 Don’t Step on My Line!

A Zany Intro to Improv

***Another LearnShop by Sharon Kirk Clifton, Writer and Raconteur
writersharonkirkclifton.blogspot.com*** ***SKCwriter@aol.com*** ***812-522-2976***

You’re already quite handy at improv. You do it all the time without thinking about it. Have you had any interaction with anyone since you arrived here today, a greeting or a conversation? You didn’t do it from a memorized script, did you? Nor did you read it from a text. No! You improvised what to say, how to say it, what expression to use. See? You have the basic skills already! During this learnshop, we’re going to build on what you know.

Most of the time, when we think of improv, we think comedy, though that’s not a requirement. *Whose Line Is It Anyway* is the most recognizable source of improv on TV, primarily because it’s one of a kind. SNL and Second City casts also make use of improv. Flash mobs, though not true improv because most are planned, even rehearsed, feel like improv to the random audiences. And YouTube has a great list of “Improv Everywhere” performances. (IE says of themselves, “We are a New-York-City prank collective that causes scenes of chaos and joy.”)

Someone defined improv as “the slacker's favorite alternative to writing comic material without any deep thoughtfulness.” That isn’t exactly true, however, as good improv makes use of a certain cleverness, a personal cache of experience, and a repertoire developed through practice in the art form. Use your mind, but don’t overwork it. Be spontaneous. The more you do it, the better you get.

During this learnshop, you will be introduced to several improv games to use with your own groups or at your next party. As we discuss and play the games, think of ways you can change them. Come up with your own variations. Improvise!

Improvisation can be the main event or a way to get somewhere else. It’s used commonly in acting classes because the skills developed through the games carry over into other forms of acting and performance. As a professional storyteller, I’m constantly improvising onstage. I never tell a story the same way twice. I read my audience. I interact with them. We play together. And if I do my job right, they end up improvising right along with me. Improv games also make great ice-breakers and team builders.

Discover the Ws. As a newspaper journalist and feature writer, I learned that every story must answer the questions of *who, what, when, where, and why*. The same is true for the improv actor, most of the time, anyway, especially if the improv game is in the form of a skit. Add to that list *how*, as in *how do I relate to the other characters?*

**NOTE: Check out some of the Improv Everywhere videos on YouTube when you get a chance. Some of my favorites are “The Mannequin Mob,” “The Matrix in Real Life,” “The Pirates of Central Park,” “Slow Shoppers in Home Depot,” “Star Wars in the Subway,” “Frozen Grand Central,” and “Who You Going to Call? [Ghost Busters].”**

**Warm-Up Exercises**

**Exercise 1: “Yes, and…!”** This is the golden exercise of improv. Don’t judge the responses of the other actors. Don’t judge your own. Go with it. Accept what was said and add on to it. If we allow ourselves to think, “That’s a dumb idea,” we shut down our own thinking, closing the door to the creative process. When it’s your turn, you have the opportunity to change the course of the dialogue, at least for the moment.

One person gives a piece of information. The next person says, “Yes, and…” adding new information. And so on down the line or back and forth, depending on how many people are participating.

**Exercise 2: “Play Ball!”** Participants form a circle. The leader holds an imaginary ball. She identifies what kind of ball she holds and tosses it to someone in the circle, who considers the size of the ball and weight as he catches it and tosses it to another, who makes the same considerations. At any time, the leader can change the type of ball being tossed and participants adjust their catch for the size, weight, and action of the new ball. Beware! The leader may change the ball in mid-toss!

**Exercise 3: “Quick! Get the Story.”** Pair people up randomly. Allow a set time for the two to interview one another, say, 2 minutes each. Then participants will have one minute to introduce their partners and tell something interesting about that partner to the group.

**Exercise 4: “Read It with Feeling.”** Everyone will read the same text, but expressing different emotions, as directed by the leader. Examples: scared, in love, freaked out, angry, very sad, confused, self-assured, pompous, hateful, bashful, excited, unsure, despondent, sick, dying, desperate, flirty, rushed, sleepy, intoxicated, bored, etc.

**Exercise 5:** **“ZOOM!”** Players are on a race track. Form a circle. Leader clap-slides hands together toward player on left while shouting energetically, “ZOOM!” Quickly, player on left does the same thing to player on his left, and so on, around the circle a couple times. When it comes back to leader, he throws hands up in the air and squeals like brakes at the person on his RIGHT. Now the direction for the zooms is reversed until someone else brakes. Then it’s reversed again, and so on, until it gets back to the leader, who introduces “BUMP!” gesturing with hand over the next person, meaning that person is skipped. Now, the players are zooming, braking to reverse, and bumping. When it gets back to the leader, he introduces “YEE-Haw!” which jumps the canyon in the middle to the player across the gap. Now, players are employing ZOOM, BRAKE to reverse, BUMP, and YEE-Haw jumps across the canyon. Next, the leader introduces OIL SLICK, throwing hands up in the air as for BRAKE. When players hear OIL SLICK, they scramble, quickly form another circle, and continue with ZOOMs, BRAKEs, BUMPs, YEE-Haws, and OIL SLICKS. Finally, let the group come up with something else a car might do.

**Let the Zaniness Begin!**

For each of the following games, know your character. What is your role in the game? What do you look like? Sound like? How do you move? What is your relationship to the other players? Are you married to any of them? Friends? Enemies? Co-workers? Co-travelers? What is your character’s motivation? What is your character’s objective in the game? How does that objective relate to the objectives of the other characters? Do those goals cause conflict in the game? Where in the world does the action take place? DO NOT SPEND A LOT OF TIME PLANNING, however. Work quickly. Think on your feet. IMPROVISE!

Each of these games end when the director ends them. There may or may not be a logical ending. “Alphabet” has a logical conclusion, for example, but not all do.

**Game 1: “Slide Show.”** (Suggested number of actors: 4) One person is the person presenting the slide show. The others form the “slides.” The presenter introduces the slide show program. What’s the purpose of the show? (Are they vacation slides? A documentary of an archeological dig? A mountain-climbing expedition? A cruise? A spelunking adventure? Reef snorkeling?) The presenter makes it up. The others listen closely to get clues about the scene, action, and location in the world. For each slide, they strike a pose and freeze. The presenter has no idea what scene is taking shape until he turns around. THEN he describes what happened in the slide. Turning back to the audience, he continues with her talk. “Next, slide, please.” He turns around, sees a new scene, and tells about the new “slide.” Do 4 or 5 slides. Finally, the presenter concludes the slide show.

**Game 2: “Fairytale.”** Brainstorm the names of some familiar fairytales. Select one group can work with. The group will have 90 seconds to tell/act out the story according to the directions of the leader. Group chooses who will be which character. First, in the allotted time, just do the story. Quickly! Then, the director will give variations. Possibilities? Here are only a few, and the director may well improvise some new ones along the way.

Do the same story:

Without dialogue Baliwood style Pirate style

As a western Mayberry style “I Love Lucy” style

As a musical or opera Double-time version (cut time in half) “Leave It to Beaver” style

Baliwood style Pre-schooler style Nothing but Questions style

Audience shout-out idea: \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_

**Game 3: “Questions or Pie in the Face.”** Choose two people to begin the game, but have others off to the side as replacements. Players can only advance the scene by asking questions. As each participant enters the scene, he holds a paper plate with whipped cream on it—the pie. If the player makes a statement instead of a question, re-asks the previous question in a slightly different way, or hesitates too long (at the discretion of the director), he puts the pie in his own face and exits. Don’t drag the responses out too long. Responses should be quick. The object is not to prolong the game (you can’t “win” an improv game, after all), but to provoke laughter through content. Let the questions meander where they will.

**Game 4: “Freeze Tag.”** Choose three or four players. They will begin a scene of their choosing. At any point in the scene, someone in the audience can shout out, “Freeze!” Players instantly freeze in place. The one who called out goes to one of the players, taps that player, who then exits the scene, and takes the player’s place, copying the player’s position. Now, the new player changes up the scene completely. It may have nothing whatsoever to do with the scene he interrupted. And so on. Anyone can call out , “Freeze,” tag any player and replace him, initiating a brand new scene. This game flows best when people are courteous of one another. Don’t stop a scene after only a few seconds just to try to steal a cheap laugh. That’s rude. Let it run for a minute or so. Nor should you let it drag on too long. Balance is key.

**Game 5: “Alphabet.”** This one can be challenging. It can be played with two players or with up to 26. The first person starts the game by making a statement that begins with “A.” The next person responds with a statement that begins with “B,” keeping to the same general subject (it’s a conversation, after all). Next one, “C,” and so on through the alphabet. Here’s an example conversation:

"**A**re you coming to dinner?" "**B**efore I wash my hands?!" "'**C**ourse not. That'd be disgusting." "**D**isgusting indeed." "**E**veryone should be so sanitary." "**F**lushing included." "**G**ross. I hope you flush." "**H**a ha. Of course I do." "**I** was just testing you. You passed in flying colors." "**J**ust hope those 'flying colors' don't come up in whatever you're making for dinner." "**K**eep it up, Mr." "**L**et me guess, something yellow and brown..." "**M**y speciality, baked beans and corn on the cob." "**N**othing quite like eating like a hobo." "**O**h that reminds me...we're being evicted." "**P**lease tell me you're joking..." "**Q**uite serious in fact. And it's your fault." "**R**eally? How?" "**S**chool keeps you from working. Paying the mortgage." "**T**he mortgage? I'm in third grade!" "**U**sually that matters, but not in this case." "**V**ideo games are my only bill!" "**W**hatever, somebody's got to contribute." "**X**ylophones are what we learned about in school today, nothing about financial responsibility!" "**Y**ou need to grow up, because your father is about as useful, when it comes to feeding this family, as a box of Scooby Snacks." "**Z**oinks." **Scene**.

**Game 6: “What Are You Doing?”** This game can involve everyone. One player takes center stage and begins pantomiming an activity of his choice, playing tennis or tossing pizza dough, for example. Players form a line off to the side of the scene.The next player in line comes up and asks, “What are you doing?” The first player does ***not*** tell what he’s supposed to be doing. He says something else. For example, if he was pretending to play tennis, when asked, he says, “Milking a cow,” or some other thing. Then he exits the scene and the newcomer begins pretending to milk a cow. The next person comes up. “What are you doing?” “Eating pie.” Exit second player as third player pretends to eat pie. And so on through the line.

**Game 7: “Lost in Translation.”** For this game, you need four players: two who imitate foreign language speakers in dialogue with one another and two “translators.” As the foreign language speakers converse, the translators listen, perhaps nodding to affirm understanding. When the foreign speakers pause, the translators “translate.” Then back to the foreign speakers, and so on. The humor comes when the attitudes, demeanor, facial expressions, emotions , etc., contradicts what the translators are saying. The translations can be ludicrous, ridiculous. Should be, in fact. Improvise!

**Game 8: “Quirky Guests.”** One person is the host of a party. He is sent where he cannot hear what is being said onstage. Three players are chosen to be guests of the host. Each one has a particular quirk. The audience assigned each of the three one quirk. For example, one guest may be made of springs (a Slinky guest). When each guest has been given a quirk, the guests go off stage, and the host is called back. The first guest arrives. She never tells the host what her quirk is, but through body language, dialogue, etc., she hints at the quirk. When the host guesses the quirk, that guest joins the party, pantomiming and exhibiting her quirk. Then the second quirky guest arrives. She has a different quirk, of course, and the host must guess. When the host successfully guesses the quirk, the second guest joins the other one, exhibiting quirk. Etc.

**Game 9: “A Day in the Life.”** Select a dance troupe of 4 or 5 players. Choose someone from the audience to tell about one funny or embarrassing day in his life, giving details. When that person is done, the dancers turn it into interpretive dance/ballet. Remember to use facial expressions, too.

**Game 10: “The Job Interview.”** This game uses two people: the human resource officer and the job applicant. The audience sees three job possibilities, but the applicant doesn’t. The HRO asks the applicant if she is applying for job #1, #2, or #3. Without seeing the names, the applicant chooses. The HRO invites the app. to have a seat and proceeds with the interview, asking general questions that do not reveal the job. Based upon the app’s answers, the HRO decides whether or not to “hire” the app, revealing at the very end what the job was.

**Game 11: “Die!”** Select 4 or 5 players. Someone from the audience yells out a category. The director begins pointing randomly at the players. The player he’s pointed to must quickly name something in that category. No repeats! If player pauses, repeats, or stalls, the audience yells, “Die!” The player pretends to die and exits. Either play to last one standing or let another step into the line-up. When someone dies, another category is yelled out, and play continues.

**Game 12: “2 in 1.”** Three people are needed for this game. One is a TV host. The other two act like one person, gesturing as one person and talking as one person. That means that one of the two has to lead, and the other must watch very closely so they can both speak , simultaneously saying the same thing. Someone from the audience shouts out a topic that the pair actually knows little or nothing about. The TV host introduces the 2-in-1 as an expert in that field and proceeds to interview the expert.

**Game 13: “Shout Out.”** Someone from the audience shouts out the name of an object, and the player must talk about that object for one minute, then exits stage. Next player. Someone shouts out the name of another object, and next player talks about that object for one minute. Etc.



Notes:

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