you something or get you to do something for them for free. You've got to pick and choose what to buy, sell, and give away.

And remember, like any career in the arts, no one asked you to do this and no one can keep you from doing it.

CHAPTER ONE

BACK TO BASICS

I don't often teach improv workshops for beginners. This is because there are so many other instructors who I think can cover those bases better than I can. There are many other books that deal with the building blocks of starting out. I'm going to try to cover topics that I don't see other teachers bringing up, such as what makes people quit or what stands in the way of them moving forward artistically. But we'll have a few cheat sheets for the new improviser along the way.

Here's the first tip. Be louder! You know how loud you are? You need to be louder. What's that? I've never met you? I don't know what your volume is like on stage? That's a good point, but that said, be louder! Unless you see the audience holding their ears, crank up the volume. If you don't know how to project theatrically, take a couple of basic acting classes. The only time I'd ever really be annoyed with students was when I'd ask them to be louder and they'd stay at the same volume. Because if you can't be heard then any other notes are pointless and because if someone can't take advice on this basic level then more advanced teaching won't get through either.

If you're playing an improv game, listen to the rules. Most games have safety nets built in and will protect you if you just follow the instructions. If you panic during a rhyming scene and just stop doing it, then you're on your own. If you commit to the handle even if you do it very poorly, the audience will still probably be rooting for you, and when you do pull something off, they'll reward you. They love seeing someone get into trouble then get out. If you just quit, they'll quit their commitment to the scene as well.

Speaking of getting in trouble, here's all you really need to do in a scene.

- 1) Set up the environment.
- 2) Establish your character and your relationship to the other performers.
- 3) Get into trouble.
- 4) Make the trouble worse.
- 5) Either find a solution or end with the trouble at its apex.

That's it. Those are the power chords of improv.

You can play around and change the structure, but if you're starting out, that's what you need to do. What happens instead is improvisers talk to each other, saying clever things and being wiseasses. There's nothing wrong with that, but it can quickly end up all frosting and no cake. Again, set up the environment. Establish your character and your relationship to the other characters. Get into trouble. Make the trouble worse. Either find a solution or end with the trouble at

its height. That's your cake. You don't need to make any of those aspects funny. Funny will come along if you invite it to the party. Don't force it through the door; just make the stage a welcome place for it. If you try to be clever and fail, you'll get that feeling like when you're walking down stairs and you miss a step. If you commit to the basics, you'll be fine more often than not.

Usually you'll have taken a suggestion from the audience. That'll provide the early part of the scene. If you just take what they've said and commit to it, you'll buy yourself at least 30 thirty seconds to a minute where the audience is pleased to see their suggestion being used. Toss it off as not being important and you're on your own. Listen to the other improvisers and use what they say and do to build a relationship. Don't fight for your own idea. Things have a natural flow onstage. Trust and go with it. Later, you can break the patterns, but at the start, just be open, listen, and go with it. It'll make the scene seem more relaxed, and the audience will feel more comfortable. The relationship you establish will help power the scene along. You don't have to be clever if the emotions are true. There's time for clever later.

Whatever you're doing, have something go wrong. Try to have it happen as a result of the actions you're taking; don't just have it be an argument. This is good rule at least when you're starting out. Feel free to bend it later. Physical problems will give you more to do on stage. Whatever your first solution is to the problem, have it escalate like throwing gasoline on a fire. Then find that solution or make it so bad there's no escape and end the scene on that high point. If you go the solution route, then as soon as it's found, end things. The audience will be pleased. Maybe there will be applause and you'll be tempted to keep the scene going. Don't! Ignore this siren song! End on the high!

Through all this, try and react as your character would. The second you step out of the scene and comment, the audience will step out of it too and it'll be all the harder to bring them back in. All rules are made to be broken at a later date. Except for one: be louder!

FEEL THE BURN!

So you've taken some improv classes. Maybe done a show or two. Now what? You do more shows. Then what? Let me make this as basic as possible ...

10 DO SHOWS
20 GO TO 10

Okay there used to be a machine language called BASIC and ... you know what, just look it up.

When you start out, you're just burning stage time. The more you burn, the better you'll be. Some shows will be awful, some will be great, but one thing's for sure: if you watch yourself five years from now, you'll have a hard time looking at what you're doing. It'll be as embarrassing as your mom showing baby pictures of you in the bath to your high school friends. That's right, I'm calling you a baby in a bathtub. And you stop being that baby ... never. And once you think you've got the hang of this thing, you probably don't. What's happened is you've reached one of the first ceilings. When you're good at acting, sports, or anything else in, say, high school, you gain confidence and maybe you become the best in your school. Then college or university beckons. Now you're not the best; you're just one of many talented people and you've got to work your ass off to be better. Then school ends and maybe you make it as a professional. Back to the bottom with you, and again it just gets harder to make any impact. You're a little fish that needs to keep growing to match the ponds. (I know you were a baby in a bath before, but just go with the new water-based metaphor.)

If you took improv in high school and have tried to move on, maybe you've discovered this already. You go from amateur shows to professional nights. Maybe you start doing corporate events or move on to radio or television. Each stage brings with it more competition. You have to get better, and if you do, then good on ya'. But there are other stages of growth and those are the ones you have to pick for yourself. High school improv shows are fun; the performers and the audience have a good time with lots of laughs, doing basic games. The games are designed to have a high success rate, and most have been proven to work over the decades. Nothing wrong with that. But if you want to evolve as a performer, you need to get beyond those handles and gimmicks. This is harder than it seems.

If you know you can get a guaranteed laugh doing a certain type of scene, there'll always be a good reason not to take a risk. You want to entertain the people in the crowd; they paid good money to see a show. You don't want to fail in front of other people who might advance your career. You don't want people to say, "What were you thinking doing that?"

There are professional improv companies doing the same thing they've done year after year at theatre and corporate shows because that's no place to take a big chance. Gimmicks, games, style, sexuality, charisma—there are a million crutches you'll find yourself falling back on as a performer. The terrifying thing to do is to kick them away one by one. You can still use them once in a while as something in your toolbox as long as you realize you don't need them to survive. For example, I've seen so many women who never get beyond playing the girlfriend role. It's safe; there's approval from the audience and the other performers, but it's a trap they never get out of. The actor then seldom moves ahead very far because there's a line around the block of people who can play that part.

If you don't push yourself to get to the next level, you're denying your audience something new—and you're denying seeing where you might go. It's easy to stop at "good enough," and most people do. Most television and films do. Then someone tries something new and it hits, and there's a mad scramble to copy it. But watching a knockoff is usually just hollow, obvious, and sad. The only way to bring the new is to keep hitting the stage; that's where it's waiting for you. You may have to burn a forest of stage time to get to it, but it'll be worth it.

THE BENDS

What's the biggest mistake improvisers make when they're starting out? Having sex with someone that's higher up than you in the company? Maybe a teacher? Close and connected to what I was going to talk about, but since you brought it up, let me highlight something ...

Don't have sex with your teacher!

Odds are you're young. Odds are the teacher is funny and wise, and since they're a performer or once were, they probably still are attractive. You're in the arts, you're probably still very good-looking and have an energy and passion that's just a thrill to be around. There's probably alcohol either backstage, onstage, or in good supply after the shows, and those improv classes can get very physical. When I started taking workshops, more than one began with a group massage. It helped us relax and get over our hang-ups. You are each exactly what the other needs right now. It'll be fun and a bit forbidden. What's the harm? It all depends if you're thinking long or short-term. If you want a good time and then want to split, that's great. Have at it; use protection.

But if you're going to be working together in the future, odds are this is going to be an embarrassing memory—one that might make the difference between moving up in a company or not. If you don't move up, you'll never be sure if it was because something happened. If you do move up, the same thing applies. Plus if anyone else finds out (and they will), whatever you achieve will have an asterisk attached to it. Also, teachers who have sex with students? Not the greatest people in the world. In fact, they're the type of people who have sex with their students. Still, it's your life, and as the old knight at the end of *Last Crusade* warned, "Choose wisely." I think that's what happened. I haven't watched the film in a long time. River Phoenix does a good job in it, I think.

No matter what you do, you'll always meet up with politics. Get more than two people together at any job and it's easy to slip into caring about who likes who better and who's benefiting from favoritism. Politics and gossip are soul destroyers. Your goal should be to keep building your skills as a performer. Do this, and you'll keep moving forward. Other people may seem to be getting ahead of you—sometimes fairly, sometimes not—but the bottom line is, it just doesn't matter in the long run. And it is a long, long run. If you want to do this for a living, caring who's getting more work, more stage time, more anything will eat you up. You'll use it as your measuring stick and judge yourself by that because it's the easiest way to see how you're doing.

When you first start out as a performer, you measure yourself show to show. As you progress, there are too many performances to continue to gauge yourself that way, and instead, you count how often you're booked. If someone else gets a job that might have gone to you, you can make yourself sick over it. It's even

worse if you're the kind of person who ties their self-worth to their work. I've been loved, hated, and ignored by those above me in companies. It made a difference in the amount of time I was on stage for temporary periods, but it all evens out in the long run. Your principal relationship is between you and your craft, not you and your boss or even your co-workers.

I've seen a lot of performers jump to the head of the line, and they're resented by the other actors who see themselves playing by the rules and waiting their turn. But there is no line. Yes, a lot of companies have a situation where you take workshops and then do amateur performances, then some pro work touring, then move on to the main stage. There's a system, and as a performer, the artistic life is so scary and random that any hint of a structure is comforting. These people can be jumping the line for a variety of reasons. Maybe the newer person has something the company feels it needs at the time: they want more people of colour, more women, more classically trained actors, or someone who's a celebrity. Or maybe there is just more work available than in the past. Whatever the reason, resenting those who moved ahead or moved up quicker than you is easy. This is your competition, yes?

No! At least not in the long-term. Sure, these people may take work that could have been yours, but if they're good, then they're just going to do quality shows, and that benefits your local industry. If they're not ready, then the audience will let them know.

I call this getting the Bends, like in diving when you rise from the depths too quickly. It's sad, because a lot of these people could be good performers but they get too high too fast, and then, thinking they stink, they quit the business. When you've got the Bends and your fellow performers resent you for your success and talk behind your back while you're being rejected by the audience, it's a triple punch. Politics and gossip are easy temptations. And when you have an obvious enemy, it makes things seem so much clearer. It bonds you with other people. But it eats away at you in the end and wastes your time when you need to be focusing on what matters: the work. The craft—your real career, not this temporary situation you're in. Right now, it may seem like the whole world but it's just a temporary campground. So let's follow the campground rules and try to leave things better than you found them.

FAILURE TO LAUNCH

Something that's often said in improv classes is that you shouldn't be afraid to fail. Getting rid of your fear of failure is stressed over and over, and various methods are given for doing so. I'm a very shy person, and my trick for getting on a stage in front of people is being too busy to think about where I am and what I'm doing. Improv games keep the mind occupied so that the improviser doesn't have a lot of time to consider what the people watching are thinking. Over time, I lost most of my stage fright. After you've walked across hot coals while doing your taxes, you realize the coals aren't that painful and the deductions aren't that complicated. But there's a big part of not being afraid to fail that seldom gets talked about. What is failing? What makes a scene a failure? A big part of facing a fear is confronting what it is. Seems obvious enough. If you're trying something on stage and it doesn't work, you've failed, right? But if you want to play the piano well, it's not a failure every time you practice even though when you start it wouldn't be something anyone would want to listen to.

As improvisers, we practice on stage in front of people—people with opinions on what they're seeing. If the audience doesn't enjoy what you do, is that a failure? What if they like it but it wasn't what you intended? What if they like it but you think the work you're doing isn't very good? What if you accidentally kill the other performer on stage? That's pretty cut and dry. Killing another performer is a fail! But what if you later find out that other performer was a terrorist and was planning a murder spree the next day? You just saved dozens of lives. Well done, you!

There really aren't any absolutes. When I read books on improv, everyone's got their own idea of what a failure is. Many things are called stupid, boring, and rubbish. That's fine. You can say whatever you want in your own book. Everyone's got an opinion. But take it as that: just an opinion. Some performers overanalyze the response they get from an audience. They don't just want to make them laugh; they want them to enjoy themselves in the correct way. Cheap laughs are a sin that taints the art form. Personally, I think a cheap laugh is like a cheap orgasm. You don't hear anyone complaining at the time, though you may feel dirty later. If you're entertaining an audience, then good for you. If you're doing new material and pushing the form forward, bless you. If you try something on stage and it doesn't go the way you want but it becomes something else you never intended, well that's fantastic.

What I advise new performers to do before a show is to set a goal for the night. It might be to not come into scenes unless they're needed. It might be to not play the same character they always do (the girlfriend, the drunk). Anything they think needs work. Then, after the show, they can see if they did it. If not, they should try again next week. It helps to run these by the other performers and get their help in achieving the goal.

It's tough to not care what an audience thinks, and as a performer, you should but not to the point where you base the success of the whole evening on how much they liked the show. By adding your own goals before the performance, you balance things out and can put some focus on developing your craft. Will Eisner, a great comic book artist, said that, "Style is the result of a failure to achieve perfection." So failure is just what happens when you can't get everything right. It's those flaws that end up defining you as an artist. It's what will make your style unique to you over time. You need failure on stage to make you you. Failure may sting at the time, but it's nothing to fear in the long run. You get to define it for yourself and use it however you choose. Maybe I haven't explained this very well. But if I've failed at it, then a couple of years from now this book will be considered a classic.

THE BAD ABOUT THE GOOD

One of the problems with improv, at least the comedy version of it, is that within a few months, if you really put in the time and effort, you'll be good enough to perform on stage. You'll be able to do a show that gets laughs and applause. And hey, there's nothing wrong with that, right? Okay, something might be wrong with that. The laughs and applause are as addictive as any drug. If love is heroin, then an audience's approval is methadone. You'll probably have learned a few tricks of the trade by this point—maybe some semi-scripted stuff you slip into a game scene that almost always gets a laugh. You do enough Alphabet Game scenes where you have to start a sentence with the letter X and you start collecting words for future use. You copy the way another improviser ends a Shakespeare scene. This isn't a sin; all art borrows. But in order to get to the next level as a performer, you're going to have to leave some of that approval behind. To move forward as an artist and take your craft to the next level, you're going to have to take some chances. But where you are feels good. It feels really good. Why give that up? The good news is, you don't have to if you don't want to.

There will always be a market for improvisers who can do scenes technically well. Look at any performance set for almost all corporate improv shows. It's a long list of games and scenes with built-in safety nets that will please your client and make everyone happy. If this is what you want to do, do it. The downside is, it does make you a bit generic. You're replaceable by whoever else knows the beats to play. You're a magician who knows the standard tricks. You're a cover band who knows the songs people at a wedding want to hear. An Arms Scene is the Chicken Dance. A few years ago, Jon Stewart was interviewing Gene Simmons of Kiss on *The Daily Show*, and marriage was brought up. Simmons said he would never stop sleeping with a wide variety of women and couldn't understand why a man would deny himself that kind of pleasure. Stewart said that he supposed it was the difference between wanting pleasure or joy.

Improv can give you pleasure. You become addicted to it, but when you take it to the next level, that's where the joy lives. That's the place where you find yourself doing something new. Where you're discovering and expanding your limits. Where you're making big mistakes and occasionally one of them becomes something the audience has never seen before, and you get a response that sounds a little different. You'll know it when you hear it. It's the kind of thing that makes them look at the person next to them to confirm what just happened. The kind of thing they talk about on the ride home. Maybe you inspire them to do something new themselves.

As an artist, one of the biggest compliments you can get is when someone else says, "I didn't know you could just do that!" Kevin Smith saw Richard Linklater's film *Slacker* and realized that the limitations he was putting on what a film could be were wrong; that it could be dialogue-driven. So he took that and made

Clerks. It happens in music all the time. Art opens doors to new rooms in people's minds, and they fill them.

The biggest obstacle you're going to face as an artist isn't your failures, it's your success. That's the hill you're going to need to get over, and you'll have to leave a lot of comfort behind when you do. You're not going to get support from the audience. You probably won't get it from the other performers or directors who have the best interest of the show at heart and wish you'd go back to being entertaining. You don't get a Sherpa for this climb; you're on your own. But just know pretty much everyone you really admire has done it, and even though they look fine now, if you ask them nicely, they'll show you the scars. If they take off their pants to show you, call an adult.

IT'S NOT FAIR

I once painted my acting agent's office. He paid me about \$75 for doing it. I needed the money pretty badly. Maybe if I had a better agent, I wouldn't have needed the cash. The real reason I did it, and why two other actors on his roster did as well, was we got the strong hint that doing this would make us seem like "team players." Doing that little extra would show we cared about the agency, and that was the kind of thing that really helped a person's career. I think I got booked on one gig as a singing elf at a breakfast with Santa after that. Didn't really get that extra boost I wanted. You know who did? The actors who were right for the parts being offered. Because that's the way showbiz works. It would be nice if things were fair: the person who really puts in the time and hard work has things pay off for him. But luck and timing play such a huge part that the idea of fairness just goes out the window. Now don't get me wrong: you're going to increase your odds by working hard, but along the way, a lot of people are going to get in line in front of you. They might have the right look or be the right gender or race or whatever is needed at that specific point in time. Even worse, you might not even see what the reason is. A person with what seems like less experience or talent than you will get ahead of you in the line. Completely unfair.

You can now resent that person if you'd like. Maybe talk about them behind their back. Get a little mean. Maybe they're pals with someone or sleeping with them. That kind of rumour spreads real easy. But it's like a turd in a pool. Even if it doesn't affect you directly, do you want to swim in that water? That line I was talking about? The one where that person just got in front of you? If you actually want to make this your career, then the effect that person's success will have on you is so minimal it's not worth getting upset about. The line you're in is so long in both directions that there's no point in worrying about your place in it. You might get picked up and moved way ahead at some point. Then you'll be that one the insecure performers will be talking about. If you get involved in a company as a performer, worrying about your rank will drive you nuts. If you start to feel that things should be based on fairness, you'll add even more nuts to that pile.

You're going to get work if you seem like the best person for the show. If the people casting use any other criteria, then they are not doing their jobs well and the company and audience will all suffer for it. Would you like to go to a Broadway musical, pay your money, and see as the lead the person who's been with the company the longest? Would you watch a "fair trade" movie where the director is whoever has put in the most hours behind a camera? How about for the Olympics we enter the runner who's put in the most laps around the track? A show is a jigsaw puzzle, and sometimes you're the right piece. Same with an improv company. They might have enough pieces like you already. Don't get mad at the ones who are already there.

As an improviser and comedian I've been in companies/clubs who stress that they reward loyalty, meaning they'll give more work to those who are more exclusive. More often than not, they won't pay you extra if you perform just for them, but they strongly hint you'll get more work and move up faster. Any company/club who tells you this is probably going to screw you over at some point. Not out of malicious intent, but if they're not casting the best people, that's going to hurt their shows, which will affect you over time. I've seen companies/clubs punish performers who work elsewhere (again, not offering any bonus pay for exclusivity) by cutting back their stage time. If these performers are better than the ones currently doing it then the audiences are getting less value than they should. Also the performers are getting work they shouldn't and working with people who aren't as good as they could be. So the performers don't have to bring their A game because the company/club is fine with a B or C game as long as they get to keep control over their talent pool. I've had companies I've worked for make it clear to performers that they owed the company for their success and that was why they should be loyal—performers who have decided they want to break out and do their own shows with the skills they honed (and often with the skills they paid hundreds to thousands in workshops with the company to learn). That's exactly what should happen in a working system: people should get so good they move on. It's like parents who won't let their children leave and keep them there by shaming them. You end up with creepy attic adults.

Don't be loyal. Be decent and kind. Be respectful of your fellow performers and everyone around you. Loyalty has creepy strings attached, and at best just means you're being good to a small group of people at the expense of others. Decency and kindness just make things better and are more honest. Don't get mad at the people you think are ahead of you; they're not keeping you back in the long run. And it is a long run. Better to have them as friends and coworkers than obstacles. Things aren't going to be fair. With the amount of luck involved, they can't be. But by treating people honestly and decently, you can make it a little better. And if someone asks you to do something out of loyalty? Smile, be polite, and don't paint that room.

TOO SOON?

Comedian Whitney Cummings was on the *WTF with Marc Maron* podcast, and the topic of why some people think women aren't funny was brought up. She said that she thought it was that women get seen before they're ready. Her manager turned down paying high-profile appearances until she was ready. It was a risk, but it paid off. Being seen too early is true in improv as well. An improv company wants to appear diverse, and so women get main stage shows and corporate events before men with the same skill level. What happens too often is the woman isn't as confident as the other performers and plays secondary roles, letting the men take control of the scenes. Many of these roles are wives, girlfriends, moms, hookers, waitresses, and on and on through the pages of the Big Book of Hack Stereotypes. The most dangerous road in art is a shortcut. Now very few people would turn down a pro-level show that they don't feel they're ready for. You take opportunities when they arrive. If the casting director asks if you can ride a horse in the film, you say yes. Fingers crossed you don't break your neck.

It's not just a person's sex; there are many reasons why you might find yourself moving up quickly. There might be a shortage of your type; maybe you're friends with someone in the company; you've got fame and are an audience draw. There are a lot of reasons you can find yourself in over your head. At every stage of your career, you're going to feel less confident, like being the smartest kid in high school and then going to university, where you feel like one of the dumbest. That's going to happen, but if it keeps happening, then here's some advice that won't be easy to take. Go back to high school. The confidence you're missing in the pro shows might be there in amateur ones. Find a group that's starting out and do some work with them. Lead scenes, move the action along, find new characters, and give yourself a little room to breathe and grow.

Over and over, I see performers who never move up artistically. They just keep playing the same second-tier characters in show after show. New performers who come up get the second-string vibe off of them and treat them like that, and the cycle continues. They're filler improvisers—never the first phone call that's made when booking the shows that week, but in the words of Douglas Adams, "Mostly harmless." Going down a notch might seem like a big step back for your career as an improviser, but if you've stalled out in the higher levels, then a step back is at least some movement. You'll also be getting to know the newer performers, and when they move up, they'll consider you a peer, not the person who's been hanging around the mainstage maybe a bit too long. You'll be more comfortable working with them, and that'll show on stage. If you don't want to leave the pro stage completely, then at least take some workshops with new people not in your current company. Do something to wake yourself up artistically and then bring that to the stage. You know that person on *Saturday Night Live* who never really became a breakout star? The one who's been on the show about three years too long and never brings anything new? The one who's

always a waiter if there's a restaurant scene? That's what I'm talking about in improv. The performers who are easily replaceable. Look at where you are on the board. If the dice got you too far too fast, step back a few spaces. The game will still be here when you're ready.

WAKE-UP CALL!

When you start doing improv, fear is your buddy. You're trying to keep busy enough on stage to not notice you're in front of a group of strangers. If you lose focus and remember where you are, your palms will probably start sweating, your mouth will dry up, and your legs will shake. I used to get this a lot while doing stand up. When you're in the groove of a routine, you're fine, but when something goes wrong or a joke doesn't go over, you become very aware of where you are. It's like waking up from a dream where you're naked and people don't like what they're seeing. You try to keep talking, but your mouth is a desert and it's all you can do to grab the microphone stand and try to stop your knees from shaking. In improv, you at least have others watching your back (or they should be), and so you can take a moment, get your focus back, and keep going. But the fear is always at the edges of your mind, waiting for an opening. So what happens later on, when the fear goes away?

I just saw a show where the host came out and wasn't scared at all. He went through the opening warm up, introduced the cast, and the show was very bland. The host had come out on stage wearing a t-shirt and shorts and chewing gum. Couldn't have seemed more relaxed. All the intro information was memorized to the point where it was rattled off without any connection to the audience. There was no real acknowledgment that they were there. It was like they were watching a television broadcast of a show. Soon after, audience members started to talk to each other in the front row quite loudly. And why not? They weren't being treated like a live audience, so they were acting like they were at home. There are two ways people watch something: leaning back and leaning forward. When you're at home watching television, you lean back in your seat and relax. If a TV show isn't all that funny, it's not a big deal; it's more there for comfort. But when something's happening that you're really connecting with, you lean forward.

When improv is done well, it's a "lean forward" form of entertainment. It pulls you toward it; it doesn't allow for a comfortable distance. That isn't to say it's not enjoyable or that it should be stressful, but with the show I saw, the host and performers sleepwalked through most of the night. The challenges were generic, and everything was in the players' comfort zone. They got suggestions from the audience but listened to three or four and picked the one they liked the most. All the danger and excitement improv naturally brings with it was drained out, and so it was up to the wit and cleverness of the players to buoy the show up. But wit alone can be distancing and often self-serving. And so the audience leaned back, way back.

Fear is your wake-up call when you're starting out. When it leaves, it's up to you to set the alarm. As a host, you need to take the performers out of their comfort zones. Look for when they're getting into a holding pattern and break it. If you've had a couple of verbal scenes in a row, get physical. If you've had a lot of wit, get emotional. As a performer, don't just wait until the show is over to go over it in

your head. Look at the night as a whole and see what it needs. Don't just do what you want, do what's missing. If you feel like you're coasting, do something difficult. Splash some cold, artistic water on your face and give that audience a reason to pay attention. Wake up!

Woody Allen said that 80 percent of success is showing up. A lot of performers are there physically on stage, but they're really just on autopilot. The audience left their homes, came down to your theatre, and paid money to see you. The very least you can do is show up.

CHAPTER TWO

IN THE COMPANY OF STRANGERS

If you're running a comedy night, there are a couple of cheats to get bums in seats. One of the more popular is to have a contest. You let people perform, and at the end of the night, the audience votes on who was the best. So unless someone cures cancer onstage, the person who wins is usually the one who brings the most friends along. I've never been a fan of contests when it comes to performing. They're a good hook to bring in audiences, and sometimes new talent is discovered. Often, though, a performer will take the stage for the first time, get shot down, and that's it for them. Or they'll win and that'll mess their heads up. You're also viewing people onstage as people to be defeated instead of as fellow performers you should be working with. Maybe they're a necessary evil, maybe not. If you do get involved in one, please take everything with shakers and shakers of salt. Contests mean very little in the long run of developing your craft. Take the stage time whenever you can, but keep repeating to yourself that winning and losing don't matter.

Back to those friends in the audience I mentioned earlier. Maybe you won't be packing a house with your pals, but at some point you'll probably mention you're doing a show, and people you know will want to come see you. Family, a boy/girlfriend, co-workers, it doesn't matter—these are people you know who are thrilled at the idea of seeing you perform. The problem is, these folks know you well, at least they know you better than a regular audience would, and they're bringing baggage to the show. They have context that they'll be adding to everything you do and so it's rare that they'll be seeing the same show as everyone else. Comedy is for strangers. So many performers choke up when they're doing a show in front of people they know. Why? Aren't the people they know friendlier and more supportive than strangers? Yes, but that doesn't help them artistically. A bit of distance allows you a blank sheet of paper to start with. If you do a love scene, these people are thinking of your real love life. If you do a scene at a funeral, they can't help but think of the person in your family who just died. And anything that comes close to something involving them or an experience you've had together, they'll take personally.

Being onstage is an intimate experience, and if you already have a connection with someone, it can be like overloading the fuse box. I've seen this with stand-up comedians as well. After a show, the people they brought are confused by this new person they've seen. The comedian is usually in a vulnerable state after a show and senses something is wrong. It's like inviting your friends and family to your strip show. No matter how well you do, it's going to get weird. People you know are going to come to your shows, and that's fine, just don't take anything they say afterward too seriously.

RELIGION AND EVOLUTION

Back when I started doing improv, we'd have notes sessions after the show. These were heated and occasionally would end with someone punching the wall or threatening to make another improviser take the wall's place. Some of the more punchy debates were over scenes about religion. What I learned from this was some people take their comedy as seriously as others take their faith. On the one hand, this is a positive thing: passion in your beliefs is a good motivator to do good work, good art, or good in general. Where it turns sour is when someone questions those beliefs. This can lead to holy wars and even worse—bad shows. Commitment to your faith can be a great source of comfort and strength. The irritating thing is that change constantly happens around you and you've got to decide how're you going to adapt to that. When you believe God made man in his own image, how will you fit in life on other planets if it's found? Do you change to fit in the new information or stick firmly to your beliefs?

I've had some very passionate arguments with people who consider Keith Johnstone to be the pope, and if you change one element of a Harold, you're being a heretic to the almighty Del Close. This is no slight on Keith, Del, or Jesus. They all seem to have some very good ideas, and all seem very often misunderstood by their followers. I don't think either Jesus or Johnstone would have wanted a punch thrown in their names. Close might have enjoyed it.

Here's an example of one way improv might need to change or at least be aware the landscape is changing. In the past, improv comedy was defined as Theatresports-style games, maybe a Christopher Guest film (*Best in Show*, *A Mighty Wind*) or a Larry David-style semi-scripted TV series (*Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Reno 911*). But now we're entering into the era of podcasts, where all you need is a mic and couple of topics to jam on and you can be *Jordan Jesse Go*, *Keith and the Girl*, *Stop Podcasting Yourself*, or *Sneaky Dragon* (www.sneakydragon.com--yes, it's my podcast). The vast majority of these shows are improvised and have a looser style than traditional radio. It's a very direct form of comedy, and we've only seen the start of its impact. Some improv companies have dipped their toes into the podcast pool, but nothing substantial has happened yet. That doesn't mean it's not going to. There's a huge audience out there for improv, and a new road just got built for them.

Back to the notes sessions. By the time I left the company I was in, note meetings had lost any real purpose. Newer players were given notes, and established players and staff wouldn't really take them or at least made the process very intimidating. You always learn more from someone's example than their words, so the newer folks came to understand notes didn't really matter or were more trouble than they were worth to give. There are a few reasons this isn't good. First, after a show, there can be tension from scenes that didn't go well, and notes are a way of diffusing that, which is especially important if you have more than one show to do a night. Second, you can start to build

resentment from other players when you don't talk things out. Third, you've basically chosen to not make the performance a learning environment; a note that's for one person might start a discussion that helps other performers. And fourth, if you don't have an environment where notes are acceptable, then when a note needs to be given in the future, it can be taken as a personal insult. You tell someone they rejected or blocked an idea of yours and they'll take offence and try to defend themselves instead of accepting the note. They might even make a cheap shot back to save face, and then the whole house of cards falls down.

Here's the toughest note I've had to give and one that very, very few people take well. You have to stop being afraid onstage. This is a note for both players and companies. I don't mean someone obviously scared and shaking in front of an audience. I'm talking about performers who have found their comfort zone and stay firmly within it. They justify this in a lot of ways—for example, saying they have a responsibility to entertain the audience who paid to see a show. Don't get me wrong, not being afraid to fail is sometimes used as an excuse to ignore what the audience thinks. The audience is part of the show, and yes, you should respect them as much as the other performers, but giving them the same thing over and over isn't good. At a certain point, you stop being *Airplane the Movie* and start being *Airplane 2*. Same basic jokes, but both you and the audience know you're repeating yourself. There's nothing technically wrong, but the soul has left the show. The interesting thing about doing something new is you might be nervous before you do it, but usually you'll be too busy when doing it onstage to be scared.

The new is often rejected for those traditional (religious) reasons. We do this scene this way because that's the way it was always done, not because that's the way it works best. If this was the way one of the performers' first instructors taught it to them, it can become sacred—and who the hell are you to question it? Why change something that's worked for so many years? Because things change and art has to adapt, reflect its surroundings, and occasionally lead or it loses its purpose. Or, at the very least, its potential.

Fear is an improviser's biggest obstacle. The second biggest is the need for approval, but that's another discussion. For good improv to succeed, we need to be able to question everything. To be able to give and take notes and be able to try the new, knowing that it doesn't disrespect the other performers, teachers, or the audience. Religion hasn't traditionally been a friend of evolution. So art needs to be.

"Fear is the mind killer." – Useful quote from *Dune*

"It is by the juice of Sapho that thoughts acquire speed." – Less useful quote from *Dune*.

PLEASE DON'T PEE IN THE POOL

Comedian Paul F. Tompkins said something about internet message boards that made a lot of sense. I'm paraphrasing, but it was along the lines of, "If you have one person trying to make a point and another trying to hurt the first person's feelings, the second person is going to win every time." I used to go on comedy message boards a lot. I write for a living, and when there's a break and the computer is in front of me, I'll start writing. Good break from writing, writing. Where I'd get into trouble was when I'd see someone higher up in the comedy food chain being rude or dismissive of someone. As someone who was beaten up a lot in school, I'm not a fan of bullies. People who get that kind of treatment growing up go one of two ways. You either spend your life not making trouble or you lash out at any hint of someone being a bully. Now being a bully is like being a racist. For the most part, no one thinks they are one and it's crazy you'd say that to them. When called on it, most of these people would say they were trying to help when they told someone their idea was stupid or insulted their performance.

This is a pretty common idea in the arts, in sports, and in the military. You break a person down and then build them up. Too often, though, the building up part is forgotten. In two cases when I told someone maybe they'd get their point across better if they were more respectful, the reply was, "I respect those who've earned my respect." Wow. So the default setting is not to respect the other person until they rise to your expectations. Usually this was followed by them listing their resumes. You see, they're successful, and treating the newbies the way they were treated is their right. Not only is it good for everyone involved, it's the way things have always worked and the way they should work. I was an asshole for stepping in. Who did I think I was? Then insults got thrown on top of the internet sundae, and like Mr. Tompkins said, that's always going to win an online argument.

In any business, it's comforting to know who's above and below you. It gives you something to strive for and someone to feel better than. You know your place, and it makes things seem like they're moving forward. But in the arts, there is no straight line. You can be doing free shows one week, have a national TV series the next, and be back to the free shows in a few months. You're hot for a while, then cold, then forgotten, then hot again. If you're basing your self-worth on your work, you're going to get messed up fast. When you're making good money, you can use that as a measuring stick for how you're doing. Fame is good too, but harder to quantify. When there's little money floating around, you've got to measure yourself some other way, and respect can fill that hole. If you feel respected, that'll lift you up and keep you going. But how do you get that? Wait for someone to ask your opinion on the craft? Have other professionals want to work with you? Yep, that's great. But if no one gives respect, sometimes people think they have to take it. They do that by making someone else feel small. They let them know what their problem is and pat themselves on the back for "telling it

like it is.” They’re the “take no bullshit straight shooter with the guts to tell the truth.” And maybe they are.

They might be right, and I could be totally wrong. But here’s my point of view. Life is hard. There’s a lot of sad. You never know what another person is going through that day. Artists on the whole are an emotionally messed up bunch, and maybe that well-meaning insult is what makes someone quit the business, or worse. Maybe the macho posturing is keeping some people out of the industry, people who’d bring a new audience in and make things better. “So you want us to all join hands and sing ‘Kumbaya’?” No, just don’t piss in the pool while the rest of us are trying to swim. You might think you’re helping keep the water warm, but it’s just making people leave until the only ones left are the ones who don’t mind the smell.

BAG OF TRICKS

When I'm teaching a workshop, I use the term tricks a lot. It sounds like you're letting someone in on a secret. Like, would you rather learn some magic methods or some magic tricks? They're the same thing, but one sounds more fun. If you want to learn card tricks, the trick is you have to practice with cards for months to years. You can learn the very basics and it might be enough to impress some people, but if you really care about what you're doing, it's a long-term commitment. Just like improv. You can learn the basic skills and get a good response, but if you really want to get better, practice is the way.

That said, here are some tricks.

STAGE FRIGHT: Your natural response to being in front of a lot of people is to be scared of being judged. Your brain can't easily keep more than one thought going at a time, so if you find something to focus on when you're on stage, then you won't be able to be nervous. When I did stand-up, I made sure I knew my material. The hardest part was the pauses in between bits where I wasn't saying anything. If my legs started to shake, I'd squeeze the microphone stand, and that would stop it; making a fist also does this. Bring tension to one part of your body and you'll lose the shakes. In improv I'd concentrate on what the other performers were saying and doing. Again, the hardest part was when I wasn't on stage; but someone always was on stage, so I'd watch them and give them as much focus as I could. The trick is, basically be too busy to have room in your head for fear.

BOMBING: You're going to have some nights where things don't go well. In real life, this is the kind of situation where you'd feel embarrassed. The trick here is not to think of your show as a performance but as part of your training. If you have someone there who's your improv teacher or a more experienced performer with whom you feel comfortable, talk with them beforehand about goals you have for the show. Then at the end, instead of using the audience's response to judge how you did, check in and see if you met those goals. A person gets to practice the piano for a long time before their first recital; improvisers have to practice on stage. I know you want the audience to love you, but your job, especially in your first few years, is to get better—and not just at the things you have a natural ability for. You need to keep working on the skills you're not good at. It's okay to balance them with ones that are more in your comfort zone, but you want as many tools in your kit as possible. By having your own goals and checking in with them at the end of the night, you'll be able to get through those rough shows (months and years) where the audience doesn't think you're great. It'll be tempting to default back to your comfort zone, but fight the urge at least a couple of times a night to work the other weaker muscles.

POLITICS: Try to ignore company politics as much as you can. It's tempting to get involved in gossip and power dynamics: who's getting more work and who's rising up in the ranks. The trick is to work on the long game. What do you want as an improviser? Stage time? Working with peers and people better than you? Money? Fun? Great. Your goal at first is to get so good that you can rise above politics. If you're good, really good, you'll work. Maybe not for the company you wanted to originally, but if your skill set is outstanding, you can take it other places. Your goal is to get so good that the political bullshit won't matter. To make that happen, always be learning, always be practicing. Anywhere you can get stage time, use it. Any time you can take a workshop teaching something new and not hurt yourself financially, take it. And a great trick for dealing with politics is to perform in other cities. You'll go backstage, and if you hang around long enough, you'll see every company has their own politics. It's like when you visit another family and get some perspective on your own. Maybe you'll learn their family is just as crazy or maybe that your own is a little abusive. Travelling is a good way to learn, and learning is your business!

THE SALVATION ARMY

When I perform with new companies as a guest, there's always that moment before we start where they're not sure if I'm any good. Once I've shown I can cross the stage without tripping and still talk out loud, then everyone can relax.

In the times where that doesn't happen and things don't start off well or if I start slowly, often I'll be swarmed by performers who'll try and save the scene. Now there's a big difference between trying to make the other performer look good and trying to save them from themselves. What usually happens is the other improviser, like a lifeguard, dives onto the stage, talking very quickly, and tries to negate what just happened, or at least deflect it, and get things going in a brand-new direction. That's basically letting the audience know that we understand that the idea brought up had fail written all over it, but not to worry, folks—we're going to be okay now.

The problem is, this kind of saving is actually bailing on an idea. Now there might be some cases where you want to do just that. Something racially charged occurred or the scene got overtly sexual and you just want to pull the emergency brake. The stronger choice, I've found, is usually to take that idea you think needs saving and build on it. Think of it like Charlie Brown's Christmas tree. Don't just throw it away and find a better tree; give it all the love you can. Take that dumb/wrong idea and go to town! Maybe you'll fail, but failing isn't a bad thing. It feels like it at the time, and it's scary, but pulling yourself out of that nosedive is a skill improvisers need to learn. If you do succeed, you'll take your scene somewhere you never could have imagined, and the audience will have come along for the ride with you. A lot of improv is set up by trying to demonstrate how risky what we're doing is, but it's not really true. Show people real risk and you're on your way to something special.

The person who brought up the "bad" idea will also feel supported. The audience might be more open in future scenes to letting things play out slower; they might not be worried when things aren't all fireworks and puppies in the first thirty seconds. The big problem with the improvisers jumping in to save things is that it sets a tone for the show. If you look panicky, the audience will pick up on that and be nervous for you when things don't go smoothly in future scenes. If they see you fully embrace the shaky idea, odds are they'll go along for the ride out of curiosity. And again, if it fails, that's okay. If you're going to fail, fail big. Saving scenes seems like a kindness to the performer and the audience, but it can lead to mediocre shows and you might just miss something new and different. A few scenes might drown, but instead of dragging them to the shore, see what they're swimming toward and join them.

FEAR'S TWIN BROTHER

We spend a lot of time in workshops talking about fear. How to get over stage fright, to not be afraid to fail. Fear stops creativity and keeps us trapped in our safe zone. We say no to protect ourselves from what happens if we say yes. Fear has a twin brother named Comfort. Comfort shows up later in your creative process, when you can go on stage and succeed more than you fail, when you've surrounded yourself with people you trust and enjoy working with, and when you're doing a format you know inside and out.

It sounds good, and it can feel great. But in your development as an artist, it can do the same things as fear. You say no to changes in the format and structure of the shows or to working with new performers with new ideas. What you're doing is succeeding. The audience is giving you love; you're having a great time. What more could you want? And honestly, what do these new performers know that you don't?

As an artist, you have to want more. You need to keep evolving, to keep changing the form, and the easiest way to do that is to be open to the ideas of new performers, to value them even above the tried and true. Any art form that stays the same will stagnate and get stale. People might still enjoy it; people like predictable sitcoms and there's nothing wrong with that. But even the most predictable sitcom is different from one from ten years before. I don't know if that's the case with a lot of improv formats.

People complain about *The Simpsons* or *Saturday Night Live* not being as good as they used to be. The shows are very different than when they started out, and they got to where they are now by taking chances. They might not be ground-breaking anymore because they were the ones that broke the ground in the first place. If they had even the same pacing as they did when they started, they'd be very difficult to watch. And as much as you love a SNL performer, after they've been around for too long, it's hard to watch them. Art needs the new. Instead of trying to make things comfortable for yourself, make regular attempts at developing new ideas and learn to enjoy that process. I'm not saying make your audience uncomfortable all the time, but push their boundaries a bit as you find your own, and welcome new ideas and new people into your work. It's nice to be comfortable, but after a few too many years, that comfy couch you love so much is going to start getting a bit gamey.

ABSOLUTE ABSOLUTIONS

I'm trying to stay positive. It's fun to get together with friends and make fun of everything that's wrong with the industry. There's never a shortage of wood for that fire. Generally, I try to cut people slack. There are very few instances where people are being malicious. For the most part, everyone is trying to make things better. But there are a couple of things I can't stand. The biggest one is people who use absolutes. They'll let you know what can't be done or the only way things should be done.

I was recently asked by CBC Radio to pitch a few ideas, one of which was a partially improvised show. I was told politely but firmly that improv doesn't work on the radio. A bit of follow-up revealed that they'd tried an improv-based pilot a few years ago somewhere back East and it didn't work. So now improv doesn't work on radio. A quick Google search will show you that on BBC Radio (the network what CBC Radio was based on) they've had a variety of very successful radio shows featuring improv comedy. I wouldn't mind if they said that the group they tried it with didn't work out and so the CBC didn't want to go down the same road again for a while. But they said improv didn't work. It would be like someone playing a guitar who had just started learning it and a radio station declaring that guitar playing was bad and refusing to play any band that used the instrument.

Absolutes may be generally accurate but they are shortcuts, and like most shortcuts, you end up missing some important things along the way. How do you become an improviser? You take the level one workshop, then the level two, then play amateur nights, then semi-pro nights, and then move on to pro nights. That's what I was told when I started, and it was absolutely true. But it wasn't the only truth. I've worked with other improvisers who came directly from professional theatre, from the world of stand-up, from a comedy class connected with a mental health workshop. Some were former tech staff, people who were in relationships with other performers, people brought in because we needed more women for shows, people who were on the bill because they owned the club the show was performed in, and the list goes on. If you want to be an improviser, there are endless means to that end. The people who tell you there's one way are probably trying to make money off that particular way.

I recently did a show where I was told I needed to dress up in a funny shirt with the name of the production and stand outside of the theatre to hand out fliers during the day. I was told by one of the producers I had to do it because it was the only way to get people into the show. The reason given was they'd seen a stand-up comedian use the same method of people in goofy shirts handing out fliers in the same area, and they went to the event that night and it was full. The show itself apparently wasn't very good, but the marketing worked. I was told that the entire cast needed to do it. We absolutely all had to! I didn't. I'm much too shy to go up to people on the street and hustle a show. I once was a door-to-door salesman and it was very short-lived, terrible job for me.

I didn't want to dismiss the other producer's idea since he was so adamant about it, and the only way I got out of it was offering to pay to hire other people to dress in the shirts and hand out the fliers. I didn't agree with the marketing method, but I wanted to be supportive. I don't know how many new audience members we got from it or how many saw the wacky shirts and were scared off. To me, though, it felt like we opened a nice restaurant and one of the owners saw that McDonald's down the street was always packed and decided we needed to hire a clown to stand in front of our establishment. Did the clown fit in with our style, with what we were serving? It didn't matter; clowns bring people into restaurants. It's a proven fact! That's the mental shortcut; that's the absolute. But all it does is make for broad generalization. In show biz, there is no shortage of people who will let you know how the industry works. They'll lay out the absolutes. They'll almost always be negative and full of good reasons why they aren't doing better and why you probably won't even get to their level. They will lay out the rules of the game. They might be right as far as their own experiences go, and it's worth giving what they say a listen, but there's always more than one road. The curse and blessing is you can't just follow another person's road.

I currently work for *Bongo Comics*, Matt Groening's company. He's someone who worked as a driver in Los Angeles and hated his job and the city, so he drew comic strips about the city, called "*Life in Hell*," to complain about it to his friends. The strip ended up in a lot of free indie newspapers, and when *The Tracey Ullman Show* tapped him to do some animated filler material for their show, he created *The Simpsons*. Can you follow that same path? You can create something of your own that you feel passion for, and that might get you noticed and open the door to some opportunities. Or it might not. At the very least, you're doing something you care about. If Matt Groening had shown his crudely drawn comic strip to someone and told them one day he'd create the most successful comedy show of all time, they'd have told him absolutely not. But the absolute nots happen all the time. The problem with absolutes is they dismiss the alternatives.

One of my peeves is improv instructors who are fast and loose with calling things they don't like stupid. That dismissive attitude gets under my skin because it stops so many ideas dead in their tracks. Calling something stupid makes it absolutely worthless, and that's a very dangerous thing to do in art. My wife's high school teacher told her that comic books were trash and that she was wasting her time with them. She's since gone on to be the artist and co-creator of *The Last Man* for DC Comics, winning an Eisner, Harvey, Shuster, and Spike Award. Stephen King has called the book "the best graphic novel I've ever read." What would have happened if she'd listened to that dismissive teacher? I'm sure if you confronted him, he would say that he was just trying to be helpful and honest.

I was just talking with a friend of mine who wants to produce television here in Canada. She didn't want to fill out all the funding forms, so she wasn't really following up on that dream. Yes, that's the mainstream way to do TV in Canada, and people will tell you that's the only path: apply for funds before moving forward. But in this world of cheap digital cameras and home computer software that does everything the professional systems did ten years ago, there are alternatives. One of the most frustrating afternoons I've had was after writing a script for a film. I got together with my friends to talk about making it and everyone really liked the script,; there was an excitement in the room. Some of the people involved had just done a short film and made it clear there were two things we needed to do the film: one hundred thousand dollars and a van. The van especially. We didn't have either of those things, and that was the end of that. There was talk of just taking the equipment we had and shooting a few scenes, but nope, we needed that van. It was an absolute, and the film was dismissed.

I've created dinner theatre shows, plays, sketch comedy groups, television pilots, a sketch comedy TV series, a couple of radio pilots, a comedy revue show in England, and self-published alternative comics books. To pay for these, I've done a lot of freelance work in TV, film, stand-up, improv, comics, and theatre. I'm only bringing this up to say that for anything I've done that I'm proud of, there was almost always someone telling me it couldn't be done and that I was absolutely wasting my time even trying it. I felt like I had something to add to the mix so I did it anyway. Again, absolutes dismiss the alternatives, and that's where we find the new stuff. We need the new stuff, the weird stuff, the stuff that can't possibly work. I guess what I'm saying is, please don't cock block the future.

FART IN AN ELEVATOR

Some people who act like jerks are just jerks. That's who they are. Maybe something bad happened to them in the past. Maybe Superman made them bald when they were a kid and now they hate the world. Some actually enjoy hurting other people. They might justify it in a variety of ways, but there's pleasure in pulling the wings off a fly or crushing someone's dream. Let's not give them too much of our time. Yes, they'll always be around; yes, they're a fart in an elevator; but in the end, like the gas, they fade away. If you want a hobby, you can try to change them. It's up to you. My advice: just walk to the farthest corner of the elevator and go about your life. Other people act like jerks at times because they're scared. They lash out because they don't feel secure and will cling to what they have and what they believe, and God help you if you upset the status quo. As an artist, it's your job to do just that, so you're going to always have conflict between the "Here's how we've always done things and it's the only right way to do things" and the "Why don't we just try this new way?" groups.

If there's an already established group and you enter it as a new person, you can be seen as a threat. The people already there have probably worked hard to achieve what they have, and they'll hang onto it like Gollum and the ring. They're not bad people, but they feel you're here to take something they love from them. Even your new ideas are going to change things, and change is scary. If you're a similar "type" to the person, well then you seem even more like a potential replacement. You're a danger, and if they can't get rid of you directly, maybe a few snide comments or rumours will do it. This happens all the time. It fuels the fires of politics in companies and is often more interesting conversation fodder than the shows or the craft. Usually someone gets burned. Building up your own confidence by putting another person down is playground nonsense. Yes, you're not secure in your own talent. Everyone thinks they're a fraud at one point or another. But the new people with new ideas aren't a threat to you in the big picture. They're going to keep things going so you'll have work in the future. They keep the bread from going stale.

As actors, we start off by having to audition. You're in a room full of people who want the same role as you. Maybe some look like you. That part is only going to one of you, though. So you get the idea that your art is a competition. For you to win, someone else has to lose. That's bullshit. As an artist, you need an audience. You might want a lot of other things. You might want to get paid enough that you can buy a house. You might want to work for a specific company, such as Second City. You might want a television series so you can have something to brag about at your high school reunion. That might be what you think you want, but it's not what you need. It's good to have goals. But again, all you need as an artist is an audience, and there will never be more performers than there are people who want to watch them. If you want to do improv, you can. You and some friends can do live free shows. I did a lot at cafes, retirement

communities, beaches, camps, and colleges. You can record your work and put it online. Do it often enough and you will find an audience.

Members of the *Kids in the Hall* got fired from *Saturday Night Live* and ended up doing one the best sketch comedy series ever. It's a good goal to be on SNL but the big picture ended up being something else. Sarah Silverman, Ben Stiller, and Chris Rock all failed on the show and wouldn't be who they are now if they hadn't. Small picture fail, big picture win. If you think small then, yes, it's a very competitive world out there and you better have skin like a rhino. If you open yourself up to the bigger picture, I'm betting there's an audience that is looking for what you have, what's uniquely you. It may not pay right away, it probably won't bring fame at first, but over time, things'll happen. It's a cliché to say, "Be yourself," but it's the only way to tear yourself away from that room full of people who look like you. You'll have to dig deeper, but there are things only you have to offer, and those have value. Bill Cosby said that he told stories about his life because people can steal jokes. And he's done okay for himself.

The people in a group talking about you behind your back are thinking small. They're worried you'll take their place on this tiny boat. You might want to lash out at them or maybe get revenge in the future, but it's not worth it. They can't see the ocean. There are more boats out there than your eyes can take in. When you consider what you're doing a competition, it makes things much harder. It's easier in some ways because things are more black and white. You're just in it for yourself and you've got to look out for number one. But that's lonely work, and you may turn into an asshole. Also, if you're thinking this is a competition, how do you know when you've won? What are you trying to prove? And who are you trying to prove it to? Comedian Marc Maron said, "It took me years to realize showbiz wasn't my parents." Get out of the elevator and go for a swim in the ocean.

CHAPTER THREE

THIS IS BULLSHIT!

Something that happened every so often when I was an improviser is we'd have a visitor from out of town. This person would do a show or two with us and then afterward inform us that we were doing it all wrong. I had workshops by guest teachers who'd let us know off the top that everything we'd been taught was crap. They'd then let us know the way they did it in their neck of the woods—the "correct" way to do an improv show. Now even if they were right, you might want to wine and dine us a bit before you take us into a corner and give us the hard truth. You don't go into a Catholic church, yell at the parishioners that everything they've been told is a lie, slap the wafers out of their mouths, and then try to bring them over to your faith. It just doesn't work. This happens in all the arts. In music, the style you enjoy is the only real music and the rest is just noise. But if you open yourself up, you might find some other flavours that'll compliment what you already like. If you want to be the Italian man who only eats pasta the way his mother made it, with any variation being an insult to her, then that's your choice.

I can't really blame these performers and teachers (okay, I can and I did for many years). It's part of the artist's way to call bullshit when they see it, and as an improviser, you're going to have a lot of bullshit moments. Bullshit moments are when you realize the system is broken. Maybe no one is casting women or people of colour. Maybe you've created a show and the company you're doing it with is taking it in a direction that'll ruin it. Maybe your show is being advertised to the wrong audience. It's frustrating. You can clearly see the way things should be. Why don't the people around you get it? What are they, idiots? The fantasy is that once you've established yourself as a performer, there will be structures in place to carry you along. Do enough shows, audition for Second City, get cast and seen by Lorne Michaels, get on *Saturday Night Live*, and move on to movies fame and fortune. Maybe that'll happen, maybe not, but in the meantime, you're going to meet up with a lot of people and situations that will frustrate you to the point of quitting. Many people do quit. They realize the deck is stacked against them and leave the game.

The idea that hard work and drive will get you what you want is ... well, bullshit. You do need to work hard, and some luck would be nice, but along the way, you're going to run up against what seems like pure stupidity. How you deal with it is the difference between staying sane and going nuts. Some artists, when they meet opposition to their good ideas, make it clear that the other party is a moron. These people tell it like it is and take no crap. Talk to a lot of people fresh out of college and they'll let you know what your problem is and how they're going to fix the world. I wish those folks the best of luck. Often, this attitude comes from a sense of entitlement. If people don't get you, then screw them. It's not a bad fuel, but it burns hot and quick. This creates a You vs. Them scenario. Get some friends on your side and you've got an Us vs. Them. It feels good to have an

enemy. Makes life more black and white. But for the most part, these fools who don't get you are trying their best as well. It may seem as if they just care about the bottom line or hiring their friends or whatever the problem is, but most people are just trying to get things done. Compromise isn't an artistic sin as long as you know how far you're willing to go and what lines you won't cross. When those lines are about to be crossed, you need to walk away. Not storm off. Not throw a match on the gas-soaked bridge. Just do your own thing elsewhere. If your talent/idea/angle is worthwhile, you'll be able to do it somewhere else, and showing people that something works is infinitely better than getting upset that they don't understand why it will work.

When I was pitching a show to my improv company, it became clear that it would never be the show I wanted to do. My line was crossed. So I quit the company and mounted it myself with like-minded friends. It was very difficult. The company was comfortable. I'd been there for years, it was safe, my friends worked there, and had we a guaranteed audience. I'd been in a similar situation before where I left a rehearsal for a show I'd created for a few hours, and when I came back, the format had been all but abandoned. I was very upset and in one case stormed out, and the others just sucked it up and did the show. Both were unpleasant experiences. But the one I self-produced was very satisfying and let me demonstrate in front of an audience what I couldn't show any other way.

Another group of mine had been performing improv in a sketch-style format for years when a local sketch comedy festival started up in town. We wanted to do it but were told that since it wasn't really sketch, the other groups would be uncomfortable with that. We got the feeling they thought improv was hack. So we renamed ourselves, wrote out some sketches that had the same feel and structure of our improv show, and it went over quite well. We won the Canadian Comedy Award for best sketch group a few years later.

In both of those instances, I felt angry at the people who couldn't see what was obvious to me. I could have blown up at them, been insulting, and sulked, content that it wasn't my fault things were shitty. Instead I created something to prove those small-minded people wrong. Spite was a motivator at first and a good one, but again, it burns fast. The work itself will take over from that point. It's like a hybrid car with an anger-based starting fuel. If you really are right, then getting what you want to showcase up on its feet is the best way to change things. If you're wrong, at least you tried it and you'll learn something from that. There really is a lot of bullshit out there, despite everyone's best intentions. If you don't help show another way then we're all the poorer for it and our shoes will be much worse off.

USE EVERY PART OF THE BUFFALO

I think it was in the book *Something Wonderful Right Away* by Jeffery Sweet where I first read that one of the main rules at the Second City was to work from the top of your intelligence. Another was that it was a good idea to assume the audience was as smart or smarter than you. The shows that frustrate the hell out of me to watch are the ones where the improvisers are head and shoulders above the material they're performing. The feeling usually is, the actors are going to do some safe handles or structures to improve the odds that the show will work. So they drag out the old tried and true. But the tried and true have been done so often there's no real challenge. So either the performers sail through like a daredevil with a helmet and safety belt, jumping a one-foot-deep chasm, or the actors pretend that they're doing something more difficult than it really is. The problem with this is, you may fool a few people in the audience but many can smell bullshit, and you've just lost your connection with them because you're basically calling them stupid.

On the flipside are people doing structures that are completely out of their range. I can't count the amount of Shakespeare scenes I've seen by people who haven't studied the Bard. The reason the company I started with used to do so many Shakespeare scenes is that was in the background of a large number of the actors. It was impressive because the performers were comfortable enough in that setting to play around and take some chances. To break this down, you need to start a scene in a place you're confident with as a performer and then shoot off in some hopefully new directions. There's nothing wrong with doing an Arms Scene as long as you don't just do the same gags other performers have been doing for decades. Then you're not an improviser—you're a cover band playing a "best of" collection of hits. If as a performer you aren't comfortable with a Shakespeare scene, then it's important to find something you are okay with. Maybe you're athletic, maybe you can play an instrument and sing, maybe you can memorize a large amount of names or have a passion for some subject. These are all places where you can create a structure that works for you.

The benefits are you'll probably look a lot better than you would doing a handle that was created for another person, and you might make something new. Without the new, everything starts to get stale. The audience can spot the new as well, and it's exciting. When a crowd understands they're part of something fresh, it's a much different reaction. It's not just laughter; there's delight. If I can get corny, it pushes things beyond just the pleasure of laughter into the joy of discovery. When you just do cover band improv, you may get some nice feedback from the audience, but you make yourself easily replaceable. You're just following the dance steps printed on the floor. If you make up scenes based on your own skill set, then you're something unique. I'm not a particularly smart person. I'm a community college dropout. But I make up for it a couple of ways. I'm good at connecting seemingly different things together and linking them in some way. Also I'm interested in a fairly wide variety of areas and obsessive

about a few subjects. So I've created a series of handles for myself where these pay off. If I'm hosting a show, I try to learn what the other performers are good at and design the show to fit their skills.

One of the most frustrating things as a comedian is seeing talented people doing television work where the structure doesn't fit their skill set or style. If you're a sketch or stand-up comedian in Canada, for the last few years the best television work you could get was performing live on stage in front of an audience with a horrible laugh track seemingly set on random. The performers were made to fit the outdated format, and so even the most talented started to blend together into one generic mass. I'm glad to see performers using the internet to create material that's built around who they are, not what's come before, and then use that in their live shows. I hope improv follows their lead. If not, then enjoy another evening of Options, Word at a Time, Audience Sound Effects, Accent Coaster, Sentences, Story from the Audience, and Endowments with a song at the end if Endowments didn't really pay off as well as the performers had hoped.

IT'S ABOUT TOLERANCE, STUPID!

I work in the comic book industry and it's a bit of a self-loathing profession. No one hates a nerd like another nerd. Read a comic book message board and your computer might melt from the bile pouring off it. The fantasy readers look down on the superhero readers who look down on the Archie readers and on and on...

In improv there's a bit of the same thing between short-form and long-form performers. Now before I get into why you shouldn't hate things, let me say I hate the term "long-form improv." Could anything sound less appealing? Sit down, this'll take a while! The name Harold has stuck if for no other reason than it sounds better. Would you like to see a long-form film festival? A long-form ballet? Okay, so that said, I've recently read a series of books about improv and listened to improv podcasts. Most have a lot of good advice in them and are worth a read and a listen. But on the whole, the books and podcasts spend a lot of time calling certain types of improv rubbish, stupid, pointless, and bad. What they're normally talking about is very simple improv where a performer stays in a safe zone, doing almost never fail games or handles and trying to get laughs. Some performers think it messes up their reputations being associated with this low form of comedy. It taints the art form. It's a common thing to do when you feel insecure: you want to define your boundaries. As a performer, it's easier to know you're doing what's right if you strongly define what's wrong. But creating that Us vs. Them mindset goes against the heart of improv.

Improv, at its, core is about acceptance. You accept the suggestions of the audience, you accept the offers the other performers make, and you accept the strange new thoughts that come into your head. You say yes and don't judge.? Maybe it's all the "yes and-ing" that they have to do on stage that makes improvisers so "no that's crap-ish" when they become teachers or write books.? I've seen what seems like lazy improv and it's bothered me: people just doing the same old intros over and over and doing very similar scenes to ones I've seen before. I can wish they'd do something new, but I'll never dismiss what they do as useless because usually the performers and audience are having a good time. When you make it your quest to make sure people laugh in the correct way, then you're on a pretty dark path. One of my favorite films is Preston Sturges's Sullivan's Travels, about a director of popular comedies who wants to make a film that truly matters and speaks to the big issues of the day. The film will be called Oh Brother Where Art Thou. He thinks the movies he's been doing are trash. By the end of the film, he sees the impact that "low" comedy has on people and how important it is.

I don't care if you're doing the most basic "moving bodies" scene with elements that have been done a thousand times before. If you're making people laugh, that's sacred. When you call other types of improv pointless and rubbish, what happens? Are audience members who enjoy it going to think, "I guess I'm stupid for laughing at that. I should change my ways? How about the performers who

do the style of improv you call stupid? How open do you think they'll be to seeing your point of view? You've just severely cut your list of allies down. Can you afford to lose that many people while you try to make improv better? If you call someone's craft stupid, you better be ready for some repercussions. You also better be pretty damn good at what you're doing because you're not going to get cut any slack. You've set a very judgmental tone, and now that's the bed you'll be sleeping in. There's a big difference between what you don't enjoy personally and what's trash. Dismissing elements of your art form as useless is fine as a personal choice, but make that into a public statement or teach it in a class and that's a different matter. Think hard before you do it. That thing you love in your life? That thing that's more special to you than anything? There are a lot of people who think that's stupid too.

SOLITAIRE'S NOT THE ONLY GAME IN TOWN

I used to write for a studio that did state-of-the-art computer animation. They had seven of the ten most powerful rendering computers in the world. The other three were used on the latest Star Trek TV series for their special effects. The other writers and I were given a tour of the building after a lot of security screening. The machines were in the basement in a special room that you could only enter if you were wearing static-free clothing. They were impressive, and we could only glimpse them from behind a glass wall. In front of the wall was a series of monitors. Only one was turned on, and a person working there was playing solitaire. One of the most powerful computers in the world, worth a couple of million dollars, was being used for solitaire. This is how I feel when I see many improv shows.

You have these amazing performers but they end up doing the same games and handles that a new improviser would do. Now there's nothing wrong with an Arms Scene and there's nothing wrong with a game of solitaire. Both can be fun in small doses and both are entertaining. But it's a bit of a waste of potential if it's done too much. Too many improv shows are the equivalent of solitaire, minesweeper and, if we want to get into long-form, Farmville. Yes, it's what people already like and it's comfortable, but if you're really a professional at this or want to be, you've got to create some new formats and shake things up. Otherwise the audience's expectations will stay where they are and your supercomputer will start to slow down from lack of use.?

Shifting imagery for a moment, let's look at you as a stock. Not a stock character but a stock on the improv stock exchange. When you begin, you're not worth too much, but then you grow over time and become more valuable. After a while, your stock is going to level out. Let's say you're there now. What is it that'll make your stock fall? Acting like a jerk? Showing up on stage drunk? Not paying attention to what other players are doing in a scene? Yep. Now what'll make it rise? Doing consistently good shows? Maybe, but more than likely that'll just get you holding steady. Quality shows are expected. Helping out the new performers? Yeah, that's a good step. These are people who you'll be working with in the future, and if you were a person who helped on the way up, that'll be remembered. If nothing else, you'll make the environment better for good improv to happen. If you're worried these new folks will take work for you and snub them, that's going to hurt you in the long run. But one of the easiest ways to see your stock rise is to develop new handles and formats. If you're creating, you're helping things to grow, and that can lead to everyone's stock going up. New ideas bring in new audiences, and that's something every business needs. By doing the same old scenes, even with new talent, you're just going to thin out your market over time.

The safe stuff kills companies in the long run, and for the most part, when their audiences dwindle, they just keep trying to do safer and safer material. It's what

happened in the stand-up boom and bust of the late '80s/early '90s. Improv has never been as successful as stand-up so we haven't seen as great a decline yet. But unless we keep things growing, we will. The best way to make things better for yourself is by making things better around you. Bring in the new. Otherwise you're a supercomputer putting a black queen on a red king.

HOW EMBARRASSING

We talk a lot about failure in improv workshops. You're told not to fear it, but often those same instructors will come down on you for not doing things in the right way. The only way to get to the "right" way is to either imitate what you see others doing or do things in many, many wrong ways until you find what works. Too many people choose the first option and just try to copy others, especially the instructor. A lot of students come out of classes with the same speech patterns and mannerisms as an instructor they've studied with. Add to this a natural desire to please the teacher and many students just end up with a surface-level copy of the craft. This is fine if you just want to do improv games and very basic scenes. Once you learn the tricks of, say, a Moving Bodies scene, you can copy them and do very well on stage with it.

The other route is to try new things, but this brings with it a whole lot of fail. And failure brings embarrassment. There's probably going to be a time when you take a risk or try something new and are met with silence or out-and-out disapproval or pity from the audience and it'll feel like a punch in the stomach. Taking a chance and going beyond your comfort zone only to be slapped down? It's like those people on American Idol whose voice breaks when they try to hit the high note of a song. Idiots. What were they thinking, am I right? It feels shameful to fail. You might be able to talk yourself down from it after the fact. Give yourself some credit for trying something new, learn from it, and build on it. But that's for after the scene. While you're in it, it's like a bad dream.

You probably won't be able to ever stop that feeling. But here's something you can do: when you see someone else on stage dropping the ball, support the hell out of them! Don't make a comment at their expense that scores points for you; jump on board that sinking ship and start rowing! I did a scene this week about being too poor to send my son to a good piano teacher so I had to save money and have him taught by pedophiles. Got a bit of a moan from the audience. But later in the scene, we met another kid, and his parent was in the same boat, saying he had to save money and have his child taught by anti-Semites. This got a good response and the scene moved forward.

Many things in a scene that seem broken can be fixed by commitment on the part of the other performers. And when you know that your other improvisers are on your side and jumping into the burning house with you, it's a lot less embarrassing. A performer's biggest fear is often rejection: rejection by the audience, the other actors, or someone else they respect in the company. If you set up an environment where you're all in this together, there's a lot less of that. It'll make people take bigger chances, and that's where you'll find the new.

Shame sucks the fun out of life, and fear of embarrassment waters down art. It's the enemy and one that's very hard to fight alone. Luckily, as an improviser, you're not alone unless you choose to be.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE GREAT DEPRESSION

I don't know if there are more depressed people in the arts than other professions or if being part of something where expressing and tapping into your feelings is encouraged just means it's more obvious. I've worked professionally as an actor, other times as a touring stand-up comedian and an improviser. There were times those jobs mixed, but there were also months to years when I'd just be making my living off one of those three. I currently make my living as a writer and use the money to create comedy projects. As an actor, you audition and get rejected constantly, most of the time with no reason given, and so your brain decides to help you out and give you a bunch of reasons why. Maybe you should lose some weight, maybe you stuttered, or maybe the casting director has something personal against you. At a TV or film audition, you're herded into a waiting room with a group of people who look like you and who you'll be competing with. You all look at your scripts, pace, try not to look nervous, go to the bathroom if they have one, wonder why they're running so late and if your parking is still valid (the auditions are always late and they seldom apologize). Maybe there's a water cooler but probably not. You go into a room, state your name, make very little small talk if any, probably don't shake anyone's hands, do your lines, and off you go with a quick thanks. You exit, and the folks in the waiting room gaze up at you hoping you don't look too happy. You probably booked time off your day job for this. It more than likely cost you money to do it, and you get treated poorly.

That is unless you get the job, and then it all flips. You get paid a lot of money to do very little work on a set. People do your makeup and dress you, the director talks to you, and everyone asks how you're doing. They give you free meals and constant access to beverages. There's a table filled with just snacks! Maybe there's a stand in for you if your part is large enough. The hours are long but the worst thing they make you do is wait in an air-conditioned trailer with your own TV. The problem with this life is the lack of a middle ground. You're nothing or you're royalty. Feast or famine. When the auditions dry up, as they do in cycles, the mind goes wandering again, wondering what you did wrong. It's got to be your fault, right? Maybe you're getting too old. Maybe you said something that offended the director. Maybe you're a terrible actor and everyone has finally called you on being the fraud you've always been.

You're like a glass full of water going from the fridge to the microwave and back. If you base your self-worth on your success or what casting directors think of you, you're going to end up broken. I didn't feel like this was healthy for myself, so I stepped back from that world and stopped auditioning. For me, that worked out because I started writing parts for myself on a local kids' show called Switchback. Then I got cast in Happy Gilmore because the director liked a live show they saw me in and I ended up getting a string of commercials because the

casting director lived in my apartment building, knew I was kind of funny, and would cast me in things as I was going down to the basement to do my laundry.

I've never been more depressed than I was while being a road comic. I did stand-up comedy at a club called Punchlines in Vancouver and was what you'd now call an alternative comic. I wasn't great but I was given some good advice when I started by a comedian I respected. He said to never do generic material and that it was a waste of time. So my act was weird. I'd turn the audience into a giant 3-D movie while wearing glasses and get them to lunge toward me. I'd pretend it was my birthday and have them hide under their tables to surprise me when I reentered, and did a ventriloquist act with a sock puppet that just did mime. I'd drink a glass of water while it walked against the wind. This was a time when other comedians would also be doing things like dressing up like a moth and getting closer and closer to the spotlight during the set.

My act was fine for the clubs and I started get some MC work, but to make any real money, you needed to tour. These tours were to bars in small towns, and most of the time people didn't know there was comedy that night. My artsy fartsy comedy was the last thing they wanted to see. I'd been performing for years doing different things but never faced that kind of pure loathing from an audience.

I was told by the comedians I was touring with that this was the only path to being a professional stand-up. You had to do the road gigs and toughen up. I couldn't take the road so I quit stand-up to focus on sketch and improv comedy. I got back into it after seeing a film called *The Comedians of Comedy*, which was about four very different stand-up comics touring together. Two of them were nerds, one did hilarious characters, and the other played piano while doing jokes and constantly confronted the audience. They were all weirdos! And they weren't being assholes to each other. They weren't trying to be cool! It was an eye-opener and I've gradually been getting back into stand-up.

There's a golden age of talent here in Vancouver that's a lot like the comic book scene I saw in the city in late '90s. In both cases, it didn't seem like there was any real hope of success, so the artists involved just did the stuff they wanted to do. And so the work they did got really good. If I kept to the road and kept working on my craft, I don't know how dark things would have gotten for me mentally. I used to live with a comedian and she would often talk about how she was going to commit suicide. It was that dark artist mindset mixed with depression mixed with anti-depressants mixed with white wine. I stopped drinking on the road after one of the greatest stand-ups to come out of Vancouver took me aside and told me over and over how his drinking was killing his career. He was fighting some demons, and in the end they won. It's so easy to drink when you're working in a bar where it's free and often in a town where you don't know anyone and have nothing else to do.

Improv has been a more positive experience, at least on the surface. Maybe because I'm not alone in it. There's always a couple of other people whose job it is to have your back on stage. After a show, you usually talk through what happened, and that leaves a lot less room for your brain to make up what went on. As improvisers, you want to make each other look good, and that's a pretty positive place to come from. This is what I dislike about improv books where the word stupid is used so much to describe performances. Verbal abuse of students just feels wrong to me even though there's a proud history of it. It seems to go against the core of improv and what makes it unique. It gives it the same problems stand-up and acting have. It's that boot camp mentality that you'll find in most of the arts. The idea that you need to learn to take a punch. The idea that if you can take abuse, it'll make you better as an artist doesn't fly with me. Practice is essential, but playing piano in a foxhole during a war doesn't make you a better piano player because you're ankle deep in mud with bullets flying overhead. It'll probably make that gig playing the wedding not seem so bad—unless your PTSD kicks in and you snap the best man's neck.?

This is where I'm going to tie things into depression. If you're in a profession where you're told you need to suffer for your work—and in the arts that's a common theme—then when a mental illness like depression shows up, you're less likely to try and treat it. It feels like you deserve it, like it's part of the artist's process. Also, how can you complain to your friends who have a “real” job about how you're bummed out doing commercials, telling jokes, or doing comedy? You're doing something fun, right? What right do you have to whine doing what you love? You feel like the girl who's told she was asking for it. The depression you've got is your fault and it's part of your path. You deserve to feel this way, and you'll stop as soon as you get that next commercial, that next big gig, that house—once you show your parents this wasn't a waste of time. But it doesn't work that way.

The arts can be a great outlet for expression and a wonderful way to make a living, but it has a lot of dark corners where bad shit can grow quickly and freely. Not to turn into a PSA, but if you're depressed, get help. If not to make yourself healthy then for the good of your craft. Depression seems like it's a good fuel for art, but eventually the car explodes. You've got too much to do to let that get in the way.

QUITTING IS FOR WINNERS!

I love quitting. There's a profound sense of calm that washes over you when you just step away from the surrounding mess. I've quit theatre companies, retail work, TV shows, relationships, and religions. The air becomes easier to breathe and you can move on to whatever happens next. That said, one of the main reasons I'm writing this book is to stop people from quitting. There are so many reasons people have walked away from improv. That's fine if you feel improv as a craft isn't your thing, but too often it's the teachers, co-workers, politics, and other associated nonsense that makes people throw up their hands and push open the exit door. It's a drag for the people involved and it hurts the industry.

I'm a big believer in variety being a strength. When there's a limited type of improv being done, it attracts a certain type of performer, and a certain type of audience builds. Other potential audience members come to see a show, think that's all improv can be, and never come back. This is what happened with stand-up comedy in the late '80s. There was a boom and comedy nights popped up everywhere, but too much of the same type of material was put out there by inexperienced performers trying to copy what they'd seen others do. There were a few unique voices, but too much of the same turned off audiences and the boom became a bust. When people think stand-up, they still think of the guy in a sports coat in front of the brick wall. When they think improv, it's matching t-shirts and people with too much energy jumping around wearing funny wigs.

Off the top of my head, I can think of a dozen very successful performers who have done improv in Vancouver and then left because the structures in place didn't work for them. These are just the ones who made it afterward. There must be hundreds who just gave up on performing altogether. I'm happy for the ones who did well, but it's sad thinking how they might have pushed improv in some new directions if that had seemed like an option to them. I quit doing stand-up comedy because I hated road work.

One time, the comedian I was touring with was killing every night with racist and gay-bashing material. The audience loved him and hated me. You can take a bit of that, but do a long tour and it wears you down. But I was told this was how it worked in stand-up. You do open mikes, then tour around the country building your material and toughening up so when you start headlining, you'll be ready. This was how every stand-up did it. Anyway, this comic was getting drinks bought for him by the audience, and I was getting nothing but stink eyes, so I went back to the motel room we were sharing. I turned the lights off except for the one by his bed. When he came in, he turned every light in the place back on. And the television had a horror movie on at full volume. He was just being a jackass, and I didn't want any part of it. So I faked being asleep and then actually fell asleep. When I woke up, it was to a loud, sustained beeping sound. It was the noise you get over the colour bars when a station goes off the air. I looked over and there he was, sitting on his bed with his eyes and mouth wide open. He was

dead. The person I was touring with was dead. And the first thought that went through my head was, "At least the tour's over."

It turned out he wasn't dead. He just passed out with his eyes open, but knowing I'd lost my ability to care if the person next to me was alive or dead, I decided now would be a good time to quit. This wasn't healthy. I wonder how many people got to that point with improv. The moment when it just wasn't worth it anymore. I'm betting they felt like I did, that this was the only road there was. They'd been taught and advised by people who'd taken this path, and it worked for them. Like the dad who justifies hitting his kids by saying, "My father smacked me and it never did me any harm." Well no, aside from making you a person who hits your kids. These folks can't really advise you on any route except the one they've taken. The two big points I'm trying to make are. 1) Don't let any of the distracting side bullshit be more important than developing your craft. 2) There's always a new path if the one you're on isn't working.

Instead of being knocked out of the game by the part of the industry you think is messed up, maybe that's the area you need to change. It's not as easy as just falling in line, but I'll bet there are more people thinking like you and just waiting for someone else to make the first move. Lose the matching shirts. Just do improv on the internet. Do it with puppets. Just make it what works for you, not what you hope others will like. A side effect of you changing things is it'll probably bring in a new audience not currently being served. Now this won't happen overnight; most new ideas face resistance. And even if it doesn't work, it might clear the path for the next thing. Quitting something also lets you step back and get some perspective. I quit improv for about six months, and when I came back, I had a much clearer idea of what I wanted to do and what worked for me. I've also quit and returned to sketch comedy and stand-up, and each time I felt like I was bringing something new to the picture. Quitting can be fun and liberating; just make sure you're doing it for the right reasons and not throwing any babies into the gutter with the bathwater. Those babies grow up mean.

A NICE PLACE TO VISIT

There's a *Twilight Zone* episode called "A Nice Place to Visit" where a guy dies and gets everything he ever wanted in the afterlife. He gambles but can't lose. The food and drinks are great, and beautiful women fall all over him. Eventually, it becomes frustrating, and he asks the person in charge if he can go to the other place instead of here in heaven. The fellow laughs and asks him why he thought he was in heaven. Then there's a "waa waa" trumpet, which is the funniest way to find out you're damned forever. Two things. One, I bet the damned souls that ended up in the hell where you burn in a lake of fire forever have very little sympathy for the guy with the great food and sexy dames. And two, it shows that we all need challenges or we'll go crazy.?

A topic I keep repeating is the need for professional improvisers to grow and come up with new angles and structures, just to stay mentally healthy, if nothing else. I keep seeing shows where the actors don't look challenged. They get the suggestion and fall into a groove that they've dug from doing hundreds of shows. It'd be too mean to do but I'd like to videotape the same game or type of scene for ten shows and play them simultaneously just to see if the beats and laughs happen at the same time. Don't get me wrong, the laughs do happen. The audience almost always enjoys the scenes. The structures have been field tested, and the odds of success are great. The performers get rewarded with a positive response. But it can be a trap, and there's no "waa waa" to let you know you're in it.

What's the harm in doing a never-fail scene and keeping the same old structure? My first problem is that the audience, while enjoying the show, is doing so in a comfortable, predictable way. When I was a touring stand-up, you'd get a lot of comedians who would do old jokes instead of writing their own material. People in the audience knew the jokes or at least were familiar with the pacing of them. They knew that when there were three nuns, that what the first two did was a set up for the third. They knew when the punchline was supposed to come and laughed as much for the rhythm of the joke as the content. There was enjoyment but there was no surprise. Improv won me over with its "anything can happen" element. There was a format, but within that lived chaos. You were never relaxed watching the show like when you were at home watching TV. You'd constantly see something and look over at your friend to confirm you both just saw what you did. You were seeing something on that stage that no one else would see again.

With the popular games and handles, if you missed seeing an arms scene one night, there'd be another the next one that wouldn't be all that different. But the big problem with digging a groove is when something happens outside of it, the actors can really get thrown. What I've seen over and over is when a wild offer from another improviser is made and the other performers look at them like they just did something stupid. They seem annoyed that they have to stretch a bit and break the routine. Why mess with a scene that's in a groove? I should mention

that I'm the type of performer who makes the odd, over-the-top offers. I've seen my share of blank stares at things I've thrown into a scene. If they aren't accepted, the scene usually has the momentum taken away until one of the other performers finds a more comfortable road to go down. When an offer is rejected, then it comes across like an out-of-context gag or like the performer is trying to be clever, which according to a lot of improv books, is the greatest sin there is.

Personally, I don't think there are any bad offers unless they put the other performers in physical danger or are outside their own personal boundaries. With my troupe, usually we do a scene and a large, seemingly unrelated offer is made that doesn't seem to follow the pattern of the scene. The audience might not be on board for it at first, or they might laugh a little at how out of place it is. The other performers accept it and take it to a place where it then connects logically with the events already established. Or at least they act like it's a logical part of the world. The audience is usually going along with the scene because the performers are, and you end up with something no performer would have thought up on their own. It's something unique that the audience really will only see that night. The performers and audience are energized in a way they aren't when you just do the greatest hits. You stop being a cover band and start developing your own style. You make the stage a place where the new can happen, and that leads to not just passive enjoyment but delight and excitement. To me, that's where the real heaven in improv lives. The other place might feel like it for a while. But listen closely for the trumpet.

LOSING CONTROL

When you start off in improv, it's easy to map your growth. You start to gain confidence and feel more comfortable on stage. Maybe you begin to get asked to do more shows. I'll say again, there's no end to this. There's no "...and now you've made it" for a performer. As an artist, you're in a constant state of growth. Even the most established artist you know of is still learning as they go. But when you reach a certain level, the obvious growth becomes less noticeable. There's a real danger of becoming addicted to audience approval. But let's say you've reached the point where most shows get a good response. You can still be addicted to growth, and if seems like there is none, if it feels like things have plateaued, that can get frustrating. The reward of getting a little better each time doesn't compare to moving from amateur performances to professional ones.

I see a lot of frustrated professional improvisers when I watch shows. They're getting the laughs but they just don't seem to have any joy in their performances. I've seen amateur shows that the audience enjoyed much more because the people onstage were having such a good time and it pours off the stage into the crowd. Usually these frustrated performers are doing formats it's clear they don't really care for. Because they can't change the format, they do their best to control everything within it. They get a suggestion from the audience, and if they don't like it, they insult the person who shouted it out. Not a lot of things make me angry in improv, but a host or performer who goes after an audience member like they're a heckler is one of them. Improv is, at its heart, about saying yes and being open. That's what character, plot, and everything else orbits around. If the first thing that happens in a scene is you ask for something and not only say no, but get on your high horse about how much you don't like it, you've hobbled the scene from the start. If you do this, you've set up a relationship with the audience that's you vs. them. Too many performers do their act at the crowd.

The frustrated performer also turns this energy on the other improvisers. If the scene doesn't go the way they want, they drop out of it either by finding a reason to leave the stage, or worse, staying. It's like the guy at the party who wants you to know how lousy a time he's having. The other performers now have to work twice as hard in the scene while dodging the occasional veiled (or obvious) insult. But in doing so the performer (sometimes) gets laughs from the audience, usually at the expense of the story. To be blunt, they cancer up the scene until it dies.

While this makes me mad to see as an audience member and annoys me as a fellow performer, I get it. There are long stretches in your career where nothing happens and you feel trapped. You got rewarded along the way, and now it seems the rewards have stopped. It's scary. What if this is it for you? What if no one discovers you and put you in that TV program or casts you in that high-

paying live show? Is this it? Are you going to be doing Arms Scenes and Freeze Tag for the rest of your life? It's okay to feel that way. It's not okay to take it out on the crowd and the performers around you. If you need a break, take a break. Improv isn't going anywhere. It'll be here when you get some perspective and find the joy in it again. It's not okay be the asshole who makes everyone say, "Yeah he's like that but he's been around a long time so what are you gonna do?" The new performers will resent you and the older ones will either be annoyed or pity you. And you're never so good that you can't be replaced. You're not doing anyone any favours sticking it out and being bitter.

A better way to work though it would be to break your rut. It's really what you're pissed off at anyway. Yes, you might have to do the same old games, but find some new angles to them, take a few risks. Remember when you started improvising and were told not to be afraid to fail? They were right. Fail a bit. It's okay. As long as you don't have that you vs. them relationship with your audience, they'll be cool with it as long as they can see you tried something tricky and failed with a smile on your face. If you're not good at musicals, try doing them more. If you're bad at Shakespeare scenes, work on those. You know your flaws; build up those muscles and you'll feel the growth you miss. You'll be a better improviser and probably a better person to be around. When you get together with other performers and talk about shows at the bar, it's rare you talk about the good ones. No one wants to hear how well you did at something. The fun stories are the ones where you crash and burn. Those are the ones that make for the best memories. So don't be a dick, take some chances, fail big, and get some good war stories out of it.

CHAPTER FIVE

THE CASE OF THE VANISHING GOAL POSTS

I think people in the arts never really have the satisfaction of getting their dream job, because by the time you've got the skill set to actually achieve it, the goal's moved or completely changed. I'm sure there are comedians who dreamed of being radio stars who made it on television but were never really satisfied by it. Because it was a new medium and the new never seems to have the same weight. I know people who have shows on cable TV but that's not as big a deal as network TV, and even network TV isn't as big a deal as it used to be. Stand-up comedians whose dream was to be on the *Tonight Show with Johnny Carson* might do dozens of appearances on the *Tonight Show with Jay Leno* and still not be able to fill a club. The goal posts they started with got taken down while they were practicing.

For me, my goal as an improviser was to perform with Theatresports at City Stage in Vancouver. I'd be in the audience every week I could afford it after standing in a line that went down the block and around the corner. By the time I started to get professional work, the theatre was renamed The Back Alley, there were more shows, so the lines were never as long, and I'd been doing rookie shows for what felt like a very long time. The rookie shows were ones you didn't get paid for but they always seemed to sell out, and after a while we started to feel a twinge of "where's our cut of this?" But we were told it was such valuable experience and we were lucky for the opportunity. This might be true, but they were lucky for the money they were getting as well. Many of the performers I admired, like Ryan Stiles and Colin Mochrie, left the group (I wonder what happened to those two?) and I never really got to improvise with them. In a Keith Johnstone documentary I saw much later, they said they were fired from the company for drinking on stage, which, given the amount of drinking I saw on stage, backstage, and anywhere near the stage after that, seems pretty funny.

I ended up getting my start in a production that most of the pros in the company didn't want to do, a parody of *Star Trek* called *Star Trick*. It was written by two performers who actually showed up at the first meeting to tell everyone why doing the show seemed like a terrible idea. They ended up writing it. We had one star performer, and the rest of us were semi-regular players who just wanted the stage time. The show was a surprise hit. It felt good to be in the show, but it didn't feel like what I expected and wasn't my goal when I started. Since that time, I've talked to other performers who became improvisers because of it and it became their goal to end up in a show like that. But there never really was another show like that, at least in that company. *Star Trick* was a mix of 75 percent script and 25 percent, improv with full music and dance numbers, and as big a hit as it was, that kind of thing was never done again. It did get a couple of remounts (here and back east), but nothing new of the kind had those production values. Right now, most shows have loose outlines and are designed so new

performers can pop in and out with very little rehearsal. So if you started off with that kind of show as your goal, you weren't ever going to get there.

The other goal for improvisers was to get discovered like the *Second City* performers and be cast in the next SCTV or on *Saturday Night Live*. *The Kids in the Hall* started as a Theatresports team at the Loose Moose Theatre in Calgary before moving on to sketch and being discovered by Lorne Michaels. The feeling was as long as you're on stage enough, someone's going to notice you're brilliant and scoop you up. I can't think of the last time that happened. Maybe a little bit in Toronto with members of the improv and sketch scene there, but those shows end up on The Comedy Network, which, no offense to it, tries hard but doesn't have a lot of impact even in Canada. It doesn't feel like the next Mike Myers is going to be found there. *Picnicface*, a Halifax based sketch group with a background in improv and stand-up, built up a large following on YouTube and were picked up for a series on The Comedy Network, but that got cancelled much too early. I can see how a real TV series would have been a goal for them. But more people saw them online than ever did or ever could on The Comedy Network. It's wasn't a step down, but they're were already doing what most successful performers do: creating work for the time they live in, in the medium of the time.

Sure you want to be a movie star and have your face on the big screen, but people are starting to watch more films at home now, streamed directly to them. The distance between performer and audience is getting smaller. Hopefully that'll mean a greater variety of work will be available for people who like something different. It might mean the days of the big hit film will be over. I don't know. But it's going to be interesting to see. I do know one thing: people will complain as it does happen. People missed VHS tapes and vinyl records. But they never totally go away. Blockbuster will fold up, but there'll be some video stores around. Someone will cater to those who want the familiar, but it won't stop the new. You can complain that the goal you wanted has changed or you can take advantage of the time you're in.

I fell in love with comic books as a kid and I write them now. The ones I loved were sold on newsstands and then at comic book stores. Now they're going digital, and soon most will be on iPads or whatever replaces the iPad. You can either mourn the past or embrace now. People called Twitter stupid, and it became a great way for comedians to write jokes and connect with a new audience (oh, and it also helped overthrow dictators, but the comedy thing is what interests me more). As an improviser, what you saw and fell in love with that made you want to do this will change over the course of your career. Be ready for that. Better still, be part of that. The future is going to come with or without you. Better to bring some of your own new to the game and help shape the road.

SURFERS AND LADDERS

When you're starting out as an improviser, there's usually a pretty clear path. You take workshops, try out for an amateur company, and hope to work your way up the ladder. But once you do, it's easy to run out of up. Often, performers don't want to leave their rung and there's not enough room for another person even if the newcomer might be a better improviser. The veterans made it there, and they've got a grip on that rung that can't be broken. Which is really too bad because it's not doing the new performer or the veteran any favours artistically. To the newcomer who's frustrated by this, you can either stay where you are, building experience, and maybe those above you will decide to leave one day, or you can step off and try another path. This is annoying if you've spent months to years working up those rungs so far. It's even more annoying if you start to feel like you're a cash cow for the person who owns the ladder to sell workshops to. Cows generally aren't happy on ladders.

The ladder is a bit of a lie. Even in the most successful improv companies, there's no winner at the end of the game. The game just keeps going and there are always going to be people who won't want to leave and will consider you the enemy because you're their replacement. Which you just might be. But if you're in this for the long haul and want to take your skills as far as they can go, you have to get over your fear of stepping off the ladder. It doesn't mean you have to leave right now, but don't be afraid that you only have one option. The others may be a bit harder to achieve, you may have to really search them out, you may even have to create them yourself, but they're there.

Neil Patrick Harris compared his acting career to surfing. You wait, catch a wave, ride it, and when it's done, you wait for the next one. Some waves are big, some small, but you make the most out of them and enjoy the ride when you're lucky enough to get one. Don't try to ride the same wave forever. Nothing is forever, and wouldn't it be sad if it was?

Get off the ladder. Start looking for the next wave and enjoy the ride.

ARTS AND CRAFTS

I've talked about both art and craft, and there's a bit of crossover in what is which and who is where and whaaaaa?

To me in improv, craft is your skill set, like a piano player who practices over and over. You expand your range over time and hone those skills, finding hidden depth in songs you already know. With improv, you find more levels in a game or structure, trimming the fat and making the handle/structure/game as good as you can make it, then making it even better the next time.

Art, on the other hand, is about creation of the new. Every improv scene has something new in it by its nature, but if you're doing an Arms Scene even though what you're saying and doing in it is new, the structure is still a classic. Every *Three's Company* episode had a new script but basically the same plot. People kept coming back to the show because they thought it was funny and sexy and they knew what they'd be seeing, which is comforting. You can call that art if you'd like. But my definition needs the artist to try something different, to break the pattern and take a risk. Hopefully what they do will connect with the audience, but they don't have the benefit of comfort being attached.

As an improviser, you can get by on craft but other people will eventually be as good as you at the classic structures. You can keep honing your skills and you should, but to me, if you don't try something really new and risky every once in a while, you're missing out on something potentially great—and so is the audience. There's nothing wrong with being a craftsperson, but we also need artists to keep the form moving along.

THE BIG FIVE

I like making lists. My favorite app on my phone is ToDo. A while back, I made one about what's important in improv. This isn't a top five; it's just five that came to me. No ranking, just ideas.

Making Money.

Improv is something so fun that we'd do it for free. But like a hybrid car, sometimes one type of fuel runs out and it's good to have a back up. Making money doing your craft is rewarding and can allow you to have, among other things, the freedom to travel and experience improv around the world. I've been fortunate enough to make a living doing improv in the past, and those times allowed me to concentrate on the work and focus on the craft.

Audience Enjoyment.

The people watching from the audience aren't separate from you; they're part of the show. A good night of improv has the performers not just tossing the ball back and forth to each other but to the audience as well. Their intelligence needs to be respected, their suggestions treated like a gift; and the more you try to develop an "us vs. them" relationship instead of an "us and more of us," the weaker you'll become. The audience might not laugh at everything you do, but if you respect and connect with them, you'll increase your chances for something amazing. They'll also cut you more slack when everything isn't puppies and fireworks.

Performers Reaching Their Potential.

As an artist, if you're in a situation where you can't grow, you need to change the environment or leave. Improv companies can feel very comfortable if you've been there for a while. You know everyone and feel safe. That's great if you're a house cat—not so good as a performer. When you feel safe, it's time to try something new. Many companies are locked into certain formats because their goal is consistency. As an artist, you've got different goals. The two can intertwine, but by being a good company man, you not only limit yourself but make yourself easier to replace with a younger, newer version of you.

New Shows.

The last paragraph was about developing yourself. Along with that, you need to create new formats, handles, and concepts for shows. As much as an audience might love a certain show over time, they'll crave the new. If you don't deliver that to them, someone else will. A common complaint is, "Why are we losing our audience? We're doing the same show we always did!" It's hard to abandon the

sure thing for the maybe, so you can do this in small steps. But give the new formats a proper chance. I used to be part of a company that would have the popular shows on weekends and try new formats mid-week. The new shows would seldom do as well because they were running in a race with weights on their feet. The new has to be given a fair shot, and new ideas need to be encouraged, developed, and, when money is involved, fairly compensated.

Social Impact.

If a show only makes people laugh, that's good enough. Laughter is such a gift that if all you do is get the audience to enjoy themselves, that's great. Job well done. If you can add a layer to that and bring up issues that matter to you, maybe get people to think about things in a different way if only for a little while, then that's good goal as well. The laughing brain is more open to new ideas. Programs like The Daily Show inform because they also entertain. There's no reason improv can't do that as well or better.

Those are my five. There's lots of room on the list for yours.

THE END

There is no end to the path of an artist. It goes on as long as you choose to stay on it and grows as wide as you're brave enough to let it. And even though you might not be aware, you're influencing those around you on their own paths. If you knew how much what you do matters to others, you probably wouldn't be able to take another step. So it's good that you don't. Forget I said anything.

Have fun with this improv thing. It can be a great ride if you let it.

