

A SHORT GUIDE TO IMPROV COMEDY

**THE
LITTLE
BOOK
OF IMPROV**

BY THOMAS MOOK

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A dual dedication to my most important improv compatriots:

To Kees de Vries, whose improv wisdom is scattered throughout this book, often totally uncredited, but who has been my partner in so many courses and workshops throughout the years that I've lost count. We've raised almost a thousand improv kids together: that's as close to parenthood as I've ever been.

And to Tom Wilcox, my buddy and sparring partner for almost fifteen years, with whom I've done so many shows that I have, again, lost count, from Amsterdam to Tokyo, from small bars to big stages, from underpaid shows to grossly overpaid shows. The best improv partner you could have on stage is a great friend who knows what he's doing. That's Tom.

INTRODUCTION

Improviseational theater has been a cornerstone of my life for nearly a dozen years. More than a thousand shows and hundreds of workshops later, this is the realization I've come to: improv is simple. It's your brain that's complicated.

All complexity and nuance in improv rests on simple foundations. The trick to writing on the subject of improviseational theater, then, is to boil things down to their essentials — to separate the technique from your imagination.

After all, your characters, your actions, and your words aren't the products of a system. They're you. Your voice is unique; no one could replicate or change it, and no one should ever try to. That's not what this book is about. Rather, it attempts to explain how to create the richest, easiest, most comfortable circumstances for you to improvise in. Your characters will be more defined, your actions will be more meaningful, and your words will pack more punch.

I've taught all kinds of people: children, parents, seniors, businessmen, an inordinate number of PhD students, people who want to perform on stage, and people who just want to overcome certain anxieties and learn how to live in the moment. The information in this book applies to you, no matter who you are. It will hopefully help you become a better player, but it can never teach you the real art of improvisation, in the same way that a book could never truly teach you an instrument. To internalize any discipline, to learn sensitivity and playfulness, whether it's music or painting or writing or acting, you'll need to perform.

The good news is that the road towards the stage isn't nearly as painful or difficult as some people think. In fact, it's a lot of fun. And in that, I hope, this book may be of service.

1.

GROUND RULES

The cliché about improv that's familiar to people who don't even practice it is the following mantra: *yes, and*. Roughly, it means 'agree with what's being offered, and then add something else'. And like many things about improv in popular culture, it's often misrepresented.

First of all, no one stands around agreeing to everything like an idiot. "This jacket is blue." "Yes, and it's made of wool." "Yes, and it's slightly overpriced." Even the youngest children I've taught are more articulate than that. So the first misconception is that this mantra is literal. But agreeing is important in improv: in fact, it's probably the most important thing.

Improv is fantasy, and moreover it's a fantasy where the audience is subject to the whims of the performers. After all, there is no set, no script, and no pre-existing agreement between the players on whether the jacket is blue. The audience will believe whatever you tell them. They're on your side, and they will create the reality of the scene together with you — that is, until you break that reality by disagreeing with your fellow actor. If one player says the jacket is blue and the other player says the jacket is red, all logic gets thrown out the window and the audience will go and find something else to do. So the players must agree. That doesn't mean, however, that the *characters* agree.

Here starts a distinction that I will maintain for the rest of this book. Improv is a magic trick: the stories that people will see on stage often contain contradicting viewpoints and

conflict. It can therefore look like the players are working against each other. But this is a trick: improv is not a competition — it's always a cooperation between the *actors*¹, even when it's an argument between the *characters*. In improv, we're constantly working on these two levels.

So while it's important for the actors to agree on the color of the jacket, they can disagree about everything else: whether it's too expensive, who it actually belongs to, or whether it makes them look cool. The reality of the scene isn't broken by these disagreements: in fact, these disagreements will often give us insight into the characters. And that, of course, is just another way for the actors to work together.

For many years, I've taught improv courses with my partner Kees de Vries, and in one of the first weeks, we present an imaginary rope to two groups of students. We position the students on opposite sides of the room, 'hand' them the rope, and let them engage in a tug of war. Most times, both teams will pull on the rope and move backwards in an effort to 'win'. At this point, we stop the game and apologize for handing them an elastic rope. Then we offer them a 'proper' rope, which is thankfully all they need to understand that they can't *both* win. They start again, and one team dutifully falls over while the other team celebrates. Then we point out to them that imaginary ropes aren't a great indicator of actual physical strength. The competition was an illusion, and not only was it secretly a cooperation, but that cooperation was the only way in which we could make the whole thing *look* like a competition. That's improv in a nutshell.

The second misconception is the '*and*' part of '*yes and*'. We don't have to keep talking about the jacket. In fact, we can talk about anything at all, as long as it doesn't contradict

¹ Your mind may immediately wander to theater sports, a subgenre of improv devised by Keith Johnstone where teams 'battle' each other to win over jury members and come out on top. The truth is that it's not terribly important who wins to either the jury or the players, as long as the audience are having a good time. I've been a jury member, and I've awarded points based on whoever's taller. Then I proceeded to explain my justification to the audience. Don't take it too seriously.

the color, and as long as whatever you say next adds something else to the scene. Improv is a tennis match. As long as both players keep hitting the ball, neither of them will feel like they're doing too much work. In fact, I encourage students to not launch into monologues or try to establish too many things in one go, whether it's the location or the object or their characters². Why bother? Kees and I like to say that improv is for lazy people. Just give the other player something to work with, and they'll hit that ball back to you. At some point, the audience is sick and tired of hearing about the jacket, anyway.

So, in a nutshell, here are ground rules number one and two:

- 1) Agree with your fellow actor.**
- 2) Add something of your own.**

It's not quite as pithy as 'yes *and*' but at least it avoids the pitfalls of the mantra.

This solves the problem of how to react, but it doesn't explain what to say in the first place. After all, someone has to start the scene.

In improvisational theater, the audience often gives a suggestion, to both highlight the improvisational nature of the show and keep the actors on their toes. It's common for this suggestion to be a location, or an object, or a relationship between two people. To the beginning improviser, it's important to emphasize that *this isn't a challenge*. It's actually really helpful.

Improv is not different from any other form of storytelling. The actors and the audience need a certain amount of clarity at the start of a scene so that they can agree on other things. Only then do we figure out what we're going to do. We refer to these basic things as the *foundation*, and it simply consists of the who, the what, and the where: who are these people, what is the scene about, and where does it take place? If we

² As the saying goes: 'bring a brick, not a cathedral'.

can all agree on these basic things, then the rest of the scene, I promise you, will be much easier. It's the most comfortable way to play.³

An easy exercise here is to pair people up and make them perform the first three lines of a scene. The goal is simple: at the end of these three lines, we want to know who these people are, what they're doing, and where this is all taking place. This will often result in clumsy, awkward lines as everyone tries to squeeze that information into three sentences, but that doesn't matter. Of course, in a real scene we'd have more time to establish these things, but the point is to activate your muscle memory, so that when you're on stage and the lights are blinding you, you're not overwhelmed with any thoughts, except for: *let's get the basics out of the way, first*. So, rule three:

3) Establish the foundation as early as possible.

That solves the problem of what the scene should be about, at least at the start. But it doesn't fix the other problem that most beginner improvisers have, which is *how* they should talk about it. Once players know where they are, who they are, and what they're doing, they might still panic: *what next?* The answer is surprisingly simple. When a player doesn't know what to say in any situation, I ask them: well, what would *you* say?

³ This footnote is for more experienced improvisers, so if you're just starting out, ignore this bit and come back to it later. Advanced improvisers, often those coming from long form, will point out that you don't need a suggestion at all, and that the delay and then reveal of an important piece of information can actually be a great moment in a scene. I agree. However, consider what the audience is reacting to: on one level, it's a piece of a puzzle clicking into place. But movies and theater don't often pull this trick: in fact, common storytelling wisdom is to get the basics out of the way as soon as possible so we can focus on the good stuff. What audiences are really reacting to is the proficiency of two players that have no knowledge of what the other person is thinking, and then find a way to make all preceding information fit with the new reveal. We're applauding their skill, not the scene.

This question is one of the most powerful tools in the arsenal of a teacher working with beginning improvisers. In every class, there are people who like to fall back on jokes, or or try to be creative. Let's put two characters in a supermarket, and let's make them a robber and a cashier (they could have gotten these as suggestions from the audience, or thought of this themselves as part of the foundation). A jokester cashier might respond like this:

A: Give me all your money!

B: Oh no! How will I ever support the lifestyle of my dog Fufu now!

The bizarreness of the response might get a chuckle from the audience, but it feels inauthentic, and moreover, impractical. This might be a conversation I'll have with student B:

Me: But the dog's not here, right? This is a scene between the two of you.

B: The dog might be here. It might be take your dog to work day.

Me: Is that what the scene is about?

B: No, it's about me getting robbed.

There are two things to unpack from this conversation. One is that the student (perhaps slightly defensively) provides a reason for why their response might have included a dog. One scenario is that they thought of the dog beforehand, realized they were getting robbed, but still wanted to include the dog in the conversation. The more likely scenario is that they panicked, didn't know what to say, and got creative. The other thing is that they *did* realize what the scene was really about: if you're getting robbed, there's not much time to think about the economical circumstances of your dog. So instead, I ask them what *they* would say if they got robbed. We try again.

A: Give me all your money!

B: Don't shoot! Just take it.

This seems predictable and simple, but it's actually a great answer. For one, it's easy to follow, and we don't have to worry about an imaginary dog that's not there. It also provides the audience with a dose of realism: it grounds the scene, which is important at the start. And finally, it creates empathy with the audience, who would probably react in exactly the same way.

Creativity and jokes come from players who are insecure and want to put something *good* out there as soon as possible. This habit comes from a good place, but it's counterproductive. Fufu would never have been as interesting as the robbery, and more importantly, the scene should be between the two players, not between one of them and their imaginary dog. As I mentioned before, improv is for lazy people. To that effect, we now have rule four:

4) You don't need something good. You just need something. We'll make it good later.

This is why 'What would *you* say' is such a good question to a beginning improviser. It absolves them from any obligation to be clever, funny, or creative, and forces them to be natural instead. After a while, they will realize that they don't need to work for it at all. This is the true secret of improv, and one that's so hard to explain to people who never practice it. The comedy and creativity emerge from the scene based on simple, natural reactions and an adherence to these basic rules. The players themselves often have no idea where these great moments come from, because they are always created together with the other actors. Let's take the example above and add a few more lines, keeping in mind that the only thing players have to do is agree to the offer and react:

A: Give me all your money!

B: Don't shoot! Just take it.

A: What, just like that?

B: Yeah, it's not my money, it's the supermarket's money. I just work here.

A: Is it too much to ask to have a little company loyalty, though?

B: You're robbing the place!

A: Yeah, but now I feel bad about it. If I knew how terrible its employees really were, maybe I would've picked someplace else.

Of course, this would be a scene between more experienced improvisers who know how to play characters (see Chapter 2), but the point of the dialogue is that the scene very quickly becomes interesting after a predictable opening. As a matter of fact, the more simple the opening, the better the scene often ends up being, unburned by expectations and free to go wherever it wants. Keep it simple. Stay lazy.

The final ground rule, and perhaps the most essential one, is this:

5) Listen.

It's a deceptively simple statement, and in order to indicate its importance in improv, we'll have to take a quick trip to the world of science. In a fun experiment, psychologists wired up people to machines and let them have conversations with each other. The machine then measured how long it took for a person to process the information they received, and how long it took them to formulate a response. The kicker: the time their brains needed to formulate a response was *shorter* than the time it needed to process the other person's sentence.

One way to explain this result is that we as people are remarkably good at predicting where a conversation is going. This enables us to have a response ready without any sort of awkward pause between sentences. In other words, we

respond to what we *think* the other person said, and we're often right. The other explanation is that we don't actually respond to what the other person said at all, and are simply injecting our own information into the conversation.

Both these explanations have important implications for improv. First off, it's not good enough to respond to what you *think* the other person said. This may work well in real life, but in improvisation, where nothing is certain and we have to work together to define our scene, our predictions are suddenly worthless. We have to respond to what people *actually* said.

The other issue is when we inject our own information into a conversation (like poor Fufu). I've already talked about the dangers of creativity and jokes at the start of a scene, but moreover, the funniest moments in a scene are always *responses* to what's happening or what's being said. In order to be funny, you have to respond appropriately, and in order to respond appropriately, you have to be able to listen.

One exercise that you can do to train people's brains into actually listening is to put students in pairs and let them play out a basic scene. There's only one rule: you have to repeat the last few words the other person said, as literally as possible, and then add some words on top of that (there's *yes, and* again). They will, to their own surprise, find that their brains are constantly rewording what the other person said into what their brains *think* they said, but not what they actually said. They will miss words or even entire phrases. We've done these exercises with so many students from all over the world, and we've concluded that this is just a basic feature of the human brain: we're bad listeners. So listen.

You might have gone through this chapter and thought that the basic principles of improv — listening well, establishing clarity early on, cooperating instead of competing, reacting simply and appropriately, and making sure you're both equally contributing to a conversation — are also excellent cornerstones of normal communication, and that the principles of improv seem like good life skills in general. You're not wrong. Keep reading.

2.

CHARACTER

The American novelist F. Scott Fitzgerald once wrote that “action is character”, which means that it’s not what a person says that shows us who they are — it’s what they *do*. In fact, it doesn’t matter much what a character says they are, and sometimes it doesn’t even matter what they *think* they are. Some of the most interesting characters in fiction and real life are interesting precisely because there’s such a clear difference between what they think about themselves and what they actually do to others. Villains that think they’re our savior. Losers that think they’re the winners. And, of course, the insecure underdog that’s secretly our hero.

On stage, this is an important guideline because we generally have no access to a character’s interior monologue. The only way for an actor to express character is therefore through their *behavior*, or more generally their *attitude*. The key to great characters is to pick an attitude and stick to it. Then you apply that point of view to everything your character encounters. That consistency of character will quickly endear them to audiences, even if their behavior is sometimes troublesome — after all, everyone loves a good villain. And in the end, it is again the simplest, most effective way to improvise, which is what this book is all about.

Early in our beginner courses, Kees and I invite a group of players up to show us their imaginary house. We don’t give them any instruction other than to not be interesting: it’s simply one character showing their house to the others,

although all actors can contribute. This generally results in the actors trying their best to fill the imaginary space with interesting ideas. There's no real rhyme or reason to these houses: things exist because they sound cool or weird. The actors are working really hard to keep the audience's attention. After all, how exciting can a tour of the house be? Then we reset the scene. Our instruction is simple: they went through a door to get into the house. Make the *door* unusual. Then continue the rest of the scene with the following thought: *if this was the door, what's the rest of the house like?*

People who opened a front door that resembled a safe found themselves in a maximum security villa. People who opened a creaky door with spiderwebs found themselves in a haunted house. A door with a computer greeting them became a futuristic residence. An old drawbridge created a castle. And houses with no door? Well. These people had no money.

Making a clear choice at the top of the scene made everything much easier for the actors. They no longer had to scramble for ideas — after all, they only had to be consistent with each other. If this house is futuristic, then the toilet is self-cleaning. There's a robot helping out with chores. Food isn't cooked but materialized. The windows are holographic. Easy peasy.

You might at this point be thinking: surely if the actors are just following through on the logic of the scene, then the audience can do the same. In fact, the audience could even start to predict what's about to happen before the actors get there. And you would be right. Here's the crazy part, which is true for improv and all comedy:

They love it.

Audiences *love* consistency (which is not quite the same as predictability). Mr. Bean can be counted on to do the exact same thing every time, because he is who he is. In *Peanuts*, Lucie holds a football up in front of Charlie Brown, who tries to kick it every time, and she takes it away from him every time, causing him to fall. Charlie's a sucker — he'll never learn. This doesn't reduce our love for Charlie, Lucy or the

gag. In fact, it's what we love about the show. Consistency is also character.

The unusual door, of course, is a metaphor. In the previous chapter, we already saw how making strong choices about the scene (the who, what and where) makes subsequent improvisation much easier. The exact same thing is true for character. Pick a thing and stick with it. Here are the first two rules, then, for character work:

- 1) **Make a strong choice at the top of the scene.**
- 2) **Be consistent.**

Both these things have to do with clarity. A strong choice about your character makes your character's attitude clear from the get-go, which grounds the scene and draws the audience in. Consistency then keeps that character clear. People won't accept a selfish character donating money unless they have a clear reason *why*. The actor must therefore always ask themselves: if *this* is true about my character, then *what else*?

This is actually very liberating. Gone are the overwhelming options for where the scene can go. After all, for your character, it can only go a certain way: one that's consistent with who that character is. Easier for the actor. Nicer for the audience. Better for the show.

There's an important difference between consistency and predictability: consistency can still be surprising. For one, everyone's brain works differently, so it's possible for a character to be consistent with itself and still surprise the audience because the consistency is expressed in ways they didn't expect. The second one is *when* this consistency is expressed: the audience thinks they have a clear idea of where a scene is going, and then suddenly the character does *that thing they do* in exactly that one moment that changes everything. These are some of the best moments in a show.

So clear choices and consistency are major building blocks for characters. The next questions then are when to

make these choices and what these choices can look like. To illustrate this, let's go back to our supermarket scene from the previous chapter:

B: Don't shoot! Just take it.

A: What, just like that?

B: Yeah, it's not my money, it's the supermarket's money. I just work here.

A: Is it too much to ask to have a little company loyalty, though?

B: You're robbing the place!

A: Yeah, but now I feel bad about it. If I knew how terrible its employees really were, maybe I would've picked someplace else.

Let's assume for a moment that the audience specified the supermarket as a location. One player decided to rob the place and just held up an imaginary gun. That's a clear choice right from the start: the supermarket is the *where*. The robbery is the *what*. Now all we need is the *who*.

On one level, the 'who' is already clear. There's a robber and a cashier. On a character level, however, we have no idea who these people are. Contrary to what some politicians might think, not all criminals are alike. The audience is dying to know more. We actually get a lot of character in these lines already:

B: Don't shoot! Just take it.

I pointed out in the previous chapter that this is a great line because it's obvious, clear and relatable. Most of us wouldn't want to die for our supermarket. This character immediately seems natural. In comedy, we call this the 'straight' character (as in straightforward). A straight character is a character that serves to highlight how crazy everyone else is being, and acts as an anchor for the audience. Beginning improvisers might dismiss the straight character as boring, but they're often the most important characters in the

scene — they're the glue that brings everything together. They're also a good choice for the beginning improviser because all their behavior can be created with that simple question: what would *you* do?

But, of course, unless we're going for a completely natural scene, we don't need *two* of them, so now it's up to player B to define their character in a different way. Here, we go back to the ground rule of *listening*. The idea of the line 'just take it' is simple: don't hurt me, it's not worth it. But that's not what they actually said. What they actually said was '*just take it*'. And if you take that sentence literally, it can also come across as someone who doesn't care that much. Player B listens well, decides that this is how their character will interpret it (knowing nothing else about their character yet — that doesn't matter), and says:

A: What, just like that?

Purposefully misinterpreting the intention of a line and instead using the *actual* line is a powerful improvising tool. It can create conflict effortlessly. It can also create character. What this response tell us is this: *the robber didn't expect this to go so easily*. So maybe they're new at this business. That's already one character trait. Character B listens and responds:

B: Yeah, it's not my money, it's the supermarket's money. I just work here.

This is, again, a perfectly natural response. It's what many of us would be thinking, although not all of us are brave enough to say it. It's the straight character doing their job. Player A again takes a sentence literally: they listen to "*I just work here*", and decide to make *that* the sticking point. That's a line that's normally said by people who don't take responsibility for their actions, or by people who don't care much about their employer. Never mind that this is a perfectly natural response during a robbery: Player A takes the line and addresses it.

A: Is it too much to ask to have a little company loyalty, though?

This seems like a funny and surprising line to the audience. Who talks about company loyalty while they're robbing a place? But Player A is just performing a simple trick a few times in a row: they take a sentence literally, and then take that sentence out of context.

By doing so, they suddenly makes their character incredibly rich. We already know they're new to the job because they're surprised when people give up their money easily while a gun is pointed at them. We now also know that they oddly care about company loyalty. What kind of character would care about company loyalty? That's right. A company person.

I guarantee you that Player A did not think about being a company person when they started robbing the place, and even if they did, it wouldn't have worked. But if they're a company person robbing a company, the rest of this scene suddenly becomes very easy to play. Their unusual door is the fact that they're a robber with specific principles. They just have to stick to those principles. And they do, in the final lines:

B: You're robbing the place!

A: Yeah, but now I feel bad about it. If I knew how terrible its employees really were, maybe I would've picked someplace else.

To summarize: Player B is going along with a simple principle: what would an average person do? Player A has a slightly more challenging role, but also applies a simple trick: listen well, respond literally rather than figuratively, and realize when you just created a character. This then brings us to rule three:

3) It's better to discover a character than to invent one.

This has the additional benefit of the audience discovering the character along with you, which is often a highly entertaining process. And once you have the character, all you need to be is consistent. If we take this together with the first rule ('make a clear choice at the top of the scene'), we know we have to start that process of discovery right away.

All of this may seem a little theoretical, but it actually works just fine with everything from the previous chapter. Listen well. Agree with your fellow actor. Add something of your own. Then listen to your own reactions, and simply think: *if this is true, then what else is true?*

I've talked now several times about consistency and clarity. They have a natural enemy in improv, which is when people get creative and add all sorts of ideas that don't flow naturally from whatever the character is. Maybe the robber is a big sports fan. Maybe they can't stop chewing gum. Maybe their wife and children left them.

All of these things can be true, of course, but the moment you add them to a scene, you *have to do something with them*. It's a good principle of all drama epitomized by something called Chekhov's Gun. The principle by the playwright Anton Chekhov is as follows: every element in a story must be necessary. Never place a loaded rifle on the stage if it isn't going to go off. Otherwise, you are making promises you don't mean to keep.⁴

If you're chewing gum, we expect the gum to somehow be relevant to the scene. If you mention sports, we expect this to come up again later. Every element you offer is a ball you have to juggle for the rest of the scene. You can now see how beginning improvisers get in trouble: they get creative, add all kinds of ideas, and then either don't follow up on any of those ideas, struggle to keep them alive, or end up contradicting themselves. Consistency of character solves these problems,

⁴ Ernest Hemingway mocked this principle and said he purposefully liked to add meaningless details. He then also admitted that his readers would inevitably seek symbolism and significance in those same details. To the audience, everything matters, whether you like it or not.

because they're only playing one single thing and extrapolating from that. Keep it simple. Stay lazy.⁵

There's an important reason why characters in improv need to be discovered rather than invented. A character doesn't exist in a vacuum. If a cornerstone of improvisation is to listen and react to each other, it means that everything that's created in a scene is actually a product of all the actors involved. Creating a character is therefore exactly the same process as the one for scenes: you construct one piece by piece. A brick, not a cathedral.

There is one notable exception to this: external traits. Obviously, a character can't develop a limp halfway through a scene, or change accents or physical mannerisms. These need to be consistent as well, and are therefore choices that have to be made from the moment you step onto the stage.

The solution that applies most of the time is as follows: don't. Funny voices or physical mannerisms are often a sign of that dreaded creativity. Remember, the best stuff comes from *reacting*. There are, however, some notable exceptions. Here are two.

Occasionally, a suggestion from the audience will serve as a framework for your scene, and it's nice to make a choice that either acknowledges or subverts those expectations. If your scene has to take place during the French Revolution, it's not only logical but also fun to give your characters French accents. You can also subvert expectations: the audience might suggest that you're pirates. You can play them typically, or you can make the choice to have them be terribly polite. So even in those situations where you make choices for physicality or accents, there's a simple question to answer: do I acknowledge the audience's expectations, or do I subvert them?

The other exception is when you're building a contrast with the other actor. Contrasts are funny and interesting. If the

⁵ Advanced improvisers *do* occasionally invent extra traits. They're also good enough to incorporate all those traits and make them meaningful. Juggling training means starting with a few balls to throw in the air, mastering those, and then adding more when you know you're ready. Improv is the same.

suggestion from the audience is ‘cops’, and one character walks on the stage in a gruff, brooding manner, it’s fun to pick the opposite physicality and enter in an overly composed manner. The conflict is practically built in. These characters have different attitudes, even before they speak a single word.

I would, however, not advise a player to do an accent if there’s no real reason to do so. The reason is the aforementioned Chekhov’s Gun: the audience will look for meaning in your accent, whether you like it or not. If you speak with a French accent during the French Revolution, the audience is satisfied and won’t question it any further. If you’re a French person on the streets of New York City, the audience will now have questions. Do you live there? Are you visiting? Failure to answer these questions will then make that element seem random and reduce its enjoyment.⁶ This is also where accent work can get you in trouble: taking on the accent of someone just because you find the accent funny and not because there’s a reason for it makes the scene about you, the actor, and not the character. Don’t.

There’s an additional easy way to apply contrast to characters, and that’s the concept of *status*. Status is an attribute of both the characters and the scene itself (and I’ll therefore elaborate on it in the next chapter instead), but suffice to say that if one character is high status, it’s fun to take a low status character and vice versa. If they’re haughty, controlled, arrogant and dismissive, it’s good to be groveling, evasive and anxious. No one wants to see two actors fighting for the role of a high status character like a bunch of roosters. Remember the tug of war exercise from the previous chapter? We’re working together.

There’s one final point to be made about characters, and it’s the most important point. If a character is defined by their attitude, and the best way to show that character to the audience is through that attitude, it stands to reason that we

⁶ People don’t enjoy randomness. People who say they enjoy randomness actually enjoy absurdity, which is an upsetting of expectations in wildly unreasonable manners. Absurdity therefore still requires a foundation.

want to seize any opportunity we have to explore it, which brings us to a very important principle:

4) A character's motivation should come from within.

Let's take the cashier and the robber again. The most likely reason for someone to rob a store is that they don't have any money. That, however, tells us very little about them. All kinds of people are poor, so it's not any real indication of character (beyond that they would consider stealing to get it back). It's therefore not terribly interesting.⁷

The answer is always to make the scene about the characters. It's their choices and actions that should drive everything, not external circumstances. For example, the scene can continue as follows:

B: You're robbing the place!

A: Yeah, but now I feel bad about it. If I knew how terrible its employees really were, maybe I would've picked someplace else.

B: So pick someplace else.

A: You know what? Maybe I will. This company has enough problems.

This choice is now much more interesting. What's stronger, the drive for money or the principles of the character? That's a choice that comes from within.

Commit to your choices. The harder you commit to them, the funnier and more interesting a scene becomes. Never stand around discussing a point until you kill it. Remember, action is character. So to really show the character, take the action and make the choice:

⁷ Beginning improvisers for some reason often jump to external circumstances. "I don't have enough money. The engine won't start. Someone drove over my dog." None of these things are about character. The simple solution is to make everything your fault, always. "I gambled away all my money. I broke my car. I drove over my dog." Assuming responsibility for your actions will quickly lead to moments of character. In real life, too.

B: You're robbing the place!

A: Yeah, but now I feel bad about it. If I knew how terrible its employees really were, maybe I would've picked someplace else.

B: So pick someplace else.

A: You know what? Maybe I will. This company has enough problems.

B: Are you serious right now?

A: Yes. I don't want your money. To think that the people working here give up so easily.

B: I just don't want to get killed.

A: I never gave up easily! I did my job, every day. I would've gotten shot in the line of duty if it meant defending this place! So why is it me who got fired?!

B: ...Jeff?

At this point, I'd like to share a pet peeve. Over the course of many years, you start to identify some patterns in how people think. For some reason, when given the suggestion 'rocket', most beginners tend to play astronauts preparing for launch. First their engine breaks down. Then they can't operate the controls. Then they think there's a stowaway on board. At this point, I often yell out: "Will you go to space already?!"

Don't be afraid. Make the choices. All the good stuff will come.

There's a reason I've put the chapter about characters before the chapter about scene work. Characters are action. The action drives the scene. In other words, characters drive scenes.

All great storytelling places the characters at the center of their story. Who are they? What choices do they make? How will they react when presented with a problem? This human element is the core of all great drama and all great comedy. Don't get distracted by your environment. Keep it between the actors. Which brings us to the final principle:

5) Character is king.

3.

ACTION

The reveal that Jeff is a former colleague robbing the supermarket only works, of course, if he was wearing a mask to disguise himself so that the cashier wouldn't recognize him. Should the actor have signaled to the audience that he was putting on a mask before he committed the robbery? No, for a couple of reasons.

Firstly, there's no way to know at the start of the scene whether the mask is relevant at all. Yes, robbers wear masks, but if we purposefully show him putting on the mask we're again messing around with Chekhov's Gun. Since the twist was discovered, rather than invented, we had no guarantee that wearing a mask would become important.

Secondly, starting your scene by putting on a mask is lame. Starting a scene by raising your gun is cool.

Improv scenes work on a simple principle: anything can be potentially true until it's said out loud. Then it simply becomes true.

It's logical for a robber to wear a mask, so the fact that Jeff didn't indicate he had one until he took it off is not a problem. The audience simply adjusts their mental picture retroactively: Jeff was apparently always wearing a mask. Makes sense.

There's a good chance the 'Jeff?' line will get a laugh, and it gets a laugh for reasons that are unique to improv. Most times, these reasons will be processed subconsciously.

For one, the twist is funny because there was no way the actors could have agreed on it beforehand, and so the actors are as surprised as the characters are.

Secondly, the reveal depends on a piece of information that was missing for the audience: the cashier couldn't recognize Jeff. But the actor playing the cashier was missing this information too, and the audience is enjoying both players incorporating this new fact to move on with the scene.

Yes, improv is for lazy people. But audiences *love* to see you work.

The real misconception is where the work actually takes place. As demonstrated in the previous chapters, the setup isn't nearly as complicated as non-improvisers are led to believe. Listen, agree, add. Set up your foundation. Create a character. You're off to the races.

The *real* work of improv is completely optional, but it's the most rewarding for both players and audiences: play to the top of your intelligence.

When I say 'your', I mean the actor, not the character. Playing dumb characters actually requires some intelligence as well (after all, how else would you recognize a lack of intelligence?). Here's the good news: you don't have to play to the top of your *improv* intelligence. I already said in the introduction that improv is simple. Instead, in order to create the world around you, you can use your own experiences, knowledge, taste and wit. We've done all the groundwork already. Now, we get to *play*.

This is also where a performer's voice comes in. You're the actor, the writer and the director, and you're unique. No one has your background, your body, your mannerisms, or your sense of humor. Teaching improv is a gratifying business because although the fundamentals are the same, every single person can and does surprise me, especially if they're playing to the top of their intelligence.

The foundation is called a foundation for a reason. We need a basic structure to support the scene before we can really let loose. This doesn't mean we forget our

cornerstones. In order to pave a way to a satisfying end for our scene, we still need to agree with the other actor, listen carefully and react. We have to stay consistent with our characters and the scene. But improv at its best defines these foundations as walls, not obstacles. And within those walls, anything goes.

Another metaphor that works here is a coloring book. We've drawn all the lines. Now we get to add whatever colors we like.

So what colors are we missing?

Let's stick with the pattern we have going so far and list five.

1) Be physical.

You're not just a bunch of talking heads. Improv is much more enjoyable for both the players and the audience if there's a degree of physicality present. For actors, this means you should carefully choose your position on stage, how to stand or sit or even walk. A supermarket is a wonderful place to set a robbery⁸. Isles of food, registers and shopping carts are everywhere. You can do a lot of environmental work there. None of this requires improv knowledge. You know what a supermarket looks like. So does the audience. They just don't know what it looks like in your mind, and so they'll always enjoy whatever you give them.⁹

Then there's also an interaction with objects. The cashier was probably operating the register before the robber walked in. Maybe they were putting in cash, or rolling a receipt, or scanning groceries. And the robber is holding a gun. You can be forgiven for now picturing someone extending their thumb and index finger while clenching the other fingers, a universal sign for 'gun'. Don't do that. This is what we call *signaling*, as opposed to *miming*. Miming a gun simply means pretending to hold a gun, which suddenly opens up all kinds of options.

⁸ This is where I get called by the cops.

⁹ Of course, whatever you do, the other actors will agree on.

Is it a handgun? A BB gun? A shotgun? A bazooka? These options only work if you mime instead of signal. The same thing is true for phones. Extending your thumb and pinky, clenching the other fingers and then holding your hand to the side of your head is a commonly recognized signal for 'phone', but you can't chuck it across the stage.¹⁰

Interestingly, this is the one area where the principle of Chekhov's Gun doesn't need to apply. The fact that you're holding a handgun rather than a shotgun doesn't *have* to mean anything. The audience's brains will file this under 'production design' for your improvised play. In fact, you sometimes don't have to talk about your object work at all. Why *would* a cashier talk about doing cashier things while they're scanning groceries? This is the most normal thing in the world. Don't talk about what you're doing *unless* what you're doing is meaningful for the scene.¹¹

Just like environmental work, you don't need improv knowledge to mime properly on stage. Want to practice how to hold an imaginary cup? Hold a real cup.

However, sometimes object work is not just flavor but can actually influence the scene. Let's assume for a moment that in our grocery store setup, the actor playing the robber is miming a small gun. The other actor might pick up on this. The scene continues:

A: I never gave up easily! I did my job, every day. I would've gotten shot in the line of duty if it meant defending this place! So why is it me who got fired?!

B: ...Jeff?

¹⁰ Incidentally, I have once seen a student use their actual phone in a scene and proceed to throw it across the stage. Don't use real props. Your options are so much richer if you just improvise everything. Getting naked is much easier if they're not your actual clothes.

¹¹ There is a well known two-person improvisational comedy show called *Bassproov*, where Mark Sutton and Joe Bill play two men who spend their free time fishing. Notably, the show is never really about fishing. It's just something they're doing while the scene develops. The fishing is flavor — or, in our terminology, color.

A: Yes. It's me. (They take off the mask.)

B: What are you holding, anyway?

A: It's a gun.

B: It's pretty small, isn't it?

A: So?

B: So it looks a lot like the toy guns we sell.

There's some careful navigating going on over here. The other actor isn't disagreeing with the idea of the gun, but they're adding something to it: with a gun that small, there's a chance it's a toy. And since they're in a supermarket and Jeff used to work there, it might be fun to imply Jeff took a toy gun to try and rob his former employer.¹²

Again, none of this requires any improv knowledge. The one actor simply saw the other actor mime a small gun, took a look at what they knew already (they're in a supermarket, and their robber is their former colleague), and connected some dots. They're just using their own intelligence.

None of this dialogue is important. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether Jeff has a toy gun or a real gun: what matters is he tried to rob the place. But taking an actor's physicality and connecting it with the scene is rewarding for the audience, and makes it seem like more than a bunch of talking heads. It's simple but fun.

2) Be specific.

Specificity is funny. Instead of trying to be creative in the scene (which I've already pointed out is a bad idea), try to be creative in the specifics. It adds tons of color to scene, is wonderfully dependent on the actor (everyone has a different background and vocabulary) and makes a scene much

¹² The actor playing Jeff probably wasn't miming a toy gun, because the plot twist was unexpected for both of them. He simply chose a small gun. That it can be interpreted as a toy gun is just a nice accident, and good scene work is about creating the circumstances for these kinds of accidents to happen, then rolling with them.

funnier. Since surprise is the key to all humor, gratuitous specificity is a great source of comedy.¹³

This doesn't mean you have to invent things out of thin air. It simply means reacting to something in such a way that you can add details that don't exist for any other reason than to tickle the audience. This can effortlessly go along with reacting to the other person:

B: It's pretty small, isn't it?

A: So?

B: So it looks a lot like the toy guns we sell.

A: (Desperate) This is a Glock 47!

B: That is a Fisher Price Blaster.

Note that making these guns specific is much funnier than saying it's real versus fake.

Side note: this disagreement would only be a problem if it was the actors disagreeing. It isn't. Player A's desperation means they're agreeing with the fact that it's a toy gun, but they're also playing a character that wants to hide the fact that it's not a real weapon. That's why it's important to pay attention to physicality and acting.

You might not know what a Glock 47 or a Fisher Price Blaster is. That's okay. Either you know different weapons, or you can make up your own names that sound vaguely believable. As a matter of fact, I'm incredibly done with this weapons example, but I've now committed to the robbery scene, so I have to run with it. Let's add a few more lines, just for flavor.

A: (Desperate) This is a Glock 47!

B: That is a Fisher Price Blaster. I can't believe it. We let you go on Monday, and you come back on Wednesday to rob the place?

A: I ran out of money!

¹³ Comedian John Mulaney is a great example of someone who gets a lot of humor out of specifics. Writing a sketch about a New York nightclub, he notes that the bouncer 'always high fives children of divorce'.

B: That quickly?

A: You all know I live an expensive life!

There are two details here, one of which is just color, and one of which will lead to our next line. The first detail is that Jeff was fired on a Monday and has come back on a Wednesday. The audience will do a quick calculation that this is only two days. Jeff is a man of action. It also means he ran out of money *incredibly* fast. Doing the calculation from Monday to Wednesday (specific, funny) is more entertaining than telling the audience that Jeff came back quickly.

The other detail is that Jeff 'lives an expensive life'. This detail is an important character trait. What kind of grocery store worker 'lives an expensive life'? The other important part of that sentence is 'You all know', because it's actually an invitation for the other player. It's actor code for '*your character knows me, so now you can work together with me to define him*'. Which brings us to principle three:

3) Have a history.

There will always be scenes where characters meet for the first time. There are situations where they simply must. But if you have the choice, it's fun for the characters to have a shared history. There's a few reasons for this. Characters that don't have a history together are either forced to focus on the situation rather than the relationship, or they're forced to tell each other about each other. Number one isn't great because character is king, and number two isn't great because in storytelling you want to show the audience things rather than tell them. Remember: character is demonstrated through action.

Of course, scenes between strangers happen all the time, but it's crucial to realize they're considerably more difficult to play well than scenes between people who know each other. If you're just beginning with improv, consider having the characters know each other.

In fact, that's what happened here: the actors took a setup that looked like an encounter between two strangers, and turned it into a meeting between former colleagues. Because they now have a shared history, it's easier to make the characters more specific. Let's combine principle two and principle three for a moment, and be specific while mentioning a history:

B: That quickly?

A: You all know I live an expensive life!

B: I know you drive a Tesla.

A: Yes!

B: And that you like designer clothes.

A: Yes!

You can feel it, can't you? That whatever the third detail is, that's the one that will have to move the scene forward. In comedy, good things come in threes. The reason for this is as follows: comedy relies on patterns and surprises, and brevity is the soul of wit.¹⁴ And the shortest pattern consists of three things. Just watch any comedy show and see how often this rule is followed: a list of two things followed by a surprise in the third.

So what could it be? Well, we're not being randomly creative. Whatever the third thing is, it has to be something that everyone knows about Jeff. It has to have something to do with money. And most importantly, it has to do something with the scene rather than be a random detail. We're in a grocery store. So...

A: You all know I live an expensive life!

B: I know you drive a Tesla.

A: Yes!

B: And that you like designer clothes.

A: Yes!

B: And that you do your shopping at...

¹⁴ Some guy named Shakespeare.

Wait a second.

B: Wait a second.

A: What?

B: You don't even shop at this supermarket!

A: So?

B: So what's all this stuff about company loyalty?

There we go. Player B used something from the character's past (which, of course, is made up on the spot) to inform the character's present. Importantly, this is the *only* way in which you should ever use the past. If character is action, then the reveal of character should happen *in the moment*. The audience only cares about the present. The characters knowing each other simply provides an easy shorthand to reveal more about each other *right now*.

And what did they do? They tied it back to the beginning of the scene! Which brings us to principle four:

4) Audiences love symmetry.

Humans are pattern recognition machines. Even small children appreciate the feeling they get when they match the right toys with each other. Audiences love to be rewarded for paying attention.

Good news: everything you do as an improviser creates the ideal circumstances for symmetry. After all, you know you need to always agree with the other actor (but not their character), and you know you always need to maintain consistency with your own character and their attitude. This means that sooner or later one of the characters will point out something that happened earlier on.

In normal storytelling, audiences will appreciate symmetry because returning to the beginning might reinforce certain themes or remind us of changes that the character has/has not gone through (more on that for point five). That's why so many television shows do flashback episodes.

In improv, there's a second level of appreciation, which is that actors who can return us to the beginning prove that *they* have been paying attention, too. It gives the whole scene the illusion of being one big masterplan from the start, even though it's of course a complete coincidence that we ended up here. As I previously said, good improv means creating the kind of circumstances where these kinds of accidents happen all the time. Listen well. Be consistent. The rest of the dialogue is just replying logically.

B: You don't even shop at this supermarket!.

A: So?

B: So what's all this stuff about company loyalty?

A: Just because I work here doesn't mean I have to shop here.

B: But that means that none of the money you're taking from us is yours! Why don't you rob the supermarket you normally go to instead? That would be company loyalty!

A: Because...

B: Yes?

A: Because they didn't fire me.

5) It's a journey.

Just like audiences love symmetry, they also want to be rewarded at the end of the scene. Since we know scenes are really about characters, the question is pretty much always the same: will the character change, or will they stay the same? Player A admitting that they're really robbing the place out of vengeance rather than just for money means that we've now come to their moment of truth. Will they abandon their robbery and become a better person or will they double down? Either way is great. The only bad choice would be not to make one and keep them exactly the same.¹⁵

¹⁵ Note that continuing the robbery would not be the same as when the scene started. Back then, it looked like an anonymous robbery. Now, it's an act of vengeance.

Though it wasn't pointed out in the dialogue itself, the audience can sense an interesting reversal has taken place. Whereas in the beginning Player B was terrified and Player A seemed to have the upper hand, Player B now realizes that with a toy gun, it would be impossible for the robbery to be successful. Not only that, but Player B now knows the identity of Player A. So the high status and low status I mentioned in the previous chapter also apply here, but it applies to the dynamic rather than the characters themselves. There's been a reversal, so there's been a change. The audience senses this, too. None of this requires much thinking: it's just playing with the elements we introduced at the start. Now the actors have to follow the scene to its logical conclusion.

Here's the fact of the scene: the robbery could never be concluded successfully. Player B now has all the power. One option is for Player A to take their toy gun and leave, but we don't really want that. De-escalation is something that happens in real life, not in stories. Things either get worse, or there's a big change. So what to do?

We have to get back to character.

A: Because...

B: Yes?

A: Because they didn't fire me.

B: Does it hurt you so much?

A: I would've taken a bullet for this company. And they fired me on Monday.

B: So?

A: Monday was my birthday.

Note how the irrelevant but funny detail we introduced earlier can now be brought back for an additional character moment. It's a blatant attempt to get sympathy from the audience, but it totally works. Not only that, but it creates an opportunity to get sympathy from the other character, too:

A: Monday was my birthday.

B: Aw, jeez. I'll tell you what.

A: What?

B: Take the money. I'll pretend I didn't see who you were.

A character's choice again presents us with the next moment! But remember character consistency? Let's bring back the comedy with Player A:

B: Take the money. I'll pretend I didn't see who you were.

A: You would give me the money even though you're not under any threat?

B: Sure.

A ...You really have no company loyalty!

There's a lot of callbacks in this short text, and it's internally consistent. But I promise you that I didn't write out this text back in first chapter to demonstrate these principles. I've improvised it as I went along, and I haven't rewritten anything. All I did was follow the rules. That's how the journey works.

4.

SCENES

The razzle-dazzle of an improv show can often trick audiences into thinking that there's an infinite amount of variety out there. With such a plethora of options, how will you ever decide what's right for you?

Don't be fooled. Most of it is marketing.

It makes sense. At festivals, or in big cities with a lot of improv groups, improvisers need to do something to stand out. Sherlock Holmes mysteries, Harry Potter extravaganzas, or the promise of new and exciting games serve to entice a prospective audience if for no other reason than that marketing an improv show is difficult. No one knows what will happen, so what do you put on the poster?

This is not a knock on these shows, which are often terrific, it's just that their real entertainment value hides underneath. No matter how cool Harry Potter is, he can't make a bad improv scene look good. That's why good technique and great players make or break any show, regardless of its concept. The rest is flashiness.

I'm telling you this because I want to dispel the myth that any of this is complicated. The nuts and bolts work remarkably similar no matter where you go.

Let's take the two major categories first, because they *are* very different. In improv, we distinguish between categories of short-form and long-form. A short-form show contains many short scenes that are not related to each other. These scenes are often framed by *games*, which are mostly just additional rulesets to increase the challenge for the

improvisers and, consequentially, the enjoyment of the audience.

Long form shows can vary from multiple sets of longer scenes¹⁶ or entirely improvised theater plays that last the whole evening.

They fundamentally require the same set of skills (good scene work), but they also differ in one crucial requirement of its improvisers. Both are interesting.

Short Form

Although often considered the most popular form for the general public (think of smash hits like *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*), short form gets a bad rap among more ‘serious’ improvisers as gimmicky and cheesy. A night filled with games and mirth? How could this be anything *but* juvenile!

This is nonsense. Good short form improvisation is not only highly entertaining, but it has challenges for its players that are unique to the form and benefits for the audience that long form does not have.

For one, since a short form show is filled with shorter scenes, it requires a lot of suggestions from the audience. While this is nice for the players (it takes away the work of having to establish at least one part of a scene’s foundation), it also forces the cast to quickly adapt to many different scenarios. One night could contain a veterinarian’s office, a pirate ship, a ninja school, the trenches of World War I, a helicopter flight, a space station and a fashion show all at once. Players will barely have time to adjust before the next scenario comes along. The trick is nailing each and every one of these cases, no matter what the level of absurdity, the tone or the characters. No matter what the audience throws at you, not only do you make it *work*, you make it *good*. An audience unaccustomed to improv will be amazed by the magic trick.

¹⁶ There is no consensus as to the duration of the scenes. In my experience, a short-form scene often falls between five and ten minutes, and long-form can range from multiple sets of twenty minutes to a single set of about an hour. Your mileage may vary.

The sheer joy of being able to take any suggestion and turn it into an entertaining, coherent vignette of a scene, now matter how outlandish or silly, provides the kind of energy that long form often can't. Like a football player whose moves are so fast that you can barely see the ball, good short form players score before you even see what's on the field.¹⁷

On top of this, short form often requires its players to adapt quickly. For example, short form often utilizes *interruption mechanisms*. Check out these games, classics of the short form format:

Change: Whenever the host yells 'change', the players have to take back the last thing they said, think of something else, and say that instead: "My favorite color is red." Change! "My favorite color is yellow." Change! "I wish I had a favorite color. I'm colorblind."

Quote Notes: Known by many other names (*Blindline*, *Whose Line Is It Anyway*), players pick up a note from the floor containing a movie quote, read it out loud, and incorporate it into the scene.

Hesitation: Players are acting out a scene, and then at some point gesture for the audience to complete their character's sentence. Then they incorporate that into the scene.

These are all the same game. On top of the normal give and take between actors, they now get an additional method of interruption from the host or the audience. The trick is exactly the same as in a normal scene: justification. Whatever you just said is the thing your character said, so how can you make it consistent with that character and with the scene? From this justification comes comedy. Good players playing to the top of their intelligence simply have better, more entertaining justifications than mediocre ones, and that

¹⁷ Scoring, in this metaphor, means playing a great scene with great characters and great color, and you managed to wrap all of it up in five minutes.

justification is somehow still consistent with both their character and everything that's come before.

You don't know then the host will stop yelling in *Change*. You also don't know which quote you're about to pick up in *Quote Notes*, or what the audience will say in *Hesitation*. But that's really not any different from not knowing what the player opposite you will say, and you have to justify their choices, too. That's what makes a scene work. Just consider the audience as a third player that is, for comedy's sake, trying to shake your character's or the scene's consistency. If you're a good player, the foundation you built is so strong that you can easily find ways to integrate their suggestions and still score a touchdown. That's the show they came to see.

The idea that short form shows can be gimmicky comes from when players let these mechanics override the scenes. Bad actors might rely on those games to provide laughs for the audience and not play a good scene underneath, so everything becomes silly and unimpressive. This is especially true for guessing games. Consider these:

Pet Shop: One person comes in to return their pet. They don't know what kind of animal the pet is, and they don't know its problem. They have to guess these things to complete the scene.

Dating Show: One contestant is presented with three bachelors and has to identify all of them to complete the game.

Foreign Correspondent: A news correspondent is sent to a place to report on an event, and can't complete the scene until they guess both the location and the event.

Again, these are all the same game. This is a variation of the tug of war exercise I discussed early in the book: it's *not* the job of the other actors to make guessing difficult. In fact, they might occasionally help the guesser out. The reason for this is that the guessing is unimportant: it's simply a framing device for the audience. The exact same principles of improv

apply here. Firstly, you play the scene first. Whether you're a pet owner or a bachelor or a news correspondent, you're a character, and you're playing a scene with fellow actors. All of the normal rules still apply: fun and consistency, bringing an attitude, applying color, finding the journey.

On top of that, it's important to realize what makes guessing games fun for the audience. It's *not* about you solving the mystery. Instead, it's about you having to justify things in the scene despite not knowing what they are. This again involves consistent scene and character work. In that way, a guessing game is similar to an interruption mechanism.

What about *really* gimmicky games, like *Three Headed Expert*? An expert is called in to answer questions about their expertise. Three actors play a single expert, and they can only speak one word at a time. It therefore requires all actors to work together to form a sentence.

This is still a scene, because the actors are playing together. Since no single person knows where a sentence is heading, they again are constantly adjusting to each other to make the answer somehow sensible (at least, according to the logic of the character). That's justification again. On top of that, since they're all supposed to be playing the same character and are discovering it together, they're trying to be consistent.

You get the point. No matter how 'crazy' or 'gimmicky' games get, not only do they always require the same improv skills, they rest on the same fundamental principles. Everything else is window dressing. That's why, despite the wide range of games and settings, a good short form show doesn't feel schizophrenic: it's all the same thing.¹⁸

The stars of a short form show are the cast. This is because no single character, no matter how great, can hope

¹⁸ This also means it's not difficult to play 'new' games. Although I know many of them, I don't understand improvisers who are comfortable with one game but not the other. Everything requires the same skills, and, at their core, they're all the same game. The only exceptions to this I can think of are games that rely on other skills, such as rhyming, singing or physicality. In those cases, it's important to realize that these are different disciplines.

to become larger than the improviser playing it. After all, the characters and scenes only stick around for five minutes, whereas you're watching the actor pull the same magic trick all night, across all kinds of genres, games and settings. The show comes first. But there's nothing cheap about a great show: in fact, sometimes it's just what the doctor ordered.

Long Form

In long form, the stars of the night are the scenes and characters themselves. Long form scenes are either literally or thematically linked, which means there's more time for immersion. In fact, there's more time for everything: gone are the requirements to wrap up a scene in five minutes or define the foundation for your character quickly. Since we're no longer going as wide, we can now go deeper.

However, just because you have more time to establish these things doesn't mean you should waste the audience's. The same things still apply: every line should add something, whether it's clarity, character, color, or a development in the scene. Too often do I see players mucking around on stage, content with the knowledge that if anything goes wrong, they'll have plenty of time to make it right. Long form, just like short form, is emergent: you have to build everything on everything that came before, which means that you can't afford mistakes at the start, either. The solution is simple: follow the same ground rules. This way, you'll always end up where you're supposed to go.

In long form, you're absolved from some of the difficulties that short form players face: without interruption mechanisms, purposeful obfuscation in the case of mystery games, and constant new suggestions by the audience, you're free to develop your scenes together with your fellow players. It's true that short form and long form have different pacing: since a scene must always escalate until a change occurs, introducing too many problems or stakes at the start of a long form scene leaves you with not much wiggle room. It's like starting an electric guitar solo at its loudest point. Long form

therefore needs some build up, but this again should not be confused with meaningless offers. A slow burn will still grow into a fire. Just pace yourself appropriately.

More time and a slower pace means that you don't have to to play quite as ferociously, but in exchange you'll need to remember a lot more information. Maintaining character consistency for a full hour is a lot more difficult than maintaining it for five minutes, and names and events can quickly begin to pile up. The most common pitfall of playing a long form scene is that the players can't see the forest through the trees anymore.

The solution, like most things in improv, is simple. *Stop focusing on plot*. Beginning long form players quickly begin to invent a story because they're worried simply having their characters interact might not be enough to sustain the show. They couldn't be more wrong. We do not want to invent anything: we want to discover it. Any time players try to steer possible future developments, this action blows up in their face. The nature of improv doesn't allow for it. Since we have to react to every offer on stage, we simply can't control where we'll be a minute from now, let alone sixty. Instead, have the characters drive the scene. Something resembling a story will emerge, and this story is often more layered and richer than anything you could have plotted out in your head.

As I mentioned before, you can roughly divide long form into scenes that are either literally or thematically linked. Let's start with a literal structure.

La Ronde is an improv structure where the actors stand in line, and every actor has one scene with the actor on each side of them. Actor A plays with Actor B, Actor B then plays with C, and so on. Notably, every actor will play the same character in both scenes. At the very end, the last actor will play a scene with Actor A, and so we'll end up right where we started. It's common to set a *La Ronde* at a single location (a village, a theme park, a shopping mall). The symmetrical nature of a *La Ronde* often encourages actors to start planning ahead, knowing that they'll have another scene

coming up. Sometimes they'll even mention characters that have not yet revealed themselves, expecting actors further down the line to take up these characters and therefore fulfill earlier promises about the story made to the audiences.

Cash your own checks, people.

We cannot control where we're going, if not in short form, then certainly not in long form. Of *course* it's a wonderful moment for the audience when a character we've often heard about finally reveals themselves, but it's up to the actors who play those characters to decide whether they want to embody them. Discovering things together is very different than burdening others with your expectations.

What we *can* create together, and what is often immensely rewarding, is a game. In improv, the 'game' of a scene is commonly defined as 'any pattern that emerges within a scene that the improvisers may follow while exploring the relationship between the characters'. Sounds familiar, right? It's how actors drive the scene. I've been avoiding the word 'game' so far because I think it's more eloquently described as consistency, but in a long form, we now operate on a higher level than single scenes. So how to create this game in, for example, a *La Ronde*?

An example I can mention is a *La Ronde* I observed while teaching a workshop in Oslo. The suggestion for their location was a cruise ship, and the first two players decided to make their characters engineers at the very bottom of the ship, complaining about the state of affairs on board. Since they were also at the bottom of the chain of command, there wasn't much to be done with their unhappiness. Their suggestions for changes on board were hilariously rooted in character (one of them needed much more food around; the other just wanted some respect). The very next scene, the engineer was talking with a cleaner, one deck up. You can feel where this is going: every scene, the group decided to move the action one deck higher. Within that structure, they were free to do whatever they wanted. The final scene ended on the top deck, between the captain and the first officer, about reports of a mutiny.

A great pattern, or game, doesn't feel limiting. It simply offers some structure and resonance for the audience while the actors are free to discover things within the scenes themselves, and use their characters as a driving force instead. The coherence of characters and structure will then express itself to the audience as a story.

An *Anecdote* is a structure where scenes are instead thematically linked. It's a close relative of the *Monologue* (also known in some circles as an *Armando*) where one player describes a short event that happened to them based on a suggestion from the audience. The other actors then question this player about the event. This conversation is used as the inspiration for a series of scenes.

Since the real suggestion for these scenes is an entire conversation rather than the single prompt from the audience, it's a much richer starting point for exploring a multitude of themes. Notably, it's *not* a good idea to replay any point of the anecdote literally. On the surface, this is because the audience is already familiar with the event, but more importantly, it's because improv requires discovery, and you can't discover a story you've already heard.

The way that Kees and I tend to practice people's abstraction abilities is by running through the anecdote portion of the game a few times without actually playing the scenes. Then we ask people for their associations with what they just heard. Sometimes, these associations are literal, and involve objects and people involved in the story. Sometimes, these take the form of larger themes — loneliness, or self-discovery, or friendship. Larger themes are helpful because they can again provide an overarching pattern to work from, while keeping the scenes themselves free to become what they want to become.

Of course, just because the scenes don't have to be related (and it's important that the first three scenes you play don't have anything to with each other at all, otherwise you may accidentally create a narrative) doesn't mean that you can't start cleverly working in characters and locations that

the audiences have already seen, and putting them in new contexts and situations. Remember: they love symmetry. You can, however, only do it through the process of discovery, which means that you can't plan for your character to return: you can only discover a great moment for re-entry.

Thematically linked long forms provide more variety and freedom than those confined by a single location. In that sense, they're more of a midway form between short-form and long-form, but they still adhere to a larger concept or theme. All long form games essentially belong to one of these two categories.

For several years, next to my weekly short form work with *Stranger Things Have Happened*, I ran a little long form project with Chandler Bullock simply called *Two Guys*. A few times a year, we'd perform a one act play. I didn't start playing long form until I was already four hundred shows in with short form, but for the first night of *Two Guys*, I had rediscovered my anxiety.

This is what I remember:

In the very first scene, my character, a private detective, tries to ask Chandler's character, a waitress in a restaurant, out on a date. He's too shy and can't get the words out.

What follows, and what was typical of our style, was a whirlwind collection of scenes involving stolen money, the mafia, an incredibly aggressive dog, emergency surgery, a shoot out in a restaurant, and, eventually, that same waitress becoming the woman who has to rescue the detective from the mafia.

Aside from these vague recollections, I don't remember much about the scenes. I know that they made sense on their own, and that they were consistent with each other. I remember the audience laughing. I don't remember any plot points, except one:

In the last scene, having been rescued by the waitress from the mafia, my character again tried to ask her out and failed. He trailed off. He shut down. There was a moment of silence.

“Are you asking me whether I want to go on a date?” the waitress said, after all the twists and comedy and violence.

My character nodded.

“Yes,” the waitress said, and as she moved in for the kiss, our technician turned off the lights.

The applause was immediate. The truth is that I think the audience experienced that show in the exact same way we did: as a collection of moments. I’m sure people remember flashes of the dog or the shootout, and I’m equally sure everyone remembers that final scene, because it answered a simple question we asked at the very start: will these two ever get together?

When you’re telling your friends about a movie you enjoyed, you don’t tell them about the plot. You tell them about the moments you loved. You tell them about the characters you fell in love with. A great night of improv can give you that same experience. Just stick to the basics, make each other look good, and trust in the scene. It’s simple. But it’s so difficult to see how simple it is.

Appendix A: The Scene

A: Give me all your money!

B: Don't shoot! Just take it.

A: What, just like that?

B: Yeah, it's not my money, it's the supermarket's money. I just work here.

A: Is it too much to ask to have a little company loyalty, though?

B: You're robbing the place!

A: Yeah, but now I feel bad about it. If I knew how terrible its employees really were, maybe I would've picked someplace else.

B: So pick someplace else.

A: You know what? Maybe I will. This company has enough problems.

B: Are you serious right now?

A: Yes. I don't want your money. To think that the people working here give up so easily.

B: I just don't want to get killed.

A: I never gave up easily! I did my job, every day. I would've gotten shot in the line of duty if it meant defending this place! So why is it me who got fired?!

B: ...Jeff?

A: Yes. It's me. (They take off the mask.)

B: What are you holding, anyway?

A: It's a gun.

B: It's pretty small, isn't it?

A: So?

B: So it looks a lot like the toy guns we sell.

A: (Desperate) This is a Glock 47!

B: That is a Fisher Price Blaster. I can't believe it. We let you go on Monday, and you come back on Wednesday to rob the place?

A: I ran out of money!

B: That quickly?

A: You all know I live an expensive life!

B: I know you drive a Tesla.

A: Yes!

B: And that you like designer clothes.

A: Yes!

B: And that you do your shopping at... wait a second.

A: What?

B: You don't even shop at this supermarket!

A: So?

B: So what's all this stuff about company loyalty?

A: Just because I work here doesn't mean I have to shop here.

B: But that means that none of the money you're taking from us is yours! Why don't you rob the supermarket you normally go to instead? That would be company loyalty!

A: Because...

B: Yes?

A: Because they didn't fire me.

B: Does it hurt you so much?

A: I would've taken a bullet for this company. And they fired me on Monday.

B: So?

A: Monday was my birthday.

B: Aw, jeez. I'll tell you what.

A: What?

B: Take the money. I'll pretend I didn't see who you were.

A: You would give me the money even though you're not under any threat?

B: Sure.

A ...You really have no company loyalty!

Appendix B: Rules & Principles

Ground Rules

- 1) Agree with your fellow actor.
- 2) Add something of your own.
- 3) Establish the foundation as early as possible.
- 4) You don't need something good. You just need *something*. We'll make it good later.
- 5) Listen.

Character

- 1) Make a strong choice at the top of the scene.
- 2) Be consistent.
- 3) It's better to discover a character than to invent one.
- 4) A character's motivation should come from within.
- 5) Character is king.

Action

- 1) Be physical.
- 2) Be specific.
- 3) Have a history.
- 4) Audiences love symmetry.
- 5) It's a journey.