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APPLIED IMPROVISATION MAGAZINE

HUMAN  
INTELLIGENT  
GENERATIVE  
HOPEFUL

AIM HIGH

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**JOEL VEENSTRA**

AIN: Our Journey

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**KIRSTEN ANDERSON**

Reimagining the Conference Experience

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**BRIGHT SU**

Improvisation is Tao in Western Context

# CONTENTS

FROM THE PUBLISHER	4
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FROM THE EDITOR	6
-----------------	---

AI EVERYWHERE	8
---------------	---

IMPROVISATION: A WAY TO UNTAKE THE WORLD FOR GRANTED | JEANNE LAMBIN | 9

HELPING HEALTHCARE WORKERS VIA ONLINE IMPROV | ANTHONY A CARANDANG | 14

APPLIED IMPROVISATION FOR PEOPLE WITH PARKINSON'S | MARGOT ESCOTT | 18

BEGINNING MIDDLE END | BENJAMIN LLOYD | 21

PRACTICAL PSYCHOLOGICAL SAFETY:

A SIMPLE, TWO-STEP PROCESS TO IDENTIFY, BUILD, AND MAINTAIN IT ANYWHERE | TERJE BREVIK | 24

THE SCHOOL OF IMPROVISATION IN PRAGUE, CZECH REPUBLIC | KAROLINA HARRIES | 28

AI IN EDUCATION	31
-----------------	----

REIMAGINING A COLLABORATIVE FINAL EXAM | CAITLIN MCCLURE | 32

AI AND AUTISM | ROBIN FOX | 35

PLAY TO LEARN:

USING IMPROV TO BOOST ACADEMIC, SOCIO-EMOTIONAL, AND SPEAKING SKILLS | KATE WIERSEMA | 38

INCREASE EMPATHY & MINDFULNESS WITH IMPROVISATION

IN UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION | DIANA DE PASQUALE | 41

BOOKSHELF	44
-----------	----

LEARNING SOCIAL SKILLS VIRTUALLY | SUSANNE SCHINKO-FISCHLI | 45

IMPROVISATION AS AN EASY LIFEPASS | PAUL Z JACKSON | 46

THE AI BOOKSHELF IS DEVELOPING NICELY

- AND THERE'S ROOM FOR A WHOLE LOT MORE! | PAUL Z JACKSON | 48

Front cover: A group photo from the AIN Global Conference, July 2023, Vancouver, Canada

Back cover: Text from *Top 10 Elements of AI*, identified in *Delphi Study Summary* (Barbara Tint and Adam Froerer, 2014)

## EVERYTHING ELSE

52

### AIN: OUR JOURNEY

OVER 20 YEARS OF BRINGING IMPROVISERS TOGETHER | JOEL VEENSTRA | 53

IMPROVISE YOUR INTERVIEW | VINCE RICCI | 56

TRADEMARKS, COPYRIGHTS, AND IP...OH MY! | JOEY NOVICK | 58

## IN THE SANDBOX

61

TWO IMPROVISERS INTERVIEW EACH OTHER | MICHELLE CLARKE & VIC HOGG | 62

## PERSPECTIVE

65

AI THROUGH MY EYES: GABE MERCADO | ILENE BERGELSON | 66

### STAYING HEALTHY:

A LOVE LETTER TO THE PROFESSIONAL IMPROVISER | PATRICIA RYAN MADSON | 68

IMPROV IS TAO IN WESTERN CONTEXT | BRIGHT SU | 70

## WHAT'S HOT

72

AIN CONFERENCE REFLECTION | TRACY SHEA-PORTER | 73

### CREATING RIPPLES:

EMBRACING THE IMPROV MINDSET WITH THE AIN CONFERENCE | JULIE TRELL | 76

REIMAGINING THE CONFERENCE EXPERIENCE | KIRSTEN ANDERSON | 78

VANCOUVER CONFERENCE PHOTO SHOWCASE | THE AIM TEAM | 80

## BEFORE YOU GO

82



## MAGAZINE GUIDE

Please use this contents page to navigate directly to articles via clickable 'hot-links'.

- = You can then use this symbol at the top right-hand corner of each spread to get back to this contents page.
- ⌚ This symbol marks the end of an article.

In article paragraphs, if you see **text in bold & color**, or this [link symbol](#), it could be a link to a website or email.

# A NOTE FROM THE PRESIDENT OF THE APPLIED IMPROVISATION NETWORK

As the publisher, I welcome you to our second issue. On behalf of the AIN Board of Directors, we are so grateful for your support of last year's launch issue, and we are excited to continue to share our passion for Applied Improvisation with you.

One of the things I am most proud of about AIN is its commitment to diversity and inclusion. Everyone has a story to tell, and AIN wants to provide multiple platforms for those voices to be heard. Over three years ago, AIN started hosting a weekly virtual Open Space that continues to welcome diverse ideas in three friendly time zones. The global annual conference in Vancouver in July 2023 provided access to brand new AIN voices through 12 scholarship recipients – the most ever awarded. And this issue features articles from writers of all backgrounds and perspectives.

I would like to thank our team of writers, editors, designers, and other contributors for their hard work on this issue. Without their dedication, this magazine would not be possible. And I want to thank our AIN Members. Their annual financial support makes AIN Open Space, AINx Watch Parties, AIN Mentorship Program, and this very magazine possible. (**Learn how to join.**)

As the president of AIN, I invite you to become a member – if you or your friends haven't yet – and be part of a global community of Applied Improvisation enthusiasts and professionals. Membership grants you access to our growing benefits, collaborative opportunities, and an international network of like-minded individuals. Join our network and embark on a journey of growth and innovation today!

Please enjoy this second issue and consider ordering print-on-demand copies from [magcloud.com/user/appliedimprovisationmagazine](https://magcloud.com/user/appliedimprovisationmagazine) and sharing them with clients.

Welcome to the AIN Family!



ED REGGI  
AIN BOARD

Ed Reggi is a lifelong storyteller. He's originally from New York City and moved to Chicago's The Second City, which led him to work with Paul Sills for over a decade. Today he's faculty at Lindenwood University and the Center of Creative Arts (COCA) in St. Louis, Missouri. Reggi joined the AIN Board in 2018 and started serving as the President in 2021. [edreggi@gmail.com](mailto:edreggi@gmail.com)

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“...a web of ripples, spreading creativity and innovation in ways I had never foreseen.”



Applied  
Improvisation  
Network



### WHAT WE'RE TALKING ABOUT

Welcome to the second issue of Applied Improvisation Magazine! I am thrilled to present to you a diverse array of articles, insights, and stories that highlight the incredible impact of improvisation in various aspects of our work and lives.

In this issue, we delve into the profound ways in which improvisational principles are being employed in businesses, educational settings, social work, healthcare, and more – or, as we refer to it in one of our seven magazine sections, “Everything Else.” The topics go wide!

Our team has had the privilege of connecting with practitioners in the field, whose innovative applications of improvisation continue to reshape traditional paradigms. From a thought-provoking think piece that explores the parallels between improvisation and agile interview skills, to real-life accounts of how improvisation techniques have transformed high-pressure medical situations, this issue underscores the boundless possibilities that arise when we embrace the spontaneity and adaptability at the core of improvisation. The topics go deep!

There is so much content to explore. I would invite you to visit the brief intro of our seven magazine Sections. All content was designed

to inspire, educate, and invigorate your passion for Applied Improvisation. Along your reading journey, please enjoy the rich photos and selected videos, and download free material. Yes, we have free goodies!

It is my hope that the brilliance within these pages inspires you to view challenges through a new lens, to embrace uncertainty with confidence, and to harness the power of improvisation to lead more fulfilling lives. As always, I invite you to actively engage with the articles, join the conversations, and contribute your own experiences to this vibrant network.

Thank you for your continued support and for being a part of the Applied Improvisation Magazine community. We hope you enjoy reading this issue as much as we enjoyed crafting it.

Improvise on!



**BRIGHT SU**  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

Bright is an improv coach and an MBA-educated business consultant, based in California, USA. He is the author of *Ji Xing Xi Ju (Improvisational Theatre, 2020)*, a 432-page book in Chinese about improvisation. [brightsu@gmail.com](mailto:brightsu@gmail.com)



## SAVE THE DATES

July 18th to July 21st, 2024

2024 AIN Global Conference (in person)

Prague, Czech Republic

↗ [Watch intro video](#)



# AI EVERYWHERE



AI Everywhere was born of curiosity. This section explores how Applied Improvisation is used in different domains, by different people, all over the globe. From city landscapes to hospitals to community centers and more, we explore how Applied Improvisation is making its mark in diverse settings. Discover inspiring stories of how this practice is fostering innovation, collaboration, and adaptive thinking across industries. We wondered whether we could find AI everywhere, and our initial answer is a resounding "Yes, and..."

# Improvisation: A Way to Untake the World for Granted

Words by  
JEANNE LAMBIN

Perhaps you have had this experience: once you start noticing something and paying attention to it, you see it everywhere. This may be your experience with improvisation and the improvisational mindset: once you start engaging with it, you see it everywhere. This phenomenon, sometimes referred to as the frequency illusion, occurs when the thing you've just noticed, experienced, or been told about suddenly crops up seemingly constantly.

This phenomenon is thought to be due to our ability to pay "selective attention." Selective attention is, just like it sounds, our

ability to select and focus on a particular input while ignoring other things.

Just because something captures our attention, does not mean that we actually attend to or are present for it. Our selective attention can fray over time. Indeed, when something is seemingly everywhere, it can be hard to pay sustained attention to the instances in which it occurs. We can take it for granted.

In the haste and hustle of everyday life, we miss the tens of millions of improvisations, great and small, that whir and hum in the background of our lives. We can overlook one

manifestations of the improvisational mindset: the urban landscape, aka our cities.

Here's a stunning fact: over 55% of the world's population, about 4.22 billion people, live in urban areas. By 2050, the UN estimates, that number will grow to over 68%. If improvisation is everywhere, so too are cities. In recent years, I have come to think of cities, especially our older cities, as a very literal embodiment of accept and build (which could also be described as "Yes, and...").

The city provides the backdrop of so many of our lives. Those places, those

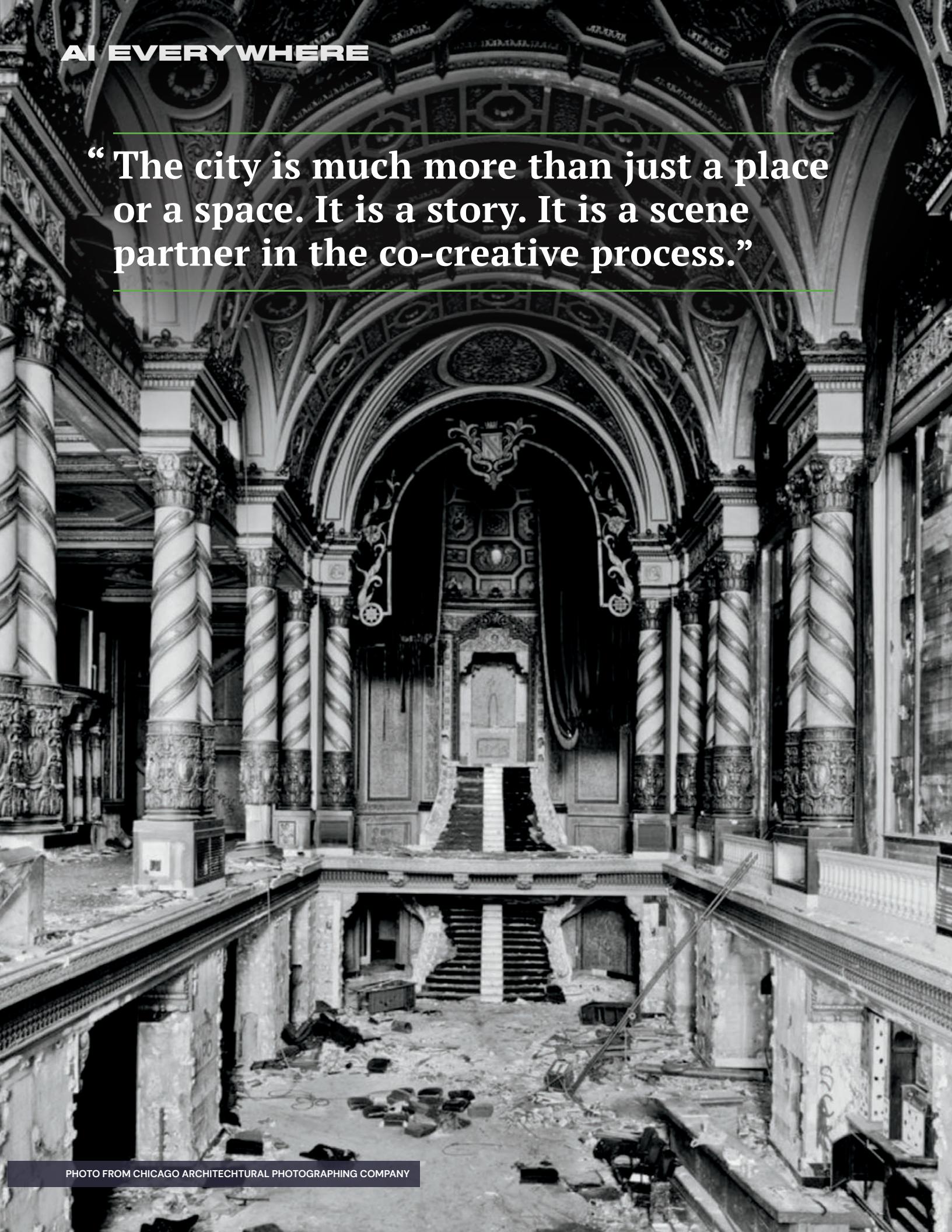


PHOTO FROM CHICAGO ARCHITECTURAL PHOTOGRAPHING COMPANY

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“The city is much more than just a place or a space. It is a story. It is a scene partner in the co-creative process.”

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spaces, provide the envelope in which we write and insert the letter of our lives. The city is much more than just a place or a space. It is a story. It is a scene partner in the co-creative process. As Winston Churchill once famously said, “We shape our buildings and afterward, our buildings shape us.”

I was shaped by the city. I was shaped by improvisation.

### Early Lessons in Letting Go

I grew up in a city. I grew up in Chicago. I grew up in the same house that my dad grew up in, in the same neighborhood that my family had lived in for decades. The house became the final resting place for the assorted ephemera of many family members. Dishes from Aunt Mary, radio cabinets built by Uncle Lee, boxes of photos of people whose images remained, but whose names were forgotten. Lists, letters, legal documents, postcards, mass cards, card cards, and so on. I always felt an affinity for these items and the stories attached to them. These objects and stories were a proxy for people I would never meet. I was constantly pestering both of my parents for stories of these people that were no more. The past always felt very present, even if elements of it were rapidly disappearing.

I grew up in the US, at the tail end of the first phase of the often-problematic program of urban renewal, funded by the US Federal Government (similar programs cropped up across



PHOTO COURTESY OF JEANNE LAMBIN

the globe). In the US, as in many other places, this meant the dislocation and destruction of block after block of our visible past, earning it the moniker “urban removal”.

By the time I arrived in this world, they were no longer clear-cutting vast swaths of Chicago, but demolishing the past was still a go-to option. I always found this great getting-rid-of perplexing, baffling, and wasteful. I wanted to do something about it.

One of the first buildings that I tried to “save” was the Granada Theater, an architectural confection, opened in 1926, at a

time when movies were so grand, so splendid, and so unusual, that they required palaces in which to view them.

Times changed, movie-watching habits changed, and the people who once populated the seats to full capacity disappeared. With the introduction of television, it was easy to take movies for granted. The collective selective attention had moved on. The Granada managed to stumble along, and it was still open, for a short window of my childhood. Enveloped in this cavernous space, dark save for the light of the screen and the exit lights, I watched Stanley Kubrick’s 2001: A Space Odyssey and will forever remember Dave imploring

Hal to open the pod bay doors, and the space inside the theater and the space on the screen becoming one.

The theater closed shortly thereafter, and - after a few stilted efforts to revive it - thus began the slow slide into decline, because as much as we need buildings, buildings also need us. When we are not occupying them, their ecosystem of existence fails, giving way to rot and decay. By the time I was in high school, The Granada was threatened with demolition and replacement with an uninspired apartment block. I joined forces with the Save the Granada Theater committee, a rag-tag group of advocates to try to save it.

### A Study in Contrasts

It was also at about this time that I enrolled in my first improv class at what was then ImprovOlympic (now iO) and started learning about the “rules,” or, as I like to call them, the building blocks of improvisation. I prefer this because it makes me think of being a kid with a trunk full of blocks, and how boundless and buoyant my young imagination was. Also embedded in the idea of a building block is the impulse to take something and transform it into something else. Accept and build.

At the time, iO was housed in a characterful building with many previous lives. In a somewhat dingy classroom above a bar, I learned the ins and outs of attention, “Yes, and...”, letting go, and so much more. This was a stark contrast to what happened at City Hall, where, in asking

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**“It would take me a while to realize that historic preservation could be viewed as one of the ultimate expressions of ‘Yes, and...’ or ‘accept and build.’”**

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that the City block the demolition, the Save the Granada Theater Committee heard that single, solitary, possibility-destroying word, no.

After a protracted battle that spanned several years, the building was demolished. It was a painful and poignant lesson in the devastation of negation and a powerful lesson in letting go.

Eventually, I returned to school to get my degree in historic preservation/heritage conservation, which can be broadly defined as preserving the past as a livable present for future generations. In historic preservation, there is, of course, the idea that you keep or preserve what is there. Then there is also the idea that if you are going to tear something down, you put up something better in its place. That did not happen with the Granada.

It would take me a while to realize that historic preservation could be viewed as one of the ultimate expressions of “Yes, and...” or “accept and build.” To take what was there before and add to it. An accretive and collective effort to which we all contribute. When you look at an old building, a city, a skyline, you see the result of decades, if not centuries, of accepting and building.



IMAGE COURTESY OF JEANNE LAMBIN

What if the university had said, “Yes, we will save the theater and transform it into something else.”?

And I want to be absolutely clear: this is not a rallying cry to save everything, or that the past is all GREAT!!! It’s not.

And I want to be absolutely clear: sometimes “no” is and should be a complete answer.

“Yes, and...” or “accept and build” is no more the answer to everything, than saving everything is the answer to anything.

In building cities, in building places, in building lives, there are those choices that, by their nature, remove so many other choices, so many possibilities. This was one of those.

Things will get destroyed. Things will always get destroyed. That’s why we have the ability to let go.

Because this is the Age of the Great Eradication, thus letting go becomes an essential skill to cope with the collective grief of so much erasure.

### Accept and build...or not

This takes us back to the devastation of negation, those places where conflict, war, natural disasters, urban renewal, economic displacement, racism, rampant capitalism, and inequity have resulted in the erasure of places, and more importantly, the people and their stories that once populated

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### “It could be said that intentionality is what makes improvisation applied.”

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them. No is a complete sentence.

The idea of accepting and building, as applied to our places and spaces, is an invitation to be thoughtful, to be inclusive, and to be intentional. Our ability to pay selective and sustained attention can be a superpower. It could be said that intentionality is what makes improvisation applied. We can leverage our selective attention by attending to it, by being intentional.

In cities, as in life, what we choose to accept and build on deserves careful consideration, a conscious and intentional counterpoint to what we intentionally overlook, erode, obfuscate, and destroy.

In this Age of the Great Eradication, when so much is being destroyed, how can we be intentional about what we hold on to? How do we extend this beyond buildings and cities, to the world?

How do we accept and build in this world?

This world, this world, this world, so enmeshed in what some have described as the polycrisis, that even our crises have crises. The world is literally burning.

How do you accept *that*? How do you build on that when it can be a relief to not pay attention to it, selective or otherwise?

How do you let go to hang on?

Perhaps you will have this experience: once you start noticing something, you can start accepting it, once you start accepting something you can start building something new from it.

Perhaps Applied Improvisation can bring ease to uncertainty and compassion when that ease is not available.

Perhaps Applied Improvisation is a way to untake the world for granted. ☺



JEANNE LAMBIN

Jeanne is a writer, facilitator, and storyteller based in Chicago. She is the founder of *The Human Imagination Project* which exists to help people connect to the magic of the ordinary, the extraordinary and everything in-between. She is the creator of *Eleven Minutes To Mars*, which helps people reimagine their relationship with time and attention in order to live with intention and the co-creator of *The Quest: Improvisation for Transformation*.

[thehumanimaginationproject.com](http://thehumanimaginationproject.com)  
[elevenminutestomars.com](http://elevenminutestomars.com)

# Helping Healthcare Workers via Online Improv

Words by

ANTHONY A CARANDANG

“SANDALI! Well, that was fun!” I exclaimed after all the participants exited Zoom. It was August 2020 and we had just finished a three-hour online session playing with our eight doctor friends, most of whom didn’t have any idea about improv. I thought that was it – a one-time virtual meet-up. I closed my laptop.

I was wrong.

## Our story

Six months into the COVID-19 pandemic, with increasingly strict lockdown protocols in Manila, Philippines, stringent quarantine and no vaccines in sight, the frustrated and tired frontline healthcare workers asked the government for a reprieve and demanded public dialogue about better strategies to stem the tide.

“How else can I ‘Yes, and..’ one of the greatest challenges facing our generation? What could I do for my friends to help them de-stress even for a little bit?” This thought led me to partner with Allyn Lomboy, a fellow physician-improviser. We invited our friends in the medical field and eight responded. The original plan was to do an hour of improv games on Zoom that would entail talking, playing and debriefs. And that’s

where we got the name of our dynamic duo, PlayMD.

I decided to aptly call our session SANDALI, a word derived from the Old Tagalog phrase *isang dali*, which literally means *one plus a measurement unit based on a finger’s width* – or about an inch (Noceda, 1754). SANDALI connotes an instant; a brief moment; or a command to stop and pause.

Two weeks after our first SANDALI session, I found myself going back to my laptop. We had our second group composed of OB-GYNs. Soon after, our friends started recommending us to their peers and residents, and

Allyn and I started offering sessions that tackled resilience strategies, team collaboration, and forming connections. By late October 2022, we had conducted 60 Zoom sessions with over 520 participants from different departments in several hospitals throughout the country.

## ZOOM: Playing separately but together

The pandemic forced healthcare institutions to migrate virtually. Several studies (*see references*) documented the success and challenges of medical schools and training institutions adapting their classes, learning modules,



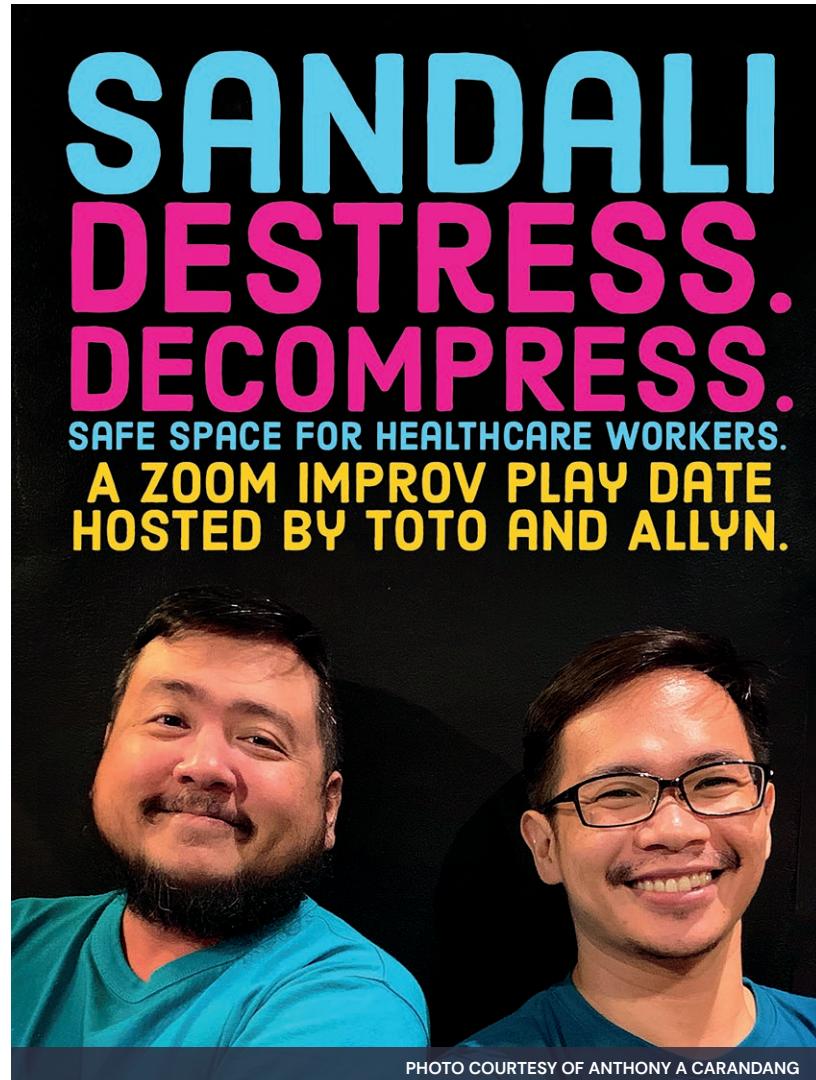
and conferences to an online format. Zoom became their medium of choice. I knew that we could do the same.

Even though most of the doctors were already adept with Zoom, some challenges remained, such as disappearing audio, loud background noises, frozen faces and even interrupted connections. Online facilitation tested our patience and 'Yes, and...' capabilities. One time, Allyn's internet and laptop both consecutively died so he had to come over to my place. We continued that session sharing a laptop, compressing ourselves to fit one tiny Zoom square!

The unpredictability of medical work was also an issue. Some sessions saw several participants on active hospital duty and a few were called away to attend to patients, never to rejoin the group. Some joined using their mobile phones while driving home. One doctor stayed inside her car in the parking lot for almost three hours. Another used her tablet in the Out Patient Department as it was being closed.

### Our experience

Most of our curious participants had no idea about improvisation and joined SANDALI with pervading nervousness or anxiety. But these soon faded away after our warm-up exercises. It was beautiful to see analytically inclined and left-brained professionals jump into the unknown, embrace uncertainty, and play without judgment or fear. "I never thought I needed this," a doctor remarked.



The game that resonated the most with the doctors was *Fortunately/Unfortunately* where the group created a coherent story with each member contributing one sentence at a time. Each alternating sentence had to either start with the word "Fortunately..." or "Unfortunately...". This exercise taught them to actively listen, accept each other's offers, connect ideas together, relinquish control, think of creative ways around roadblocks, and collaborate as a group.

One beautiful memory I have was the first time we played *Turn Your Camera On*. It began with everyone's cameras turned off. Somebody would say, "turn your camera on if..." followed by a truth about themselves like, "you love coffee." Participants briefly turned their cameras on for a few seconds if they shared that truth. Then another round. Playing this exercise, some residents became teary-eyed and even cried. They haven't felt this connected since

**“They haven’t felt this connected ever since the pandemic began. It was as if this huge heavy load was lifted, knowing they were not alone.”**

before the pandemic began. It was as if this huge, heavy load was lifted, knowing they were not alone. A good way to start forming connections is finding commonalities between people.

Two other games also resonated well: *One Word Story* and *3-Line Scene*. Additionally, *Pass the Face* was a simple game that was surprisingly a hit, allowing doctors who deal with life and death situations to let go, laugh out loud and just be silly. Mirroring exercises were less favorably received but when we asked the group to follow one leader and made it into a guessing game, then people gleefully committed to it.

It is heartwarming to witness participants discover the magic of improv and arrive at similar revelations about themselves and others.

**“It is heartwarming to witness participants discover the magic of improv and arrive at similar revelations about themselves and others.”**



PHOTO COURTESY OF ANTHONY A CARANDANG

### Some of the realizations during SANDALI include:

1. Nervousness and apprehension are replaced with joy and a renewed sense of connection with the team.
2. Physical distancing does not necessarily equate with emotional isolation; SANDALI activities allow for meaningful interaction.
3. Forgetting the pandemic stresses even for a few hours provides relief and renewed energy to meet the new day's demands.
4. Being aware of the teamwork dynamics online allows for better collaboration, ultimately producing better patient care.
5. Becoming more familiar with “Yes, and...” and applying it to everyday situations relieves some of the stresses and allows for more openness to collaboration with others.

Andrea et al's study (2020), which involved 40-minute Zoom sessions between medical students and COVID-19 frontline physicians, concluded that one of their program's benefits is an increased sense of connectedness. I observed this similar phenomenon in multiple sessions across different participating groups.

Initially, we thought that we were working towards obsolescence - that the pandemic would end after a few months and our services would not be needed. We were wrong. The virus changed and adapted. So did we.

### So what's next?

PlayMD has started conducting face-to-face team building sessions with cross-functional healthcare teams. Topics include presentation skills for residents, resilience strategies,

active listening and status play for empathic communication. Early in 2023, I led a two-day storytelling workshop for the University of the Philippines Diliman biologists. We also partnered with the Department of Medicine of the University of the Philippines-Philippine General Hospital for monthly improv sessions with their residents. One of our ultimate goals is to advocate for improvisation and its incorporation into the Philippine medical curriculum as an ancillary tool.

To date, we still offer online sessions. I don't think people will give up Zoom any time soon. Online or a hybrid approach is here to stay.

Looking back, I always knew that the lessons I learned in my improv classes could be used to help

**“The global pandemic, with all its frightful changes and seemingly impossible difficulties, has beckoned for one big ‘Yes, and...’”**

people in their everyday lives. Improv changed me and it has the potential to change the lives of others. As improvisers, this is our power - to sit and be comfortable with being uncomfortable. To jump into the unknown. The global pandemic, with all its frightful changes and seemingly impossible difficulties, has beckoned for one big “Yes, and...”. There is no better time to answer that call.

Back in 2020, Allyn said, “You know, things can happen and

all this can be over in a few months.” It was half a year into the COVID-19 pandemic and we had just finished our nth SANDALI session.

“Yes, we'll carry on until whenever,” I replied. I closed my laptop.

“Our goal is obsolescence,” he added. It wasn't as if we wanted to stop. He just meant he wanted things to improve so that online sessions like SANDALI would not be needed anymore. We both wished we could go back to our regular lives and that life would go back to the way things were. But life, like an improv scene, took an unexpected turn.

“Yes,” I replied. “And...”

The (next) offer awaits. ☺

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**ANTHONY A CARANDANG**

Anthony is a physician with Radiology training, based in Manila, Philippines. He is the co-founder and lead facilitator of PlayMD, a Medical Improvisation group that supports collaborative and communicative pathways to improve doctors' well-being and achieve better patient outcomes. He is known as "Toto" in his beloved improv community. He is also interested in empathy and storytelling for science communication.

# Applied Improvisation for People with Parkinson's Disease

Words by  
**MARGOT ESCOTT**

I began teaching improv for people with Parkinson's Disease and their care partners in 2017 at a local Parkinson's Association and community theater. In 2020, we started teaching online and continue to meet every week via Zoom. In addition to Parkinson's, our students have other neurological disorders and dementia. They have performed live on Facebook and are an inspirational group of people to play with.

Parkinson's Disease (PD) is a movement disorder that affects up to one million people in

the US and over 40 million worldwide. PD is a complex motor disorder that can cause unintentional or uncontrollable movements. It typically occurs due to low levels of dopamine in the brain. Being intentionally playful, as we are in improv, stimulates the production of this neurotransmitter which encourages new pathways between the brain's neurons.

## Personal Connections

My father had Parkinson's Disease and passed away before I was introduced to the wonderful

world of improvisational theater. I took care of him for several years before his death and attended many support groups for people with Parkinson's and other care partners.

This chronic illness has no cure. Symptoms can be reduced with medication, but it is a progressive illness. A surgery called Deep Brain Stimulation helps to control the progression. Understanding the many benefits of improv, I thought it could prove to be a powerful treatment intervention as well.

My experience with improvisational theater games is primarily based on the work of Viola Spolin. Her games were developed to work with children and parents who were immigrants in Chicago, held at Hull House, the home of social work in the US. As a social worker, I feel a deep connection to Hull House and Viola, who was herself a social worker.

## Curriculum with Impact

Parkinson's Disease is characterized by many problems such as facial rigidity (or masking), gait impairment



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARGOT ESCOTT

characterized by shuffling, and balance issues which are the result of low dopamine levels. Behavioral health issues such as anxiety and depression are prevalent as well. Some of the improvisational exercises I teach are directly related to helping these issues.

**“We emphasize at every class that there are no mistakes, only gifts.”**

PD can be isolating not only for the individual with the disease but for the family as well. We have several care partners that participate in our weekly classes. In some cases, the person with PD is unable to navigate Zoom themselves so their partners assist them and stay in the class.

Like most improv classes, we teach the *Yes, and* concept in our early classes. Students learn to really listen to what others say, remember it, and agree by creating an additional thought. Games like *Last Word*, *First Word* and *Last Line*, *First Line* are helpful for memory and focus. We emphasize at every class that there are no mistakes, only gifts. Students with PD, dementia, or other movement disorders, often feel embarrassed or hesitant to speak, afraid of saying the wrong word or getting confused. Often, their care partner will try to “correct” their loved one. In a gentle way, I remind all players that there is only one coach! Within the first few classes, students learn to raise their hands over their heads and say,

“Ta Da!” if they think they’ve made a mistake.

Playing *Gibberish* games can reduce their reluctance to speak or diminish their fear of mis-speaking. *Gibberish* also brings a lot of laughs, which addresses their mood disorders with an

### The Magic of Music

We start each class with music, playing *Mirror* and *Follow the Follower*. We spotlight certain players, and everyone follows their movement until the spotlight moves to another person. Movement is vital for people with



increase in endorphins. Also, by allowing adequate time for games, no one is pressured to speak quickly, which supports those with vocal issues.

*Acceptance* is another important improv concept in these circumstances, as people with PD have difficulty accepting their disease. The idea that they don’t have to like it but can choose to *accept the reality* helps with the denial that often accompanies this disorder. This also holds true for the care partners, as they are often frustrated with the demanding schedules and role reversals (PD is more common in men).

PD and in this activity, students use hands, arms, and some are able to stand. This energizes students and we encourage full use of the jaw and different emotional expressions.

Researchers have found that music therapy may help people with PD move faster - and make them happier. These were the results of Italian researchers that appeared in *Psychosomatic Medicine*. They found that music that improved patients’ abilities to move and walk can also help improve their well-being.

Music is a powerful tool. We play several music games during each

class. A favorite is *Music Freeze Tag*: when the music stops, two players hold their positions and do a short scene. This exercise also helps utilize facial muscles as well.

Most of the students grew up in the 1950s and '60s, so I play music from those eras. Sometimes we play songs by the Beatles, like "Good Day Sunshine," with a catchy tune and easy rhythm to follow. I encourage them to sing along, as one of the symptoms of PD is losing the ability to speak loudly. I frequently remind them to "Share your voice!" to encourage using more volume.

### **“Body, Mind, Intuition”**

After an energetic music and movement exercise, we often do a mindful exercise. I teach mindfulness, which helps students learn to be in the here and now, which is so essential for improv play. It gives them time to slow down and calm their thoughts. I use many of Viola Spolin's games like *Feel your Body*. One of Spolin's quotes speaks to the importance of this:

*“If you can get it out of the head and into the body...Body, Mind, and Intuition. This is what we're after. Body, Mind, Intuition.”*

Another game, *Show (don't tell) your feelings*, has students use their facial muscles to portray a feeling, and is part of our warm-up. After the first student "shows" an emotion, the others mirror their face and identify the feeling that is expressed. This exercise is important for students with a "PD Mask," and

reinforces the need to practice using their muscles to indicate their emotions, as opposed to the usual lack of affect.

Students engage in a variety of improv exercises each week, to strengthen the muscles of their bodies and minds. Games include *One word story*, *Story spine*, *Scenes using numbers*, *What are you doing?* *Three-headed expert*, *I am a tree*, any *Gibberish* game, and especially, *Gibberish Opera*, played with two singers and two translators.

In these classes, they have the opportunity to express themselves non-verbally through movement and music. Since speech is often difficult and slow, the non-verbal games provide a safe space to play. These activities aid in cognition and memory skills. Improvisational games present fun challenges to solve simple problems and increase self-confidence and a sense of accomplishment.

### **A Hopeful Mission**

I've been working with some of the same students for over eight years. Our meetings have been virtual for the past few years, allowing students from other parts of the country to join us!

There is growing research on the benefits of improvisational theater for cognitive, social and emotional growth, and we look forward to more research, specifically on improv and Parkinson's Disease.

As a clinical social worker, my mission is to help people who suffer. Applied Improvisation is a

wonderful tool to help people who are living with behavioral issues such as anxiety and depression, or who are coping with chronic diseases, like PD. Discovering improv has not only benefited my life but those of my patients. ☺

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### **MARGOT ESCOTT**

Margot Escott, LCSW, has practiced in Naples, Florida for over 35 years. She trained as a New Games referee in the 1970s, and has taught *The Healing Power of Play and Laughter* workshops to corporate and healthcare workers for four decades. She discovered improv in 2011 and used Applied Improvisation in her practice. She teaches improv to people suffering mood disorders, neurological issues, dementia and those with ASD. She hosts the podcast, *Improv Interviews*.

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# Beginning, Middle, End

Words by  
BENJAMIN LLOYD

Imagine you are sitting on a couch. It occurs to you that your favorite beverage is in the refrigerator in the next room. You get up, go to the refrigerator and get the beverage. You return to the couch and drink it. It's a celebratory drink you are having, as you consider the end of a year-long project today. For five years, you and your colleagues worked on a project that matters to all of you. You succeeded; the project has run its course, and today was the last day.

That project and your trip to the refrigerator share something in common, something so universal to human experience that we rarely notice it. And yet, it is an essential aspect of human learning and consciousness. Both your project and the trip to the fridge had a beginning, a middle, and an end.

Beginning, middle, end (or BME in shorthand) charts a journey. From the moment we pick up and read our first story, and through all of the movies and TV we watch, and the projects we embark on, BME



is as fundamental as the air we breathe. As we experience it in our lives, we internalize it and use it to organize the way we prepare for life experiences. Not only is BME a source of safety for us – a familiar arc which suggests a destination – it also describes three different kinds of experiences. Here are a few examples of experiences connected with beginnings, middles, and ends:

Improvisors have a unique relationship to BME. As beginners, we don't think about it much at all – we are trying to stay present, listen to our scene partners and build a story together. Later, as we explore longform improvisation, we develop the extraordinary, bifurcated mind of the improvisor: partly immersed in the present experience, and partly hovering over the scene, looking for the map of beginning, middle, end.

**“Beginning, middle, end (or BME in shorthand) charts a journey.”**

BEGINNING	New ideas, introductions, decisions, hopes and desires
MIDDLE	Journeys, connections, discoveries and surprises, transformations, obstacles
END	Returns, resolutions, reflections, new beginnings

As an Applied Improvisation practitioner, I use BME in a variety of ways with clients. When debriefing on games or exercises I ask participants to

reflect on how they felt in the beginning, in the middle and at the end. It's a great way to link a felt experience to a learning journey: we notice that we're nervous at the beginning, exhilarated in the middle, and accomplished at the end.

A facilitator can apply that journey with the game/exercise to the larger issue at hand. "You see, friends? Maybe this merger we're all worried about will also feel better at the end..."

Sometimes with a client group I sense are open to a deeper level of artistic collaboration, I will coach participants to create three frozen tableaus: one that describes the beginning of an experience they share, one that describes the middle, and one that describes a (hoped for) end. This exercise combines creative visualization and deep collaboration with BME. Because it is so deeply connected to storytelling, BME invites creative applications. When I design scenario outlines for clients, I use the theater terms, *act 1/act 2/act 3*, to describe the BME journey being explored.

But what if you have a condition that makes relating to BME difficult? What if you are a kind of person that is deeply rooted in the present moment, and for whom extrapolating a beginning, middle and end is a nearly impossible abstraction? I work regularly with people with a variety of diagnoses, people who have sometimes been described as having "disabilities," although that term has recently come under scrutiny. After years

of playing and creating with people with various types of neurodivergence, I have come to recognize that they are, as we all are, people with unique gifts and challenges. And some of them have a hard time grasping BME.

And yet, part of my goal with these folks is to create a class in which they can experience the creative joy and accomplishment of devising, rehearsing, and performing a play using Applied Improvisation. It's a challenge to meet each student where they are. Some students want to be in every scene. Some don't want to be in any scene. I need to create an experience that is somehow valuable and fun for all of them.

I use a whiteboard when I play with this community. Especially for people on the autism spectrum, having a visual outline of what we're going to do in class is super helpful. An example of a class "menu":

I was looking for a way to use a visual support for developing our original plays using Beginning, Middle, End when I came across the Story Spine at the AIN Global conference in Avila, Spain last summer. Kenn Adams, Artistic Director of Synergy Theatre in the U.S.A. has popularized if not invented it. It's an outline meant to be used to create a narrative journey. Each step is incomplete, and participants are invited to "fill in the blanks". I have segmented the sequence into Beginning, Middle, End and added the theatrical designations, *act 1, act 2, act 3*.

This structure is very useful with my class of "differently-abled" people. It takes an abstraction – beginning, middle, end – and makes it visual. We put this up on a whiteboard or a big flip chart and we tell a story together. We make notes and changes as we go. We identify characters and events. And we talk about the kinds of things that happen in





the beginnings of stories, in their middles, and at their ends. The goal is the fun and accomplishment of creating and performing a play together. But the life skills and experiential learning from this process are profound.

People with disabilities often struggle to see themselves navigating “real life.” The obstacles they face can be overwhelming. By co-creating and then moving through a BME sequence, they practice an essential feature of being in the world: entering an experience, moving through it, and completing it. We take this sequence for granted, so much so we don’t even realize we’re doing it. The Story Spine – focusing on BME – lifts this sequence up for those who don’t take it for granted. It creates a visual roadmap, assisting people who find it difficult to both be in the moment, and think about what comes next.

I described earlier, ways I refer to Beginning, Middle, End when teaching and leading games and

exercises. But it has an even broader application. Imagine you are working with a group that is facing a big transition. Their company is moving, or is being bought by another company. Using a whiteboard, you might lead a brainstorm on what the beginning of this transition might look and feel like, what might happen in the middle, and how things might be at the end (good or bad!) Imagine coaching a series of vignettes bringing some of these possibilities to life – what might a group learn from witnessing each other confronting hoped-for, or fearful episodes under imaginary conditions? What behaviors and language might be identified as useful in moving towards a positive outcome? What language and behavior might be seen as contributing to a negative outcome?

And maybe that’s the final point to make for now. Our hopes and fears are inextricably linked to this narrative arc we have

absorbed since childhood. In our fears, we imagine ourselves ending in ruin. In our hopes, the ending is full of love and accomplishment. What a powerful tool to use in assisting people of all abilities to visualize outcomes.

May your journeys have auspicious beginnings, surprising middles, and satisfying endings! I just remembered there’s something in the refrigerator I want... ☺



BENJAMIN LLOYD

Benjamin runs *bxlloyd consulting*, a learning and development practice that uses the power of play and Applied Improvisation to support extraordinary teams, groups, and communities. He also continues to work creatively with people of all abilities, develop and perform in various shows, and lead classes and workshops.

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# Practical Psychological Safety: A simple, two-step process to identify, build, and maintain it anywhere

Words by  
TERJE BREVIK

Psychological safety is a way to define whether we feel safe to take risks and be vulnerable in front of others. It is subjective; a perception of how others will react to what we say and do, how we say and do it, what we wear, eat, drink and so on.

As humans, we've learned from enough negative experiences to be careful about expressing ourselves in certain ways and settings. Our brains have even provided us with an inner critic; a strict judge of impulses that wants us to make as few *faux pas* as necessary. This frightened voice is very good at protecting us from punishment, humiliation, and rejection, but is also what keeps us from engaging – sharing our ideas, concerns, questions, or mistakes with others.

As practitioners of Applied Improvisation, it is especially important to help identify and reduce, or even remove, the fear that keeps our participants from unlocking their inherent, unlimited potential. *Practical psychological safety* is an efficient tool to help us do just that, with any individual, team

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**“It is especially important to help identify and reduce, or even remove, the fear that keeps our participants from unlocking their inherent, unlimited potential. Practical psychological safety is an efficient tool to help us do just that.”**

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or organization.

## Dynamic conditions

Our perception of psychological safety is always changing based on where we are and who we're with; dynamics that leave us no choice but to try to adapt to our rapidly changing environments.

To put it bluntly, ‘actionable items’ and ‘synergy’ are perfectly safe words to use in a workplace meeting room. Announcing that you just broke wind, followed by blowing raspberries, is far less acceptable. Meanwhile, put yourself in a kindergarten classroom and you're likely to build strong rapport

with the latter, and get a lot of blank stares with the former!

## The fear is real

Flatulence jokes aside, the consequences of doing or saying something wrong can be dire in the professional world and we know it. The fear of being seen as ignorant, incompetent, negative or disruptive is stressful and very real. So is the potential punishment, humiliation or exclusion from the group. Reactions can lead to a loss of livelihood or being known as *Farting Frances* for the remainder of one's professional career.

Our brains need us to live, so they protect us in the safest way they know: by engaging less, or not at all. It's safety racketeering, and it strangles efficiency, problem solving, productivity and revenue, not to mention team dynamics, motivation, positive work environments and health.

As with most rackets, what follows is an increase in accidents, turnover, and other health and safety-related issues.

## From theory to practice

The lack or presence of psychological safety is something we experience in ourselves and with others every day, holding us back or moving us forward. Despite a lot of theory on the *what*, the *how* seems, in my experience, to be more ambiguous. The gap being a practical approach for building psychological safety with any team, workplace, or general gathering of people.

For this, I recommend *Practical Psychological Safety*. It is a simple, two-step process to identify, build, and maintain psychological safety in groups you are facilitating. Step one is figuring out where you are. Step two is how to go from there.

**“The lack or presence of psychological safety is something we experience in ourselves and with others every day, holding us back or moving us forward..”**

One could consider adding a third step – identifying a desired destination or end-goal – but it might not be necessary. More on that later.

### Step One: Figuring out where you are

A check-in is a very efficient tool to determine the level of

psychological safety felt by an individual or group at the point of observation. A check-in can serve many purposes. In this context it's defined as a simple, “I'm here, you're there, we're here” process.

It can be a relatively quick process, with the advantage of being able to check-in larger groups quite fast. An obvious disadvantage to speed is that you might miss important nuances or get inaccurate indicators.

It doesn't matter how simple you make the check-in process; we can't help showing who we are to the world if we know what to look for.

For some people, the check-in is an opportunity to stand out; to show how funny or clever they are. This is perhaps indicating a perceived



pressure to perform. For others, it is a chance to conform, to show that they're to be taken seriously – perhaps indicating a perceived pressure to comply.

Sometimes the answer from a person with a certain status will shape the response from the others, indicating status and hierarchy, or actual leader- and follower-figures in the group. Other times, people may be hesitant to share their answer, even when provided with safe or low-risk alternatives. This may present as speaking with a barely audible voice while avoiding eye contact. It could be a low sense of security, but it could also just be a migraine.

The latter is a reminder that the check-in is a surface-level snapshot and not a 3D map. Our observations and interpretations may be wrong or influenced by internal or external circumstances we're not privileged to know.

### Verbal cues to look for

Below are some examples from my experiences using a simple check-in exercise in a group circle setting. Participants respond in various, but common ways, to the prompt, "Please say your name and a number.":

*Funny and clever* – Numbers like 69 (sexual innuendo), 42 (Douglas Adams' meaning of life) and Pi (more clever than Arabic numerals), very large (because my number is bigger than your number), negative numbers, or many decimals (both very clever). Replies like these are fairly common with new groups and can indicate an individual pressure



to perform or stand out, or a group that rewards competitive or clever behavior.

*Patterns and mirroring* – When someone answers 1979, and now everyone's answer follows the pattern of four digit birth years. Patterns are fairly common with established groups and can be an indicator of complacency within the group, as other options are no longer being explored. It can also say something about social status, in the case where someone breaks the pattern or establishes a new one. It might be done to show who's really in charge, or perhaps to avoid a status fight by not repeating 1979, as this year now 'belongs' to the first person who said it. Identical or almost identical numbers is another status indicator, as people are likely to mirror people with higher status. Mirroring can indicate an intention to create an

illusion of higher status, or rapport with the individual in power.

Mirroring can also indicate physical attraction, so again, we benefit from not jumping to conclusions.

*Originality* – Most people are hesitant to repeat numbers that have already been said by others. This can indicate a pressure to be perceived as original and a low level of safety.

This also provides a harmless but powerful demonstration of psychological safety and how our brain is working non-stop to take care of us: "I wanted to say seven, but it seemed too obvious, so I chose eleven. Then someone else said eleven so I couldn't say that anymore. I thought five, but

then it felt wrong for some reason, so I just went with seventeen." Look for the nodding of heads if you point this out, as this internal thought process seems to be universal.

Replacing numbers with letters will provide similar results. Expect X or Foxtrot, as A and B are too obvious. I've experienced this with movies, professions, food, drinks, artists, colors, and more. These subtle clues seem to be true for most groups, and we haven't even mentioned non-verbal cues!

Last but not least, if people comment on each other or their answers during the check-in process, it can provide a ton of information about the group's dynamics and the struggle for status between its members, or someone's need to challenge their interim leader: you.

### What do I do with all this information?

It is important to note that these observations are not a checklist of static truths by any means. There are just too many internal and external variables that will affect our observations.

Time of day. Lighting. How we as facilitators are sitting, in relation to the group and the room. Seating type and formation for the group itself. Air quality. The change in group dynamics when we go from sitting to standing or standing to moving. Body language, intonation, volume, eye-contact, dress code, coffee intake, personal health and hygiene, to mention a few. Everything. Everywhere. All at once.

I'm usually cautious of sharing my assumptions with the client or group, as this can affect the trust required to facilitate a safe space for learning to take place. The information gathered from the check-in is for me as a facilitator, to support decision-making for what comes next.

### Step Two: What comes next?

Use your observations to adjust your current plans for the group.

By knowing their starting point – the pre-requisites of the group – you're in a much better position to utilize the time you have together, on the fly and regardless of topic or content. Unknowingly, the group has told you which exercises or content to add, remove, or adjust.

Look for behaviors to resurface later during your facilitation process to confirm or disprove your observations.

### Safety for safety's sake?

A practical approach to psychological safety can be implemented by itself, or in addition to practical exercises designed to train interpersonal skills.

Improv offers a wide range of practical exercises designed to identify and train interpersonal skills, as well as provide a way to explore the psychological safety of an individual, team or organization. Done right, they will facilitate a state of play; a joyful feeling of being in the moment, together with our partner(s). In this moment, there's no fight, flight, or freeze, no worries about the past or the future; only effortlessly releasing the unlimited potential in ourselves and our partner(s).

A destination or end-goal might be relevant to identify, but you need to know where you're starting from to get to where you want to be. Success depends on the right crew and mode of transportation, and a goal that is likely to be achieved. Finding out that your crew is unfit for certain journeys can be a lifesaver, which is why I believe a destination is secondary in the process of practical psychological safety. ☺

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### TERJE BREVIK

Terje is sometimes referred to as "the Navy SEAL of psychological safety." He is an Applied Improviser and an expert in practical psychological safety. Terje comes with 10+ years of experience teaching methods from improvised theater to improve communication, collaboration, and creativity on and off stage. He holds two bachelor's degrees, one in Drama and Theater Communication, the other in Computer Engineering. Terje operates from Oslo, Norway, and already regrets ending this sentence with purple pony taco kick.

# The School of Improvisation in Prague, Czech Republic

Words by  
**KAROLINA HARRIES**

## How the Christmas party helped me to become an AI trainer

Sometimes when one does not feel like going to a party, it might end up being the best party. This was the case nine years ago when I went to a Christmas party at the insistence of one of my clients. When I walked into the room everybody was standing in a big circle, laughing, and doing some crazily funny stuff. I thought to myself: "WOW!"

I have been working in the self-development profession for more than 15 years. That night, freshly new to improv, I decided this is something I want to learn. I wanted fun and ease in my training products, a change from the deep psychotherapy and coaching sessions I was offering. Ha! Little did I know...

Soon after the party, I took my first improv lesson in the School of Applied Improvisation in Prague, and I was surprised by the insights, sharing, and vulnerability shown by the participants. Fast forward three years, I was offered a place as a trainer. I was extremely honored to join. It was so meaningful then, and remains so even now.



PHOTO COURTESY OF KAROLINA HARRIES

For 10 years the school has been steadfastly advancing and refining its practices, prospering as a business and growing strong as a community. Thanks for joining me in sharing our approaches here.

## Organic beginnings

The school was started by two founders: Martin Vasquez, an improviser and a trainer who conducts corporate events and workshops in Prague, Czech, and Ondřej Nečas, who at the time was mainly a marketing expert. When Martin met Ondřej, the former encouraged the latter to offer the Applied Improvisation experiences to the general public too. Ondřej (correctly) thought if it can work

**"It was one of the first improv courses in Prague that didn't aim to train for stage improvisers, but to allow them to grow."**

for teams in corporations, it must work for individuals too.

It started with just one class per semester. Two trainers met 16 adult students of various ages and professions, once a week for three hours, over 13 weeks. The students would do an improv show for their friends and

families upon graduation.

The class was offered as “Applied Improvisation for self development”, using improv games to help people learn about themselves, with each activity followed by debrief, which led to opening up and learning to be vulnerable. It was one of the first improv courses in Prague that didn’t aim to train for stage improvisers, but to allow them to grow.

When the first group graduated, the students asked for more. The co-founders did not plan for this, but responded with “Yes, and...” with a follow-up semester, and continued to offer the beginners’ course. After two semesters, the students wanted even more. At the end of the first year, there were students who enrolled in the beginners’ course and in two advanced classes (2nd and 3rd semester). And they asked to even go further!

### What comes next?

The founders asked themselves: “What else can we offer to our students?”

This is how the *Theatropolis* classes came into being. The program aims more at improv theater skills, but still with a focus on the applied part. The topics are very diverse such as musical, improvised Shakespeare, sitcom, body and dance, and authenticity. Now the School runs three semesters of “core” AI courses, and *Theatropolis*. All together there are approximately

15 groups, both morning and evening classes, each semester.

Twice a year the students are invited to a special “Improv intensive weekend” in the outskirts of Prague. Its goal is to deepen the principles learned earlier, to connect, and of course have lots of fun.

The school also organizes many other products, such as the Improv Festival twice a year, summer intensive week, corporate workshops, and fundraising activities for charities. One special product is international improv workshops, as many of our trainers are connected to a bigger, worldwide improv community. The School invited many well-known international trainers to deliver workshops, for example Jonathan Pitts, Jim Libby, Lee White, Shawn Kinley and more.

The latest project is The Trainer Academy. It is a year-long train-the-trainer course for those who want to become AI facilitators. Yes, we are growing and prospering.

### Three top success factors:

#### 1. Methodology

As the number of students grew, so did the School’s training team. The initial team made of theater-based improvisers was complemented by trainers with solid experience in training, coaching and psychology. We have 23 trainers currently. Such a diverse training team brought new challenges. How to ensure training quality? How to balance the standardization while

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“That’s when the School started to look into the instructional design and created a curriculum for each class.”

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allowing customization? With learning objectives and improv principles in mind, it is not just a random mix of games selected from an individual trainer’s preference.

That’s when the School started to look into the instructional design and created a curriculum for each class. Our improv “semester” is a longer version of other schools’ “level” workshops. The first semester had a more detailed and standard curriculum, with the second and third being more flexible which took into account the students’ needs and the individual trainers’ perspectives.

This methodology helps the School be more consistent and professional, and allow individual trainers to shine with their personality, hence with more robust results. Often, students from one class continue together through the first three semesters, as they bond together strongly along the journey. In the event that someone needs to change a class to be with another cohort, our training design enables such a transition, smoothly.

#### 2. Feedback, Supervision, Intervision, 1:1, internal workshops

The evolution was not always smooth. With 23 trainers on the team, each going through different challenges in life and work, it was apparent very soon that it was necessary to create a space for sharing and caring.

After each class, the two trainers give each other quick feedback, with thorough feedback at the end of semester. Once a month, an external professional comes in to run a regular supervision session. Even though it is rare that all trainers can be present, these meetings are important. Such sessions help the trainers to be mindful of what is going on during their own class, but also what happens in colleagues' classes. Furthermore, it keeps them informed of things in each other's lives that have an impact on the work, directly or indirectly.

The team also has team meetings without an external facilitator or internal supervisor. Once a semester, Human Resources runs 1:1 meetings during which the

trainers get more time to share and receive feedback.

On top of that, the School offers internal workshops for its trainers – including those run by internal facilitators – and also “labs” run by internal trainers: spaces in which they can experiment, receive feedback and grow.

### 3. Community

There is no doubt one of the success factors is the community that we created. Current and former students, trainers, and their friends and families – even improvisers from other schools – create a larger improv community. The School's Facebook account is followed by 10,000 people, and it is a place where the community can connect with each other and are actively doing so. Over the years, we have organized Christmas parties, summer barbecue parties, ballroom dancing events, and live and recorded improv talks.

A few improv groups made up of our students have been formed over the years. Some are already quite established in the community, and some are at the beginning of the exciting journey.

It is nice to see many students stay in touch with each other and with the School, even years after the completion of a course. Lifelong relationships have been formed. Some people who met in improv even got married and now have babies! The lovely and respected American improviser, Jill Bernard, once said: “I know the lesson should be don't date other improvisers, but really, who else is interesting enough to date?”

I am blessed to have reluctantly “Yes, and...”-ed myself to an improvisation journey. The School has witnessed me grow tremendously, as a person and as a trainer, along with many others in Prague. So has the School. Now, I feel even more blessed to help people start their journey and have their first, “WOW!” Yes, and... let's create and celebrate even more “WOW!”’s. ☺



PHOTO COURTESY OF KAROLINA HARRIES



KAROLINA HARRIES

Karolina is an Applied Improvisation practitioner working with teams and individuals. She focuses on cooperation, Design Thinking for innovations, and communication skills. Karolina is the chairperson of the AIN Global Conference 2024 in Prague, Czech Republic.

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# AI IN EDUCATION



Educators are often imaginative, using activities in class to illustrate a lesson, teach team skills or simply have fun. These four articles in different contexts come from a range of educators in elementary school, high school and in college. What is common is the educators' desire to help their students achieve better outcomes using Applied Improvisation. Let these articles inspire you to take more risks, play more games, and use more AI.

# Reimagining a Collaborative Final Exam

Words by  
CAITLIN MCCLURE



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAITLIN MCCLURE

“Final Exam?! But this is a course on leadership and *improv*,” my students gasped.

For the past two years, I have taught *Leading Creative Collaboration*, a required course within the Executive MBA program at Stevens Institute of Technology in New Jersey, in the U.S. In 2022, I challenged myself to add a final exam that would be true to the spirit of the course while still avoiding the drawbacks of traditional exams that are usually stressful solo endeavors and may not indicate actual competency.

In addition to being guided by improv principles, such as *be average and give and take*, I frequently rely on a fundamental lesson from Keith Johnstone:

clearly identify the problem to be solved, then create a tool/process to solve it. So, I defined my problem like this: What kind of final exam will function as a capstone experience for the students, will reinforce the principles of collaboration, and will uncover the ways the students had developed?

As a solution, I created 12 questions on the exam—to cover topics that I felt were vital to their understanding of the material—then I asked the students to provide the other 12. My intention was a) to reinforce their sense of being an ensemble, capable of supporting each other’s learning, b) to reframe a final exam as something more than transactional, and c) to create a frisson of excitement about what their peers might ask of them.

Here are two sample questions from me:

“According to Stuart Brown, work is the opposite of play. True or False?”

“Why does the theory of Organizational Climate (as opposed to Organizational Culture) matter to leaders?”

Here are two questions from students:

“Describe a time where you used an improv tenet to deal with a difficult conversation.”

“Which of the following is not an improv principle? a) Be obvious, b) Leap before you look, c) Sympathize with your partner, d) Give and take.”

Our classes were held in-person with the 11 students divided into three teams. Seated with their teams, I set up the final exam:

- The exam is open book; they can use online or any other materials.
- They have half an hour to prepare answers.
- They will state answers aloud; no need for writing
- They can skip their own submitted questions.
- Each team will be graded collectively.

I handed out the exam paper, started a countdown clock and said, "Go!" When they first

looked at the questions, they were sweating and serious. It was 10 points out of their grade of 100. They were relieved as I reminded them the exam was graded collectively.

They spent the first few minutes reviewing the questions, then deciding who would answer each one. Except for the shuffle of papers and the sound of clicking keyboards, the room was silent, punctuated by the occasional voices, "Oh, let me do question four!" or "Sal, you could share that story about your roommate for question 12."

Half an hour later, laptops down, they were ready. I asked each team to tell me their answer to Question One. Then I shared the "correct" answer and distributed

their points accordingly, tallied on a whiteboard. We continued like this for all 24 questions, which took about 40 minutes to complete.

Hooray, what a final exam!

I really wasn't sure how the grading part was going to work out, but it turned into a delightful free-for-all; a full-class conversation and discovery process. One big discovery is the degree to which they supported each other, big time! They gave the simpler questions to their teammates who had struggled the most during the semester. Those students could have simply stayed quiet, but everyone was given at least one chance to speak and was encouraged by their team to answer confidently, with cheers



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAITLIN MCCLURE

and approval once they earned their point.

That indicated to me that they were showing up true to what Leonard and Yorton say in their book, *Yes, And* (2015, p.71): "...your ensemble is only as good as its ability to compensate for its weakest member."

One team asked to change their answer after hearing another team's response. I couldn't think of a reason to say no as the whole idea was to work collaboratively. At other times, they made compelling arguments for why I should accept their answer even if I initially indicated that it didn't quite hit the mark. It became a fully collaborative process with students arguing on behalf of their peers, even for other teams.

I did not indicate beforehand how the exam would be graded, but hinted the process mattered more than the answers. Since they got most of the answers correct, I gave everyone all ten points. It was clear from their full commitment to the exam and to each other that the experience itself was more important than the actual answers.

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**"An exam like this could only have come from an Applied Improvisation mindset."**

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Why is this Applied Improvisation? We didn't play then debrief any improv games!

An exam like this could only have come from an Applied

Improvisation mindset, rather than a traditional, hierarchical, right/wrong approach to pedagogy. I felt validated when I later realized that our exam hit all of the *Top 10 Elements of AI*, as identified in the 2014 *Delphi Study Summary* by Barbara Tint and Adam Froerer:

- 1) Making your partner look good
- 2) Yes, and...
- 3) Atmosphere of play
- 4) Curious listening
- 5) Complete acceptance
- 6) Flexibility/Spontaneity
- 7) Focus on the here and now
- 8) Risk taking
- 9) Personal awareness/mindfulness
- 10) Balance of freedom and structure

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**"Ultimately, my students had had an experience of challenging and supporting each other to learn, [and that] experience reinforced what we had been practicing all semester in real time..."**

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we had been practicing all semester in real time, and we collectively and collaboratively finished up the course true to its intent. Long live Applied Improvisation! ☺



**CAITLIN MCCLURE**

Caitlin McClure is a leadership development consultant, executive coach, professor in the business schools of Stevens Institute of Technology and Baruch College, and co-editor of two books of case studies, *Applied Improvisation: Leading, Collaborating & Creating Beyond the Theatre* and *The Applied Improvisation Mindset*. Her MA is in Adult Learning and Leadership from Columbia University. She lives in New Rochelle, New York.

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# AI and Autism

Words by  
ROBIN FOX

The day started like any other, as I greeted my students at Coginchaug High School in Durham, Connecticut. After decades in special education, I knew well that no two days are the same, but little did I know how different this day in 2010 would be. A merger of my worlds was about to take place that would lead to a breakthrough discovery, thirty-five years in the making.

**“Seeing them sparked me to wonder what their internal world is like and propelled me to study further to understand their neurodivergent experience.”**

Back in the '70s, walking into my classroom was a different experience. Young adults with ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder), sat together, yet alone, missing most social cues. Seeing them sparked me to wonder what their internal world is like and propelled me to study further to understand their neurodivergent experience.

After two degrees, four decades, and probably a thousand autistic students later, I grasped the fundamental differences in the way an autistic person processes shared social space, compared with a neurotypical individual.

One is the difficulty individuals with autism have seeing the whole picture, which leads them to miss social cues (body language, facial expressions, nuances in tone of voice) and overlook organizational and relational patterns. Their subsequent reaction may be overly literal and out of sync with the rhythm of the conversation.

People with autism also have difficulty with Theory of Mind, which is understanding that other people have different thoughts and perspectives than you. Trying to figure out the multiple streams of viewpoints happening in real time can be daunting to

most neurotypical people, and extremely difficult for those on the spectrum.

Another social hurdle is that autistic individuals tend to present their raw, unfiltered self to others “as is”. If they’re in a loving, kind environment, all is well. If they’re in a culture where conformity is rewarded and uniqueness is shunned (enter any middle school to witness this in action), they are likely to be ridiculed, bullied, and ostracized.

Most of the students in my 2010 class grappled with social challenges and many were



PHOTO COURTESY OF ROBIN FOX

## 5 BENEFITS OF USING IMPROV FOR SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING



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### 1. IT TEACHES STUDENTS TO BE MINDFUL AND PRESENT

The activities and exercises require focus as participants Listen, Look, and Act on Purpose by responding to what is being said and done rather than executing a pre-planned idea.



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### 2. THEY LEARN EMPATHY AND HEART-BASED LIVING

Students learn to embrace making mistakes as part of life and learning. In doing so, they become kinder to themselves and to others in the group, who are challenging themselves to grow, too.

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autistic. Intellectually, they knew what social behaviors were expected of them, and knew that they weren't meeting those expectations. Their faces and body language revealed their discouragement. As their restlessness and boredom mounted, I knew I needed to find a way to reach them.

We were learning the concept of *whole body listening*, which meant listening with their bodies still and their eyes on the speaker. Yet, they *could not keep their bodies still enough to listen*. They stretched, they scratched, they twisted, and turned away. Their discomfort became my discomfort.

To give them some relief, I veered off my lesson plan and offered them an improvisation game called

*Clap it Out*. That's when my worlds collided in the most surprising and advantageous way. I remember so vividly because, for a moment, time stood still as I watched my mind being blown.

I turned toward the student next to me and asked him to clap at the same exact time as I clapped. He then turned to the person next to him and clapped in sync with him. The clap passed around the circle and came back to me.

"Again!" they yelled. *What? Could this be happening??* Are my resistant students shouting to play more together? At that moment, I realized *I could use improvisation games to teach social connection and awareness*.

My students didn't grasp the concept of *whole body listening* by traditional methods, but *Clap it Out* is a deceptively simple way to teach that skill. It works because players must focus with intention to execute the clap in sync with a partner. No time for stretching or scratching! They had to *look on purpose* and communicate non-verbally without pre-planning to get in sync. And they were having FUN.

My students on the spectrum love rules, which bring order and consistency. Without rules, the behaviors of others seem based on random, hidden agendas adding to the challenge of trying to make sense of social interactions. Improvisation exercises are rules-based, yet within those parameters, participants are free to use their impulses and

### 3. IT CREATES A SENSE OF BELONGING IN THE CLASSROOM

The therapeutic, applied improv activities and exercises draw everyone into the creative zone. As their imaginations lead them into new territory, students connect and bond in the shared experiences.

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### 4. STUDENTS LEARN IMPORTANT SOCIAL SKILLS

The foundational skills of improv are the very skills that build healthy relationships. Students learn to be flexible, attentive to others, resilient, emotionally aware, self-regulated, and kind, for starters!

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### 5. AND IT'S FUN!

Students watch each other and engage in scenes and exercises that bring out the funny. Laughing is a stress release, a bonding experience, and just plain feels great. Who doesn't want more of that?

ILLUSTRATIONS COURTESY OF ROBIN FOX

creative urges to let it rip. Since there are no mistakes in improv and everyone's a genius, my students on the spectrum find that, with improvisation, they finally have a safe haven where they can wholeheartedly express themselves. This discovery led to the most important pivots of my career.

**“Since there are no mistakes in improv and everyone's a genius, my students on the spectrum find that, with improvisation, they finally have a safe haven where they can wholeheartedly express themselves.”**

After explaining how “Yes, and...” works and trying a couple of rounds, one of the boys exclaimed, “It’s a formula! You just have to repeat what the last person says and add on to it.”

It’s true that “Yes, and...” starts out formulaic. As children practice the “Yes, and...” strategy, the structure eventually becomes less rigid. The affirmations and additions become more natural, and the connections more fluid. The “Yes, and...” words eventually drop away altogether.

Since back-and-forth exchanges are confusing for people with social challenges, the “Yes, and...” exercise helps reinforce the basic skills needed for successful social interactions. It’s a first step in

learning that we use connecting comments to build a conversation by linking our thoughts to what other people are talking about. It’s another way of helping our kids learn that interaction has a pace and rhythm, and everyone can be part of the dance.

The comfort with social interactions which my students develop in our group sessions ripples out to other areas of their lives. Parents and teachers notice more resilience, playfulness, and flexibility. Students try out for school plays and become involved with other extracurricular opportunities. Their improved sense of self and confidence comes from knowing that they can have fun socially, be appreciated for who they are, and use a growth mindset to learn new ways of being in the world.

Since that pivotal day twelve years ago, my work has been infused with well-known and self-created improvisation activities, mindfulness exercises, and cognitive tools to help my students (and their teachers) manage emotions and build relationships. This includes writing anti-bullying lessons for Connecticut schools, authoring *SocialEyes Together* which embeds lessons with Applied Improvisation (AI) for groups of socially challenged students, and creating lesson plans that teach non-defensive communication, brain science, and safe gun storage, which are being piloted in high schools around the US. I lead professional development programs with teachers and supervise social improv groups Kindergarten to grade 12 in

schools. Incorporating AI in my work with educators and students has brought measurable results and joy to everyone involved.

Applying improvisation to teach SEL (Social-Emotional Learning) allows students to experience how successful relationships work within a supportive setting as they practice rule-based activities and exercises targeted to teach specific social objectives. Improvisation as the delivery system turns out to be rewarding, effective and most important to the students, enjoyable. Improvisation levels the playing field for students with autism to explore new ways of being social. “Yes, and...” they finally belong. ☺



ROBIN FOX

Robin Fox, B.A. Psychology, M.Ed., is a Social-Emotional Learning educator, consultant, speaker, and professional improv actor. She works with Connecticut's SEL Collaborative and partners with the CT Dept. of Education on SEL presentations and anti-bullying projects. Robin created *Trust Talk for Teens*, a non-defensive communication, brain science, and safe gun storage high school guide. Her book, *SocialEyes Together*®, helps socially challenged students navigate social/emotional challenges using Applied Improvisation, Mindfulness, and Social Cognition.

[www.social-eyes.org](http://www.social-eyes.org)

# Play to Learn: Using Improv to Boost Academic, Social-emotional, and Speaking Skills

Words by  
**KATE WIERSEMA**

Fifth-grade students think they are pretty cool. And, they aren't wrong. They *are* the oldest kids in the school. They understand sarcasm, are beginning to have more meaningful friendships, and have much better style than I ever will. Unfortunately, worrying about being cool comes with some downsides and one of these is the fear of looking foolish in front of your peers.

I remember standing in front of a room full of children and dying a thousand deaths waiting for someone to respond to a question. I kept saying, it doesn't matter if you are right, somebody please just try. That's when it hit me, these kids are scared of something that they have never experienced. And if the biggest

fear is fear itself, then it's time to face that fear of being *wrong*.

*Wrong Jeopardy* was the first game I looked at and said, "Man, this improv thing could really help kids." I have taught improv clubs and classes for over ten years. I have seen firsthand how great improv is for kids' self-esteem, problem-solving skills, and teamwork skills. However, this was the first time I realized that these games could be modified and played not for the sake of performance, but for the sake of education.

After utilizing games to improve social-emotional skills, I realized that games could be applied to other aspects of education. I started tinkering with performance improv games to modify them for use in classroom learning. Here are three games working on three different skill sets (social-emotional, academic, and speaking and listening). Take them! Play them! Yes, *and* away!

**Wrong Jeopardy**  
[youtube.com/  
watch?v=brO5XJa9Zo8](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=brO5XJa9Zo8)  
*How many people?* Three to five.

*How do you play?* The teacher picks the players and they stand in front of the audience. The teacher introduces the show and explains how this is the smartest group of people in the world. She then has each student make a 'ring-in' sound and introduce themselves. Students are encouraged to come up with a character that seems very smart. Example: *Rings in*. "Hello, my name is Dr. Elizabeth Smith. I have my law degree from Harvard and have never had a B in my life." The host gets questions that have one right answer that kindergarten students would know the answer to and asks them to the contestants, such as "What is one plus one?" or "What is the first letter of the alphabet?" Students ring in and answer the questions as incorrectly as possible. The teacher will react to the wrong answers and then at the end of each round, tell the correct answer. Rounds can last three to five questions, depending on the time limit.

*Link to social-emotional learning: develop self-awareness* – This game is all about confidence. I like playing this game at the beginning

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**"I realized that these games could be modified and played not for the sake of performance, but for the sake of education."**

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PHOTO COURTESY OF KATE WIERSEMA

of the year. After each round, I ask the students how they feel. Usually they say it was fun. I ask them to check and see if the Earth has swallowed them whole. The students will never be as wrong as they just were, so they should have no fear of answering a question wrong or asking a question in front of this group of students now.

*What have I noticed?* After playing this game, I have noticed that children are more confident in speaking in front of others. They are also more willing to volunteer answers.

**Dr. Know-it-all**  
[youtube.com/watch?v=FEExWGrnc6c](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FEExWGrnc6c)  
*How many people?* Three to six.

*How do you play?* Students stand in front of the audience in a

horizontal line. They will answer questions from the audience one word at a time. The teacher will help direct the students to answer. The best questions for these are how or why questions. Example: “Why is the sky blue?” When the students have finished the answer – or when the teacher thinks it is time – they are encouraged to take a bow.

*Link to academics: restate questions, write complete sentences* – This is one of my favorite games to teach students how to restate a question. In many types of testing, students must answer questions in complete sentences, restating the question. Before you play this game, review the steps of how to restate a question. Example: If the question is, ‘Why is the sky blue?’ you would start the answer with, “The sky is blue because....”

*What have I noticed?* When talking about writing responses, I can reference this game and students will remember that we have to restate questions.

**Conducted Story**  
[youtube.com/watch?v=S7WCnh3OmHM](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=S7WCnh3OmHM)  
*How many people?* Three to six.

*How do you play?* The teacher pulls three to six students to the front of the room. He then gets a suggestion of a story that has never been written. Once the teacher chooses a title, he will explain to the students that only one person will be speaking at a time. When he points at the student, the student starts telling the story. When the teacher wants that student to stop talking, he cuts them off like a conductor does to an orchestra. Then, the teacher points to another student. This student must

pick up exactly where the last student left off, be it at the end of a sentence or in the middle of a word. The teacher can jump around in the story, adding information or getting additional suggestions to integrate from the audience.

*Link to speaking and listening: comprehension and collaboration*  
– Students will need to listen actively to each other to make sure they continue the story. For older or more advanced students, the teacher could do eliminations based on students not repeating what was said before, but just

naturally going in. For example, if one student said, “And then the boy ran towards...” and the next person repeated, “The boy ran towards,” an elimination would occur.

*What have I noticed?* Students can reference the parts of a story when reading and writing. They can tell me important elements that come in each part. ☺



KATE WIERSEMA

Kate Wiersema lives in the south suburbs of Chicago. She has been a special education teacher for over 13 years. Kate is an ensemble member at ComedySportz Chicago and the Artistic Director of South of Chi Productions. She is currently working on her first book about using improv in the classroom.

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PHOTO COURTESY OF KATE WIERSEMA

# Increase Empathy & Mindfulness with Improvisation in Undergraduate Education

Words by

DIANA DEPASQUALE

I was assigned to teach *Critical Thinking About Great Ideas* during the spring 2021 semester. I decided to build the course around the foundational principles of long form improvisation to give students opportunities to use improvisation in their daily lives and help them communicate more effectively, be more open to others, and develop their empathy and creativity. Although I taught at the university level for a decade and I am one of the founders of Glass City Improv in Toledo, Ohio, I had never designed a course this way. During the pandemic, I offered free Zoom classes for people looking for ways to feel more connected to, and present with others through mutual support and affirmation using improv games and exercises. I also teach Applied Improvisation to organizations across northwest Ohio. I show leaders how to use the foundational principles of improvisation to promote creativity and collaboration, mutual agreement and acceptance of ideas, and the development of trust, confidence, and cohesion among their teams.

I was inspired in part by reading Don Waisanen's *Improv for Democracy* (State University of New York, 2020). Waisanen's text strongly suggests improv-based teaching and training

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**“Our community of thoughtful learners explored how empathy is developed and strengthened across coalitions, and how we can find innovative solutions to complex problems through enthusiastic collaboration.”**

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methods can bridge differences and promote communication, leadership, and civil skills. Using this text as our anchor, our community of thoughtful learners explored how empathy is developed and strengthened across coalitions, and how we can find innovative solutions to complex problems through enthusiastic collaboration. Assignments were developed around identification of personal values and how they align with the choices we make every day, how to live a life with purpose and meaning, and development of communication skills and perspective-taking through storytelling. I also built in opportunities for cooperative play with *BaFa' BaFa'* and *Where Do You Draw the Line?*, two board games dependent on spontaneity and cooperative game play.

One of the greatest things I've learned from improv is how to relinquish the fear of failure and develop my resilience. All the assignments were posted on our classroom management learning system in a discussion thread for each week. In one writing prompt I asked students to reflect on their failures and successes. In particular, instances when they took bold risks and what they learned from the experience. In other words, I wanted students to think about the skills and techniques they'd need to use in their role as a student leader on campus or in their future career or vocation, or even as a friend, spouse, or caretaker. It was a goal of mine to remind my students it can be easy to feel alone when things don't work out as planned but improvisation can give us the skills to adapt and pivot when the unexpected happens.

Students were not aware until a few days before class that the class would be centered around improvisation. On the first day of class many students revealed their fear of failing at not getting it "right" and a few didn't want to engage. An overwhelming majority of my students also revealed their struggles with anxiety and depression either in class or in emails to me. Taking both of these into consideration, I knew I had an opportunity to give students



PHOTO COURTESY OF KATE WIERSEMA

techniques to accept and support each other, and affirm their partners' choices through active listening and agreement. We played lots of games in class, but what follows are the ones that made the most impact.

Once we started playing *Zip Zap Zap* everyone became engaged! I built in the rule that if a player messes up we all shout, "Hurray!" at the top of our lungs. While faculty teaching nearby may not have appreciated this, my students absolutely did. *Zip Zap Zap* is irresistible to use for beginners because of its ease and likability, but I also explain to students that *Zip Zap Zap* is all about being in the moment. You can't "catch" a *Zip* from someone if you're in your head thinking about something you regret from the past or planning for a future mistake you're sure you'll make. Staying alert and paying attention to the members of the group is what makes *Zip Zap Zap* so immediately fun! And when anyone makes a mistake, we celebrate it, and move on with the game. No one is made to feel like they failed at their task.

Another game which requires active listening is *One-word Story*, and as we formed our 22-person circle, I didn't explain much. I just told everyone to add a word of their own without thinking about it too long. My goal was to encourage spontaneity and diminish harsh judgment of their own contributions to the story. Once again, the circle came alive quickly and our stories went several rounds before reaching their end. Quite often we knew the story was over when we were laughing so hard it became hard to hear each other.

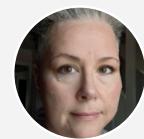
I also made sure to include games that required silent cooperation among students. *The Line Up Game* is perfect for this. I explain they

need to line up in order of birth date without speaking to each other, giving them only a few minutes to assemble. Giving them the go-ahead, I watched students using their fingers and hands to establish months and days, and then walk closer to, or farther away from each other. Some students approach it seriously, some are laughing, but everyone is involved, either in the silent consideration of the data, or in the moving back and forth between players. At first glance, requiring silence makes it more difficult, but it asks them to use different skills in communication that are a delight to see in action! I watched them use facial expressions to indicate agreement, and hand signals to represent days or months. Some students would take the information and run to the front, back or middle of the line and begin the process with a new group in a new location relative to their birthday. I have students use this as an opportunity to become aware of themselves in relation to others and how to find their connection to each other.

Finally, the game I used in the classroom that I found most useful for my students and myself is called *Change in Motion* and works well with a big group for reasons that should become obvious. I begin by asking students to walk around in no particular direction or path. In fact, it's best to wander here and there amongst each other. I explain that there are only two things to do: walk and stop. They begin walking when I call, "Walk!" and stop walking when I call, "Stop!" After we do that for several successful rounds, I explain that we're going to flip it; when I say "walk" they should stop walking and when I say "stop" they should walk. It's clumsy the first time, but they quickly get in-tune. I then add two new words: "name" and "jump." As you might guess, when I say "name" they shout their first name and when I say "jump" they hop in place. As

we did before, after a few rounds we switch up to jumping when I say "name" and saying their name when I say "jump." We've now got four words to listen for: *jump, name, walk* and *stop*. I add more words - *clap* and *twist* - and we continue as before, eventually switching *clap* for *twist* and vice versa. Students laugh even when they get it wrong and that's the point. In order for students to feel comfortable with risk, they need a safety net and that's what my class provided.

For me, teaching this class helped me create a bridge between my work as an improviser and an educator. This was something I was hesitant to try for a long while, but the results could not be denied. The feedback for this class was far and away the most positive I've ever received in my decade of teaching. The overwhelming majority of students offered that they had learned to be more spontaneous and comfortable in their skin, felt more meaningfully connected to their peers, and gained confidence and self-assuredness. I would encourage anyone involved in teaching to bring improvisation into your classroom. It creates such a strong sense of community for your students, and regardless of the subject matter, you get to share the power of Applied Improvisation. ☺



DIANA DEPASQUALE

Diana DePasquale trained and performed in New York City at the Upright Citizens Brigade, Peoples Improv Theater, and Magnet Theater. Diana performed in the Chicago Improv Festival, Del Close Marathon, and Kalamazoo Improv Festival. In 2018 she co-founded Glass City Improv in Toledo, Ohio where she taught college courses on American culture and identity. Her scholarship on improvisation has been published in *Studies in American Humor* and on the Society for Cinema and Media Studies' podcast, *Aca-Media*.



# BOOKSHELF

Books are more patient than most people. They understand us and bind us together as authors, readers and reviewers. They break the shackles of locale and time. In this issue, we have author Susanne Schinko-Fischli introducing her timely *Learning Social Skills Virtually*, while Paul Z Jackson introduces his *Easy* way and reviews a few books in the currently nicely developed AI Bookshelf.

# Learning Social Skills Virtually

Words by

SUSANNE SCHINKO-FISCHLI

**Title:** Learning Social Skills Virtually: Using Applied Improvisation to Enhance Teamwork, Creativity and Storytelling

**Publisher:** Routledge (December 15, 2021)

**Paperback:** 104 page

Before the COVID-19 pandemic, I never thought it was possible to work online with Applied Improvisation (AI)! In March 2020, I had the choice to stop earning money or to try working online. To my surprise, the latter can be just as successful as in person. These days, I work up to one third of my time online and accept assignments from all over the world.

Over the recent few years, digital workshops and meetings have established a firm foothold. My book, *Learning Social Skills Virtually*, demonstrates how online workshops and meetings can be just as interactive, varied and enjoyable as face-to-face events. Improvisational theater methods are surprisingly well suited for online use and can elicit the liveliness, playful levity, and co-creativity that are often lacking in digital lessons and meetings.

The book consists of the following chapters:

1. Introduction: I begin by introducing AI and its online possibilities. I'm preaching to the choir when I mention to this magazine's readers that AI is

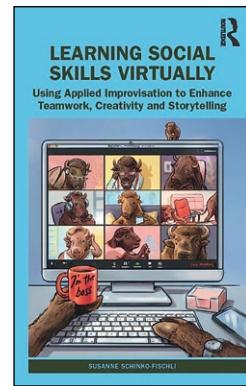
one of the best methods to convey social competencies offline and online!

2. Creativity: In the second chapter, I explore online communication for creativity and co-creativity. Improvisational theater is at its core, real teamwork, and therefore, offers a large pool of exercises that promote and strengthen team cohesion. It is more challenging, but still possible to build openness and trust in teamwork online.

3. Storytelling: Improvisational theater is always about storytelling. When improvisers say, "yes, and..." they are guided by how well a story is constructed. Our brain loves stories. When managers, scientists or politicians want to reach their audience, the best way is to wrap their message in a story right from the start. This chapter is about how stories and heroes' journeys are structured and what exercises can be used online to train storytelling.

4. Status: Status involves non-verbal and verbal signals' potential effects on our social influence. Although we can only see parts of our bodies online, the topic of status still plays an unchanged major role. The aim of all online and offline status exercises is to increase our status flexibility, in order to adapt our status behavior to the situation at hand.

5. Practical Examples: In the last chapter, I delve into three online workshops for different organizations and describe actual scenarios from these workshops. Several chapters throughout the book end with a collection of exercises for online use.



This book is for everyone — facilitators, coaches, teachers, and leaders — who are seeking new inspiration for their digital workshops and meetings, and who aspire to expand the variety of their online methods. It offers new perspectives on many "soft skill" topics and supports interactive, engaging, lively and productive online learning.

My fellow Applied Improvisation community, I hope you continue to have fun and success working with Applied Improvisation online and offline and I would love to hear from you! 



SUSANNE SCHINKO-FISCHLI

Susanne Schinko-Fischli studied psychology and acting at the University of Vienna and the University of California, San Diego. Since 2004, she has been an independent trainer, with a focus on and passion for the methods of Applied Improvisation. As a trainer in the areas of social skills, storytelling, teamwork and creativity, she works online and offline for well-known organizations in Europe. She is also the author of the book *Applied Improvisation for Coaches and Leaders* (Routledge, 2018).

[cocreative.ch/en](http://cocreative.ch/en)

# Improvisation as an Easy LIFE PASS

Words by  
**PAUL Z JACKSON**

*Download and discover Easy: Your LIFE PASS to Creativity and Confidence by Paul Z Jackson, with illustrations by Angelina Castellini*

In a complex world of constant hustle, finding simplicity and ease appears to be an unattainable dream. I set out to challenge that notion, by drawing on the practical wisdom from improvisation. I aimed to show how improvisation tenets reveal the path to an easier life.

First I had to organize those tenets. If you ask 12 improvisers for the principles, rules or guidelines to improvisation, you'll get a dozen lists. And while some differences may be cosmetic or 'merely semantics', key tenets are contested, while others convey significantly different meanings. 'Yes, and...', for example, makes most lists, but generates much discussion as to what it entails.

Even more challenging is that most writing about improvisation has centered on theatrical improv, and it's clear that not everything you might tell a performer in the safety of a workshop will translate without further thought into useful advice for a world of greater stakes and infinitely more purposes. Context matters and this is the Applied Improvisation community.

I also wanted my list to be

comprehensive, touching on all aspects of improvisation. Oh, and one more ask: wrap it all up in a memorable acronym.

Early contenders for the acronym included STARTREK, and I eventually settled on LIFE PASS.

My ambition was to explain the heart of what's distinctive and important about improvisation with these principles:

Let Go  
Inhabit the Moment  
Freedom within Structure  
Embrace Uncertainty  
Play to Play  
Accept and Build  
Short Turn Taking  
Spot Successes

You can read the details and sense-check my selection by downloading the book for free ([tiny.cc/aim002-easy](http://tiny.cc/aim002-easy)).

What sets Easy apart from other improvisation books is the presupposition that everyone already has plenty of skill and experience as an improviser. We all improvise every day. We are good at it.

So instead of addressing readers from an expert perspective with an author's new and somewhat arcane set of skills that the readers need to learn, it helps you to

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**"Easy helps you to rearrange what you already know. It articulates a framework within which to make sense of life's experiences, and offers activities to develop skills further."**

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rearrange what you already know. It articulates a framework within which to make sense of life's experiences, and offers activities to develop skills further.

And because these are important life skills such as resilience, presence, confidence and creativity, the approach is direct, rather than via the admittedly well-stocked cupboard of theatrically-based exercises, which are exhaustively covered in many other improv books (including my own *58½ Ways*



*to Improvise in Training: Improvisation Games and Activities for Workshops, Courses and Team Meetings*). By non-theatrical, I mean there's no need to assume an audience or any role other than yourself.

Reflecting on what's happened since publication, I notice that the world has experienced a pandemic, which interrupted all our plans and reminded us just how improvisational life can be. Perhaps people will more readily appreciate the pragmatic value of approaching it via an improvisational lens such as LIFEPASS.

Improvisation can be central and practical, not only for when things go wrong or depart from the plan, but as first choice when it's going steadily (so we can respond to bumps along the way) and – for maximum added value – to make the most of peak performance and flow states when it's going well.

By responding skillfully to what's around us, we can pay attention to what's most salient. We can inhabit the moment to adapt to change and lead others more effectively. It's no surprise that the ideas in *Easy* are now applied increasingly in the world's most innovative and successful organizations. And we can expect that to continue as we assert our human capabilities in a rising tide of automation and artificial intelligence – the other AI.

*Easy* offers numerous benefits that transcend the book's pages. By embracing improvisation, readers can:

- Enhance problem-solving skills: Through the power of simple co-creation, readers gain a practical toolkit to tackle complex challenges with ease and creativity
- Improve productivity and collaboration: Actionable strategies to simplify work processes, fostering a more efficient and harmonious work environment
- Cultivate personal well-being: By incorporating ease into everyday life, readers can reduce stress, find balance, and increase overall well-being
- Unlock hidden potential: The book inspires readers towards creativity and innovation, allowing them to uncover new possibilities in their personal and professional endeavors

Readers of the book responded most positively:

*"Humanitarian work is becoming impossibly demanding. It seems too difficult to absorb and process changing threats. How can we rapidly think and act under so much pressure and uncertainty? It is actually doable and enjoyable, if you embrace applied improvisation – shared so eloquently and accessibly by Paul Z Jackson in 'Easy'. I recommend this book to all who aim to facilitate processes of learning and dialogue in a way that is both serious and fun."*

– Pablo Suarez, Associate director for research and innovation, Red Cross Red Crescent Climate Centre

*"The book's concept – to use improvisation for business and LIFE – is inspired and important."*

– Patricia Ryan Madson, author of *Improv Wisdom*.

So, now exclusively for AIM readers, you can get into the action by downloading your copy here: 

DOWNLOAD



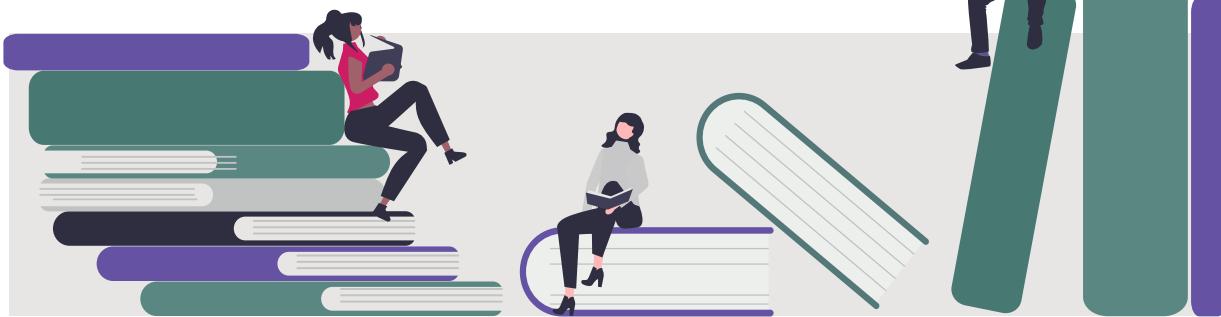
PAUL Z JACKSON

Paul Z Jackson is editorial advisor and editor of the Applied Improvisation Magazine and author of books about improvisation, including *Impro Learning, 58½ Ways To Improvise In Training* and *Easy: Your LIFEPASS to Creativity and Confidence*. He is co-founder and a long-serving board member of the AIN. Paul lives in Oxford, UK.

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# The AI Bookshelf is Developing Nicely – *and there's room for a whole lot more!*

Words by  
PAUL Z JACKSON



There are many books about improvisation, mostly about theatrical improv. And now the bookshelf for Applied Improvisation (AI) is expanding rapidly, probably at a rate making it increasingly unlikely for anyone to be able to read everything.

What is this bookshelf? First and non-metaphorically, I have dozens of printed books accumulated to accompany my first purchase on the topic, Keith Johnstone's *Improv*.

Then there are fan lists curated by our colleagues such as this Goodreads page from Bright Su: ([goodreads.com/list/show/180991](https://www.goodreads.com/list/show/180991)) And Theodore Klein's collection: ([tiny.cc/aim002-bsg](https://tiny.cc/aim002-bsg))

Going beyond books to other media resources, you could dip into this handy guide, also from our esteemed editor, Bright Su: ([tiny.cc/aim002-mir](https://tiny.cc/aim002-mir))

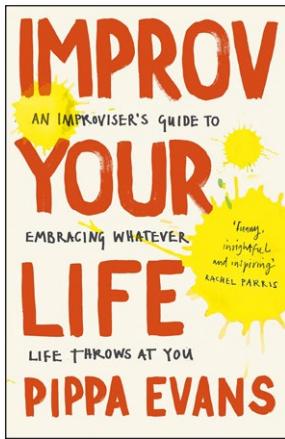
Today's article is based on a more modest trawl of my Kindle collection, searching for titular keywords such as 'Improv,' 'Presence' and 'Yes.' This turned up 35 entries, about half of which I'd purchased, with the remainder free samples. I've dipped into all of them and read several. I must confess that they tend to blur into each other after a while.

If we eliminate those purely about improv as performance and focus on applications of improvisation, here are my notes on apparent trends and observations on a few of the most interesting.

Overall, it seems we are getting the kinds of titles we'd hope for on a bookshelf about AI, such as applications in particular contexts such as schools, creative organizations or medical practice.

What's disappointing is that the contents too often fall short of a theory, a thought-through approach to getting beyond the stage, or even a perspective regarding improvisation for life or work. They tend to make a case in favour of applying improvisation – well, OK, but I'm persuaded anyway – and offer a long list of activities with which any theatrical improviser will already be familiar.

Among the titles presenting attractive topics are *Improv Your Life* (2021) by British performer and social activist Pippa Evans;



*Executive Presence – Improv Style!* (2013) by long-time West Coast AINer Lisa Safran; and Seattle-based Sage Cameron's *Improv: Wisdom Without Thinking for an Eventful and Luxurious Social Life!* (2016).

I swiftly warmed to Cameron when I read the section distinguishing performance improv from Applied Improvisation:

*“Although improv is mostly popular as a form of theatrical approach, its concepts and disciplines have been used in a lot of non-theater industries and practices, generally called Applied Improvisation. Improvisation Outside of the Stage. Although improvisation relies heavily on being spontaneous and being ‘in the moment,’ there are a set of principles and skills that improvisers follow to create an effective ‘improvised’ show. These same set of principles are now being utilized and applied in different fields to encourage spontaneity and adaptability. According to Paul Z Jackson, President of the Applied Improvisation Network, ‘applying the concepts of improvisation in organizations can help in*

**“I wonder if there’s yet an agreed set of principles or a theory of change that pertains offstage and on.”**

*improving leadership, management, communication, teamwork, and cooperation. It is a useful tool in adapting to change and complexity and it brings out better results as it boosts an individual’s courage, energy, and creativity. Improvisation concepts help in developing a person’s confidence to face complex scenarios by being aware of their own self and their own surroundings, trusting their intuition and creativity, thinking outside the box, and responding on the drop of a dime.”*

Great to be quoted, though I wonder if there’s yet an agreed set of principles or a theory of change that pertains offstage and on.

He continues,

*“This is helpful in today’s modern and fast-paced world where people are expected to be flexible and responsive to any given situation! Numerous companies are now applying the concepts and disciplines of improvisation in running their organizations. These disciplines train leaders and managers on how to efficiently manage a group and maximize their potential. Results have shown that applied improvisation teaches authentic communication, creative negotiation, empathy, quick thinking, and camaraderie. With these, a wider range of options and possibilities are discovered without going all over the place. The growth in a company*



*or individual will be exponential as a direct result of using Improvisational concepts!”*

Nicely put, and though the bulk of the book is quite simple and beginner-ish, it's well organized and highlights a crucial difference between guidance for stage improv and wisdom for life: “As a common improv adage when it comes to raising the stakes goes: ‘Don’t solve the problem, live in it!’” That makes for good drama, whereas in life we’d rather solve the problem as easily as possible, so we can get on with things – so of course the precepts for good improvised drama will not carry over directly as precepts for real-life applications.

Max Dickins, from London’s Hoopla stable, has also made a

**“One of the best tests of writing about Applied Improvisation is how much sense it contains on the topics of failure and mistakes.”**

stretch into adding something new in *Improvise!* (2020). He gets some way there with the insight that “‘Yes, and’ simply requires you to be solution-focused rather than problem-focused.” His “small-steps” and “turn-taking” recommendation to “bring a brick, not a cathedral” transfers well from stage to life. He explains why play space needs special protective rules to reduce the perception of risk.

One of the best tests of writing about Applied Improvisation is how much sense it contains on the topics of failure and mistakes, which are traditionally welcomed in improv circles, whilst typically being unwanted (compared, say, to getting as much as possible right and enjoying success) in most of our lives.

Dickins, while still ultimately in thrall to stage improv’s failure fetish, gets closer than many to abandoning the faulty logic. He notes that over-egging a response to failure is redundant: “All they want to know is that their failure is normal.”

He explains how lots of practice enables a graphic artist to improve their results. But it’s false to conclude, “We have to do it and get it wrong in order to learn how to do it right.” We do, certainly, have to have a go to acquire a new skill. But we might get it right from the outset, and appreciate how the learning comes from the successes not the mistakes. If we are cooking, many of us can follow a new recipe, carry out the

steps to order, then memorise how to do it for next time. Similarly, the draughtsman’s improvements come from retaining the more accurate strokes and discarding the false steps.

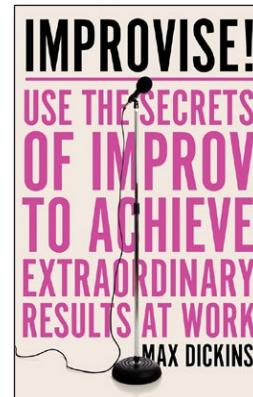
It’s fascinating how improv writers – even the more thoughtful such as Dickins – will distort their arguments to retain the rose-tinted view of failure. Notice how this next example by Dickins describes choice, redundancy and care in the process, and is not actually a description of failure at all: “Finally, you need to be able to tolerate an awful lot of failure along the way. For example, according to Ed Catmull, Pixar co-founder and former president, it takes roughly 12,000 storyboard drawings to make one 90-minute Pixar movie. But, due to the iterative nature of their development process, the Pixar story teams commonly create ten times that number of drawings to get it right. Pixar is one of the most creative organizations on the planet and they throw away 9/10 of their ideas. The takeaway is clear: volume wins, waste is normal, and creativity starts with saying ‘yes, and...’”

It’s a hell of a stretch to describe the discarded drawings in a planned iteration as “failures.” How about an example of a simple, unarguable failure, such as a movie that results in a studio going bust, or a performer not turning up for a scheduled show?

Likewise, he equates “failure and mistakes” with not going to plan, when he writes, “Then get them to share something that didn’t go to

plan and what they learned from it. And have the room literally applaud it. This little ritual is a great way to get people into the habit of reflecting on and learning from failure. Most of all, it has the effect of destigmatising mistakes and therefore changing people’s attitudes to risk.” Of course, there are all sorts of reasons beyond mistakes why things don’t go to plan. It’s precisely the unpredictability of complex, adaptive systems such as organizational life that makes improvisation a first-choice stance.

That’s what makes it worthwhile to draw stronger conclusions from evidence. For example, Dickins writes, “If you don’t know what to do (and there is no best practice example to follow), then you should keep trying stuff until you find the answer. But it’s important to emphasise that the goal is not to fail, the goal is to succeed. We don’t want to simply fail more. We want to move from failure to success as quickly as possible. In order to do that we have to fail faster.” Surely the final sentence should instead be, “We want to



identify the fastest 'succeader'."

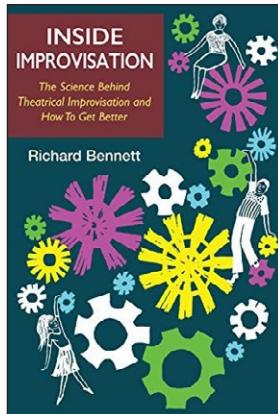
A switch of focus from failure to success would support the key insight of Richard Bennett's *Inside Improvisation: The Science Behind Theatrical Improvisation and How To Get Better* (2019). Bennett states, "Improvisation is an awesome evolutionary mind hack," which sets the scene for a fascinating trawl through history, making distinctions between different schools of improv and putting AI into context.

This is astute: "Yet many of the exercises we use today in improvisation, teach us both spontaneity and scene progression at the same time, making them difficult to use in other non-theatrical domains without being adapted in some way. For example, a scene painting exercise will help with spontaneity, scene initiation and scene progression skills. The spontaneity aspect may be useful for training improvising jazz musicians for example however the visualisation and storytelling aspects may not. Recognising this gives us insight into how theatrical improvisation exercises can be adapted into other domains including applied improvisation."

It's a pioneering book, worth reading despite (or perhaps because of) its muddled mix of sense and nonsense; acute perception and irritating repetition (where was the editor when needed?).

Typically, he'll make an accurate observation, followed by a bold

and ridiculous claim, which I guess he needs to justify his obsession with brain science. For example, "With the increased use of applied improvisation — improvisation used as a tool for life, business or other creative endeavours — the way improvisation is taught is changing. Eventually, teaching the first principles won't begin with being in the moment, being fearless, and playing classic theatre games and exercises while facing out behind the fourth wall. The first principles will soon be what happens in our brains, and how that leads to and supports spontaneity and improvisation."



Absolutely no need to drag neuroscience in here. I'd think it considerably more likely that the first principles will be derived from what we observe of improvisation in the applied settings.

So, what have we discovered? Well, there's a lot to read, either

**"...the bookshelf still has plenty of room for your contributions"**

to learn more about the basics or to prompt discussion and even argument from the more experienced practitioners. And for writers, a message that the bookshelf still has plenty of room for your contributions — especially if you are a clear and original thinker, with insight into the significant differences between the safety of an improv workshop and the higher stakes environments of personal and organizational lives. ☺

**Executive Presence-  
Improv Style!**



A Guide to Improvising Your Way into Executive Presence!

Lisa Safran, MA



**PAUL Z JACKSON**

Paul Z Jackson is editorial advisor and editor of the Applied Improvisation Magazine and author of books about improvisation, including *Impro Learning*, *58½ Ways To Improvise In Training* and *Easy: Your LIFEPASS to Creativity and Confidence*. He is co-founder and a long-serving board member of the AIN. Paul lives in Oxford, UK.

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# EVERYTHING ELSE



In this section, we cast a wide net to include any matter in the world of Applied Improvisation that doesn't fit in other sections. This time we visit the AIN's historic journey as an organization, improvise our job interview and grow our intelligence on the legal aspects of running a business.

# AIN: Our Journey

## *Over 20 Years of Bringing Applied Improvisers Together*

Words by  
JOEL VEENSTRA

Improvisation, like life, is ephemeral. Applied Improvisation (AI) practitioners know that utilizing improvisational principles can produce successful spontaneity and collaboration. Yet it can be difficult to accurately capture, document, and articulate this process of facilitating lightning in a bottle. And the same is true of trying to capture the history and scope of the Applied Improvisation Network (AIN).

From the beginning, the improvisational ideals of spontaneity, discovery, innovation, and generosity were embedded in the organization. Three presenters, Paul Z Jackson (England), Michael Rosenburg (Canada), and Alain Rostain (USA) discovered each other presenting at the International Alliance for Learning Conference in 2001. With each approaching AI from a different lens, they inspired and challenged one another to refine their work. After the conference, they created a 'Bulletin Board' listserv for like-minded individuals to connect, leading to a gathering at Dr. Sivasailam "Thiagi" Thiagarajan's North American Simulation and Gaming Association (NASAGA) Conference in 2002. Momentum was building with roughly 35 participants, but this new stream threatened to overwhelm NASAGA, who encouraged them to create their own organization. While the initial focus was improvisation applied within a business context, they soon

discovered individuals applying improvisation to a wide range of fields including personal development, education, healthcare, performance, and humanitarian social change.

AIN has grown exponentially over the past two decades as practitioners continue to collaboratively support each other. The biggest community touchstone is the annual (or bi-annual) conference(s). Planning and production of these live events are emblematic of AI principles, including utilizing Open Space Technology (OST) as a foundational element. Each year improvisational trailblazers and special guests are honored; these have included Keith Johnstone, Aretha Sills (for Spolin/Sills), Colin Mochrie, Mick Napier, Armando Diaz, Adrian Jackson (for Augusto Boal), Ed Greenburg and Randy Dixon (for Del Close), Thiagi, and Alan Alda (for Stony Brook University's Alan Alda Center for Communicating Science). The relationships formed at these conferences have fueled innovation amongst the facilitators, who remain generous with their knowledge and opportunities.

Beyond the in-person events, mini-conferences, retreats, and roadshows, applied improvisers also continue to connect via technology. For example, weekly online Open Space provided an essential point of community, support, and guidance on how to navigate the world remotely within a month of the global pandemic shut-

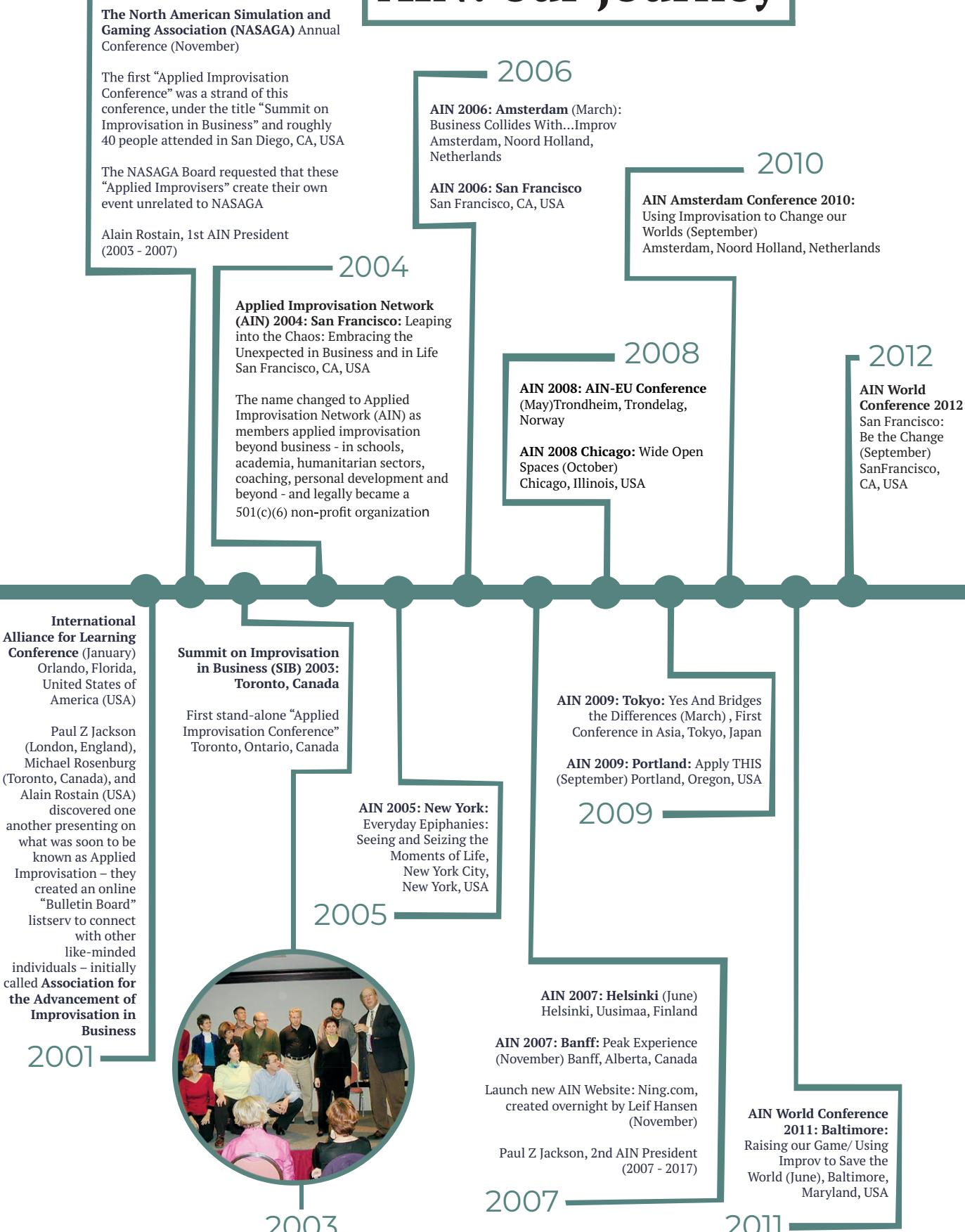
down and continues to do so today. AIN resources have grown, including an extensive Facebook Group (with 8000+ individuals), a YouTube channel (featuring years of AIN content), Zoom events, and AIN Watch Parties.

The Mentorship program and Mastermind groups align seasoned practitioners with those who need guidance in developing their professional practice. Research continues to expand in validating and codifying AI practices, including AIN's 2014 Delphi Study. And in March 2023, AIN launched its first publication, the Applied Improvisation Magazine, to document and share the value of its work.

So many people have discovered their community within AIN over the past 20 years, and the network continues to grow, innovate, and elevate Applied Improvisation. What started as an organic group of like-minded individuals has developed into a diverse professional network of over 600 active members who call each other colleagues and friends. While "what comes next?" will always be the main question, it is equally valuable to reflect on what brought us to this point to help guide us into the future.

Special thanks to Paul Z Jackson, Angelina Castellini, Ed Reggi, Barbara Tint, Theresa Robbins Dudeck, Yael Schy, Sue Walden, and the AIN Community for your support in making this article and community possible. ☮

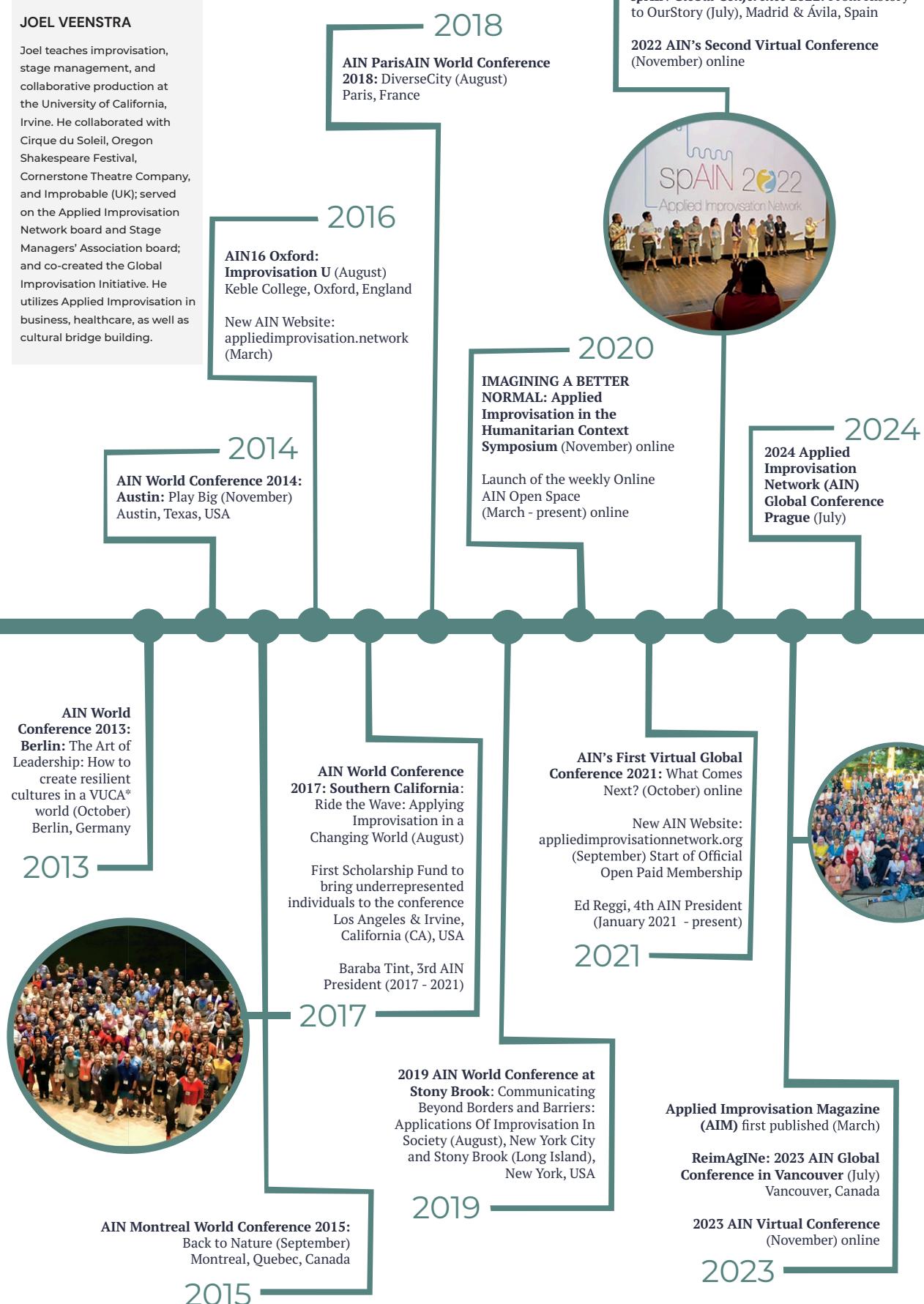
# AIN: our journey





## JOEL VEENSTRA

Joel teaches improvisation, stage management, and collaborative production at the University of California, Irvine. He collaborated with Cirque du Soleil, Oregon Shakespeare Festival, Cornerstone Theatre Company, and Improbable (UK); served on the Applied Improvisation Network board and Stage Managers' Association board; and co-created the Global Improvisation Initiative. He utilizes Applied Improvisation in business, healthcare, as well as cultural bridge building.



# Improvise Your Interview

Words by  
**VINCE RICCI**

A pivotal moment in my life occurred during a Kellogg Business School interview, where I stumbled and failed to convey my true potential. Despite my interviewer's repeated requests for a story showcasing my leadership skills in a non-authoritative role, I found myself fixated on recounting instances where I held prestigious titles such as Director or President. It was not due to a lack of preparation but rather my failure to truly listen. Looking back, I realize I was avoiding her unexpected question because I was afraid of improvising.

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**“I guide my clients to perceive interruptions as unexpected gifts and view each unanticipated question as an opportunity for them to shine.”**

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Since that fateful day, I have applied my improvisation experience to empower individuals in their quest for success in job and admission interviews. Since 2002, I have helped hundreds of clients who seek admission to prestigious colleges and graduate schools or aspire to advance their careers through internships or jobs. Through this work, I have developed strategies that consistently yield favorable interview outcomes. For example, drawing on

improv insights, I guide my clients to perceive interruptions as unexpected gifts and view each unanticipated interview question as an opportunity for them to shine.

As an admissions expert, I have recently served as a board member of the Association of International Graduate Admissions Consultants (AIGAC), including a one-year tenure as President. AIGAC, in its 17-year history, has fostered trust and credibility, primarily through organizing annual conferences that facilitate meaningful interactions between admission directors from the world's top business schools. Most notably, our 2023 conference, hosted by Columbia Business School and the Yale School of Management, was a resounding success.

During these conferences, we actively seek input from admissions officers regarding their interview preferences and grievances. Remarkably, they consistently express their disdain for rehearsed responses, yearning instead for genuine conversations. Unfortunately, they often encounter over-rehearsed, robotic deliveries lacking emotion and authenticity. They genuinely want applicants to acknowledge the question at hand and take a moment to reflect on an example that answers the question behind the question.

In my earlier anecdote, my interviewer sought a story that exemplified my leadership abilities as a team member, regardless of my formal title. Regrettably, I





failed to grasp this nuance and instead regaled her with tales of my directorial and presidential triumphs.

A similar pitfall might arise in a job interview scenario when you are asked why you wish to join the organization. Rather than rattling off the three-minute list you have memorized, select one or two points that resonate with your sense of what your interviewer loves most about working there. Use the time to make connections. Most interviewers are trying to collect something other than new data. Often, they are trying to get to know the person behind the profile.

Admissions officers and hiring managers also mention how annoying it can be to interview applicants who need more self-awareness. It reminds me of Albert Mehrabian's well-known 7-38-55 Rule of Personal Communication. His research at UCLA postulates that when speakers' words diverge from their nonverbal cues, listeners tend to place greater trust in

**“What matters is your ability to engage in natural conversation.”**

the latter rather than the former. For instance, if someone were to utter, “I don’t have a problem with you!” while avoiding eye contact and exhibiting signs of anxiety, as suggested by Prof. Mehrabian’s findings, the receiver would base their interpretation predominantly on the nonverbal aspects (vocal tone 38% + facial expression 55%), rather than the mere 7% associated with the words themselves.

I have observed that those lacking self-awareness benefit significantly from practicing their responses in front of a mirror. This “Mirror Method” exercise allows my clients to visually and audibly witness their delivery of fundamental questions such as, “Tell me about yourself,” or “Why do you wish to join us?” Real-time feedback facilitates identifying and rectifying verbal, vocal, and visual pitfalls that might

impede their success. Once they demonstrate proficiency in handling typical questions and unexpected and behavioral queries, we engage in multiple mock interviews to refine their skills further.

In these mock interviews, I focus on asking deep and broad questions. Since clients tell me that answering unexpected questions can cause anxiety, I look for opportunities to ask follow-up and non-standard questions from a particular school. I encourage clients to record our mock interviews and review the videos between our sessions. Over multiple sessions, I build up their confidence. As I tell my clients, interviewing is physical. I compare it to sports. One must master the basics, play scrimmages (with me or another professional coach), and then show up comfortably for the interview, ready for anything.

It’s common to think that an interview is about sharing our best stories, but it is actually more about connecting with the interviewer. What matters is your ability to engage in natural conversation. Instead of trying to speak more eloquently, try listening more deeply and waking up to the gifts. Let’s begin. ☺



VINCE RICCI

Vince Ricci helps college and graduate school applicants find and tell their best stories. A leading admissions consultant since 2002, Vince was president of The Association of International Graduate Admissions Consultants (AIGAC). As an Applied Improvisation coach, he offers online and in-person *Games for Creative Living* courses in California and Japan.

# Trademarks, Copyrights, and IP...oh My!

Words by  
**JOEY NOVICK**

I have attended a bunch of AIN conferences and conducted informal “legal clinics” for speakers and facilitators during the Open Spaces. The top question is always: *“How can I protect the work I have created?”* Great question! While each matter is naturally sensitive to the specific facts, I can offer you a map to guide you in your business planning.

Intellectual property (commonly referred to as IP) refers to creations of the mind: In our field of Applied Improvisation (AI), your IP is your workshops, programs, books, articles, recordings, slides – anything that is your own unique and original creation.

You can protect your work in two ways: by registering your trademark and registering your copyright. Let’s start with

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**“As an AI practitioner, once you have delivered a program, given a lecture, written an article or a book, it’s definitely time to plan to protect your creative work.”**

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definitions, so we know what we are talking about.

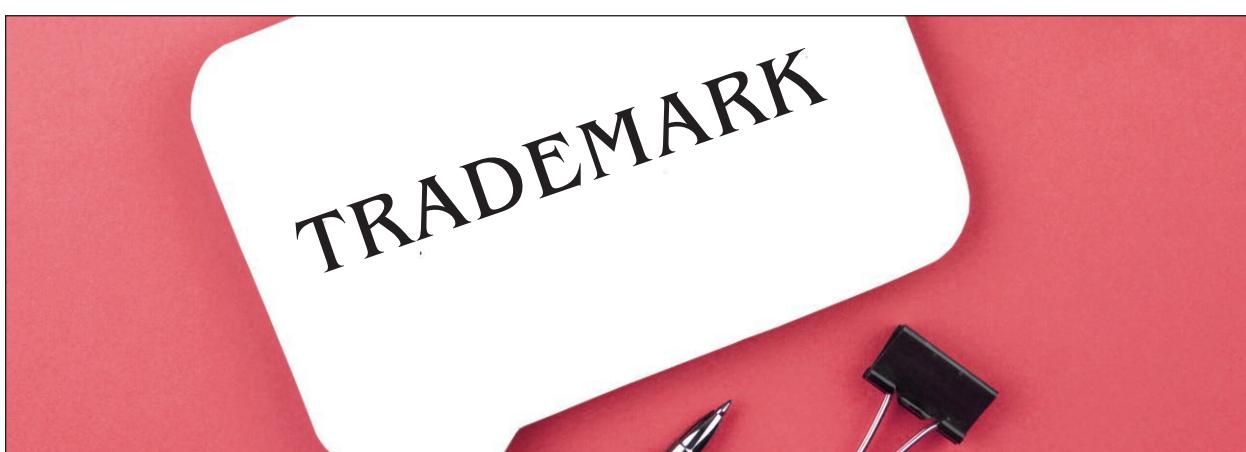
A **trademark** is any word, phrase, symbol, design, or a combination of these things, that identifies your creative work as an AI practitioner. It’s how clients distinguish you from your competitors. Examples of trademarks in our industry are “Playfair” (Matt Weinstein’s company), “The Improvisational Lawyer” (me), and “Applied

Improvisation Network” – all of us as an organization.

**Copyright** protects any original work of authorship that is fixed in a tangible form of expression. This includes photographs, illustrations, music, recordings, computer programs, books, poems, blog posts, movies, workshops, plays, and much more.

As an AI practitioner, once you have delivered a program, given a lecture, written an article or a book, it’s definitely time to plan to protect your creative work. The result of your creativity **is** who you are – and is what separates you from the pack. If you’re making money from your creativity, you’d be well advised to protect yourself.

There are interesting variations between the EU and the USA, so let’s explore those in more detail.



## Trademarks in the European Union (EU)

In the EU, two main pieces of legislation govern trademark protection: the Community Trademark Regulation (CTR) and the Directive on the Harmonisation of the Laws of the Member States relating to Trade Marks (Trade Mark Directive).

The CTR has established a handy single registration procedure for trademarks that are valid throughout the entire European Union, providing protection against any unauthorized use of the trademark within the EU.

The Trade Mark Directive harmonizes the national trademark laws of EU member states. As an AI practitioner, this gives you greater consistency and certainty about the legal framework across the EU.

## Trademarks in the United States

In the US and Canada, the big thing for AI practitioners to watch out for is theft via the internet. It's mind-numbingly easy for anyone to search Google, "click here" and voila – thousands of works to choose from and *copy* – one of which could be yours. Law-abiding citizens, remember: Just because something is on the internet, does not mean you can use it!

This was certainly what made the difference for such AIN members as Matt Weinstein and "Playfair", as his workshops for colleges and corporations are all over the net. He has been diligent in protecting his IP with a long-time trademark

registration. So it would be unwise to play unfair with Playfair!

The protection of trademarks in the United States is primarily federal law. Federal trademark laws are administered by the United States Patent and Trademark Office (USPTO), which examines and grants trademarks to eligible applicants.

To be eligible, your mark must be distinctive, non-generic, and not confusingly similar to other registered marks. A trademark can take many forms, including logos, slogans, and product names. You also have to provide evidence of your intended or current use of the mark in commerce.

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**"For the AI practitioner, the primary benefit of trademark protection is the exclusive right to use the trademark in connection with your programs."**

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For the AI practitioner, the primary benefit of trademark protection is the exclusive right to use the trademark in connection with your programs. This right provides legal protection against infringement by others and helps prevent the use of similar marks that could dilute the value of your trademark. You are also well-placed to license or sell trademarks to other businesses.

## Copyright in the United States

Copyright protection is a fundamental aspect of intellectual property law in the United States. It refers to the legal rights given

to the creators or owners of original works, allowing them sole authorization to control the use and distribution of their works. The Copyright Act grants the creators exclusive rights to reproduce, distribute, display, perform, and create derivative works of their original creations. Copyright is seen as so important that it is enshrined in the Constitution in article 1, section 8, clause 8.

In the United States, copyright protection is automatic and granted to the creator of an original work as soon as it is fixed in a tangible form, like a manuscript, recording, or photograph or – for the AI practitioner – a lecture, program, book or article. But it needs to be registered if the owner wants to monetize (such as selling a book) or license their work. For works created after January 1, 1978, copyright lasts for the life of the creator plus 70 years.

AI practitioners can rely on this copyright protection to safeguard their works from unauthorized use and exploitation by others. Infringement of copyright occurs when someone uses, copies, or makes derivative works from a copyrighted work without your permission.

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**"One major difference with the United States is that copyright protection in the EU is automatic and doesn't need registering."**

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This includes posting copyrighted content online, creating copies of books, lectures, workshops, slides or software without your express written permission.

If your client or rival or anyone else steals your creative work, then you can sue them for financial damages, legal fees, loss of income, and theft of your property.

The consequences can be severe – both financially and reputation-wise. Violators of copyright may be sued for damages and forced to pay monetary compensation to the copyright holder. In some cases, they may also face criminal charges, heavy fines, and imprisonment. Yup, you can end up in jail for copyright theft!

## Copyright in the EU

EU copyright law aims to promote innovation, creativity, and protects the rights of creators by providing them with exclusive rights to their creations. The law ensures that creators receive financial benefits from their creations and that their works are not used without their permission.

This set of regulations, directives, and case law grants the creators of original works, known as rightsholders, exclusive rights to control the use of their intellectual property. This includes the right to reproduce, distribute, communicate to the public, and make derivative works based on their original creations.

One major difference with the United States is that copyright protection in the EU is automatic and doesn't need registering.

Copyright infringement in the EU refers to actions that infringe on the



exclusive rights of rightsholders. This includes using, uploading, or downloading copyrighted works without permission, as well as distribution, copying, import, and export, or selling pirated copies of copyrighted works. Infringement can lead to legal intervention, damages, and compensation for the injured party.

Wherever you are in the world, protecting your IP by establishing rights to your trademark and your copyright is an essential part of planning your business as a trainer, author, facilitator and presenter and – most importantly – as an AI practitioner.

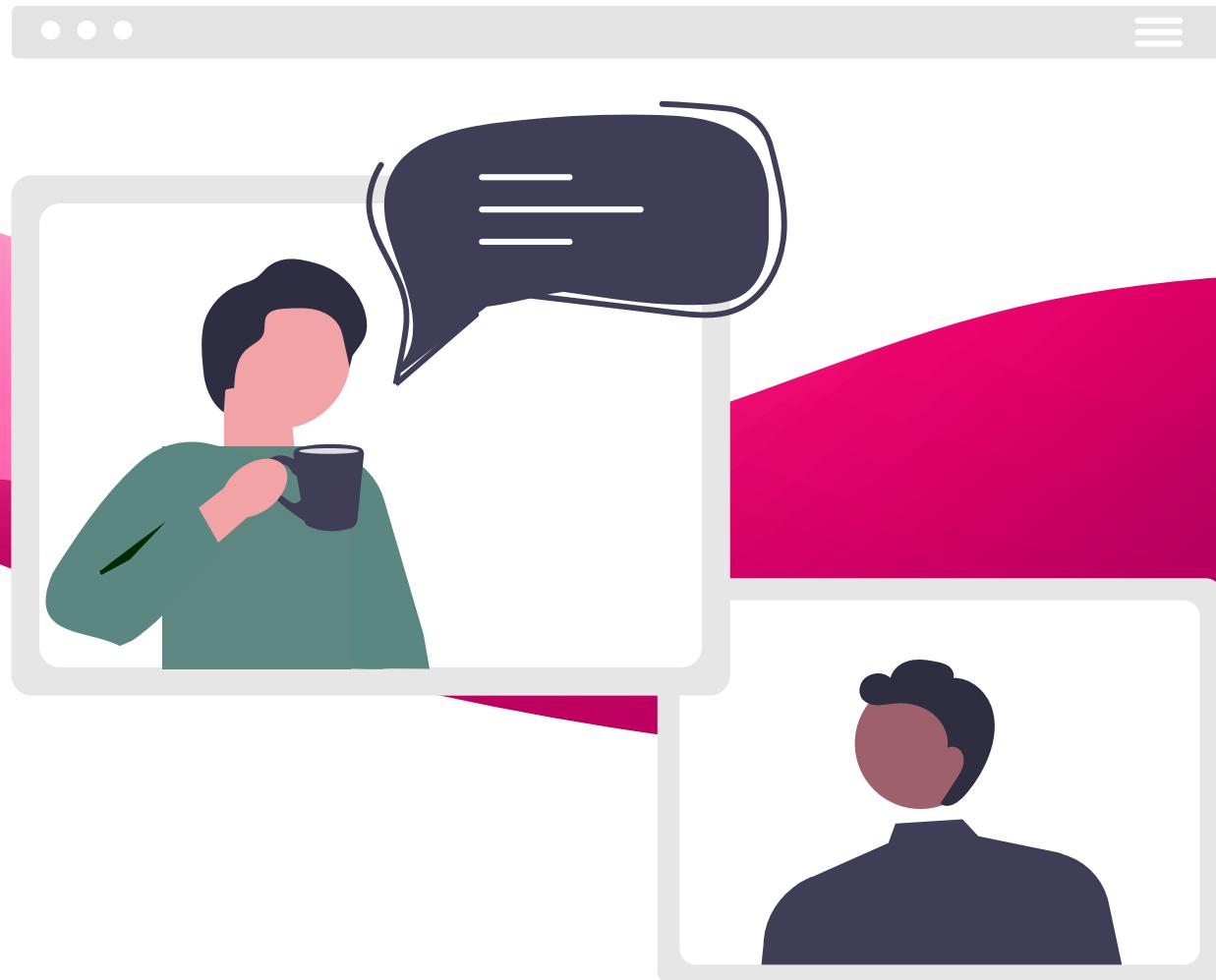
*The information provided here is to be used as a map to guide you and your business. There may be individual questions about your particular business for which you should seek the advice of an experienced lawyer. ☺*



JOEY NOVICK

Joey Novick, Esq. is an entertainment law attorney, working with storytellers, facilitators, and trainers, volunteering as general counsel for AIN and the New Jersey Storytelling Network. He is the former Executive Director for New Jersey Volunteer Lawyers for the Arts providing workshops for American Bar Association, AIN conference, and ArtPride New Jersey. Joey's performed solo shows at Fringe Festivals, with one nominated for Best Comedy Performance at Capital Fringe Festival.

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# IN THE SANDBOX

We ask two Applied Improvisers to meet each other in the sandbox: a Zoom call to chat about their origin story, values and what Applied Improv brings them. We designed it so the improvisers really feed off on each other and share their insights, creating cross-pollination. In this first sandbox are Victoria Hogg and Michelle Clark. Here is the condensation of their wonderful conversation.



## **Victoria Hogg and Michelle Clark**

### **Saying “Yes, but...” versus “No”**

**Vic:**

Ah, the classic bedrock improv tenet of “Yes, and...”. As facilitators, we all unpack the difference between saying “No”, “Yes, but...” and “Yes, and...”. I teach clearly that saying “Yes, but...” *sounds* pro-active but it’s a sneaky safety thing, a status-heavy way of protecting yourself. “Yes, but...” is more problematic than saying “No”. “No” is clear. Even if you’re scared, think the offer is dangerous or you have a better idea, “Yes, but...” says, “Yes, it sounds like I’ve listened to your idea but I’m going to explain why I’m out.” It’s a very unhelpful, defended position, even though it sounds the opposite.

**Michelle:**

I train people to become coaches and I always say, “How about replacing that ‘but’ with ‘and’ in your coaching – and in your life?” Because it makes such a difference to how that language is going to be received and held in a coaching conversation.

### **Failure vs Mistakes**

**Vic:**

You have your comfort zone (cosy familiarity), your panic zone (unacceptably scary vulnerability) and between them lies the sweet spot of the stretch zone, where you challenge yourself appropriately as you learn new skills. I’ve changed my mind regarding “celebrating failure”. I tried hard to buy into the mantra of “we suck and we love to fail” when I started. But I now state that we don’t want to celebrate failure because, actually, nobody *likes* to fail; it doesn’t feel nice. Plus I kept thinking to myself, “I can’t seem to celebrate failure! What’s wrong with me?!”

For me, now, it’s about being *comfortable* with failure. We are joyful scientists sifting data. Sure, we all occasionally make things more difficult for ourselves by mishandling offers, but we must aim to stay on a “Yes, and...” path that makes things fun and easy. Failure is a by-product of the work that we do; it’s not a goal so we can high-five each other over something that didn’t work out.

**Michelle:**

I don't talk about failure much at all. I talk about mistakes. Mistakes are allowed. Furthermore, there are no mistakes when we weave them into the story. If we all agree that we have each other's backs, anything that appears to be a mistake, we'll pick it up and run with it. So in the space of psychological safety, we say, for example, in the leadership space or the workspace, we want to create a place where mistakes are okay. Not necessarily where failure is celebrated. But where mistakes are okay and they're learning points. So I talk a lot more about mistakes than I do about failure.

**Debriefing****Vic:**

Thiagi ([www.thiagi.com](http://www.thiagi.com)), as conveyed to me by William Hall, teaches clearly "It's all in the debrief". We must remind ourselves constantly that *any* exercise is solely for the purpose of setting up a debrief. We are here to unpack what just happened, in order to discuss it with the preordained challenge and desired outcome in mind.

**Michelle:**

I was in Prague this 2023 at the European Mentoring and Coaching Council and I delivered an improv workshop to coaches and facilitators new to improv. The entire premise I gave them is that the *games* will be the teachers. I'm just here to facilitate, and to convene a collaboration. We learn, as you're saying, through a solid debrief. We put ourselves through the exercise – it's experiential – and then we ask the question, "What did the game teach us toward what we're hoping to achieve?"

**Holding a space vs controlling it****Michelle:**

I am a facilitator, co-collaborating on the learning of everybody who's connected in that space. One isn't *running* the meeting. When working with a team using Applied Improv, I am not the lead. It's very self-organized, and that's what I teach teams: Let's self-organize so that everybody in the room is collaborating; everybody in the room is agreeing they're part of it.

**Vic:**

"To hold space rather than control it" does two things: stops your ego from getting out of control and prevents your inner critic from doing the same. Otherwise, one can get in such a panic! "Am I doing the right thing?! It's got to be perfect!", etc. To have the pressure removed is wonderful: you're simply there to create and convene provocations for a group of like-minded people who are going to collaboratively unpack what's happening in real time.

**Michelle:**

Yes, one is co-creating this experiential space together and feeling free adding what was not within the rules. Like recently, we were playing a game, it was clear how the game went, and somebody decided to add a rule. We were all co-collaborating, I didn't stop and say, "No, that's not the rule of the game!" Instead, I went, "Wow, how exciting is this!" We've just created a new level between us. The group embraces that new level and that gives others permission to start taking risks and adding in something.

**Vic:**

I find there's an interesting tension between what you're *expecting* and what might happen. One must always be prepared to stop everything and have a conversation about what's emerging. It's easy with improv to create a super-fun session that ends on a positive collaboration high. Is this always the best area to lean into? Sometimes groups need some dismantling. You can't open half a can of worms.

**Michelle:** This applies to everything. At some point it's wise to say, "Timeout! What do we think is happening here? What do we observe? What are we doing? What could we do better?" And then let's resume. It's important to have those pauses where a group can self-regulate or self-inquire.

**Vic:** I spent my early career trying to make everyone happy. Often one's scared of the group and trying not to upset the apple cart, and it's easy to create joy as distraction. I've come back around to building joyful sessions while simultaneously dealing with group difficulties. I just co-designed a workshop with the brilliant Carrie Caudle called "Make Room to Spark Joy", which embraced joy as a radical act in times of struggle. We explored collective effervescence, which was lovely.

## The Future

**Michelle:** My recent workshop in Prague this 2023 was my first in-person workshop since Covid and it reminded me of how much I love to travel for in-person training. A kind of fuzzy horizon for me, therefore, is to get this work onto the road more. I've had the great good fortune of being in the AIN mentorship and I'm stoked that my mentor, who's halfway to that point, is helping me bring my vision to bear.

**Vic:** Wonderful! My latest direction is to create confidence courses that are asynchronous. They'll be instructional design packages that offer a rigorous yet fresh experience, where people can learn positively and gain value, regardless of working hours or time zones. I'm also creating a teaching system with a new business partner that we call "I.M.P.R.O.V. to Improve". Watch this space!

**Michelle:** I'm excited and thrilled we're connected, Vic, and I can't wait to see what transpires.

**Vic:** Absolutely! It's such a joy to talk to you, Michelle. Thank you so much. 



**MICHELLE CLARKE**

Michelle is a Global Leadership Coach and IAF Accredited Facilitator. Originally from South Africa, she is based in Santiago, Chile. After discovering Improv, she immediately fell in love with its powerful application to her coaching clients and to working teams. She has trained with Improv instructors Jason Delplanque, John Cremer, Joe Bill, and Gary Schwartz. She has studied musical Improv with Kaivalya Plays India and the Improv intensive hosted by the iO Theater in Chicago.

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**VICTORA HOGG**

Vic is a UK-based Confident Communications Coach who champions participant success via Applied Improvisation and low-risk, high-reward safe space. She coaches on Zoom and in-person. Her work (including new system "I.M.P.R.O.V. to Improve") is informed by an Applied Theatre Masters (Goldsmiths College) and 12 years of improv comedy training with a wide range of international trainers such as Keith Johnstone and those from Second City.

[www.theofferbank.co.uk](http://www.theofferbank.co.uk)

*Maarten Joosen transcribed and edited this article. This section's inspiration has the same source as The Playground of Possibilities.*

*In memory of Kay Ross. Kay was a beloved member of the AIN community, the creator of The Playground of Possibilities (a card deck), and an invaluable copy editor and contributor in AIM Issue 1. Kay was a ray of kindness, ensuring new and experienced applied improvisers to feel at ease and home at any (virtual) occasion. She passed away in September 2023 in Hong Kong. She will be greatly missed. RIP.*





# PERSPECTIVE

In this section, you'll find pieces that explore the range of ways in which we imagine AI principles shaping our lives. In this issue, you can feel the love from a letter on Staying Healthy, and discover the Tao connection with Improvisation. In our regular column, AI Through My Eyes, practitioners share sources of inspiration, experience and insight. PERSPECTIVE invites us to challenge our perceptions and expand our vision.

# AI Through My Eyes: Gabe Mercado



## Spotlight on GABE MERCADO

Where to see more of Gabe:  
[vivita.ph](http://vivita.ph)  
[vivita.global](http://vivita.global)  
[thirdworldimprov.com](http://thirdworldimprov.com)  
[@gabemercado \(X/Twitter\)](https://twitter.com/gabemercado)

**Home base location  
(town, country):** Baguio City, Philippines.

**Where/what/how or with  
whom do you use AI?** I use AI primarily with the youth now aged 8-18 in a creativity accelerator called Vivistop Baguio.

**Fun Fact:** I used to be active doing theater, films and commercials when I still lived in Metro Manila. Also when I was a teenager, I got involved in the protest movement against former Filipino dictator Ferdinand Marcos. (<https://newsinfo.inquirer.net/874034/radyo-bandido-days-recalled>)

**Why does AI speak  
to you?** Funny how when we say AI these days to most people, Artificial Intelligence comes up and not Applied Improvisation. It's also fortunate though because the power of our version of AI comes more into focus when juxtaposed with the emergence of the other AI. While machines and computers can learn and predict and generate through their algorithms, Applied Improvisation brings out the unpredictable, surprising, delightful sparks of casual genius that can result in authentic connection, spontaneity and joy that only imperfect humans can create.

**What are some of your  
favorite themes to  
explore through AI?** Aside from the usual corporate-friendly applications in presentation skills, communicating effectively and working with a team, I have used Applied Improvisation for disaster readiness in my work with Mary Tyskiewicz and Heroic Improv, as well as my work with Applied Improvisation in Ignatian Spirituality. I am currently using Applied Improvisation in my work in Vivita – a creativity accelerator for youth.

**What about AI has  
surprised you?** The biggest surprise that Applied Improvisation has given me is the global network of friends and colleagues that I have discovered through our network of practitioners. The ability to be on the same page and see eye to eye and work on long term projects with applied improvisers across different generations, cultures, ethnicities and backgrounds has been delightful.

**“It’s important that we look for stories - not philosophical ramblings, or word definitions or anything fancy or deep. Just tell us who or what the word reminds you of in a minute.”**

**What is one AI activity that you do/lead/share?**

We discovered this exercise through our sessions in SPIT (Silly People’s Improv Theater) and Third World Improv. It’s called *Tell That Story*. It starts as a simple word association circle. After a steady flowing rhythm of word association is established, we introduce the wrinkle that at any given time a person can call out “tell that story!” when a word, a facial expression or anything at all intrigues them. The person who is called out then has a minute to tell a true story, which doesn’t have to be dramatic or funny or anything at all that the word inspires in them. It’s important that we look for stories – not philosophical ramblings, or word definitions or anything fancy or deep. Just tell us who or what the word reminds you of in a minute.

Using the profound silliness that AI makes possible is very useful in doing innovation and creativity work among the youth I work with in Vivita ([vivita.ph](http://vivita.ph) and [vivita.global](http://vivita.global)). I learned an exercise long ago called *Dumbest Idea First* where participants are presented with a problem but, instead of challenging them to come up with the best solution, the facilitator asks them to compete with each other to come up with the 5 dumbest ideas. This results in a fun, energy filled process with some of the ideas accidentally turning out some useful insights or solutions and with the teams being more willing to cooperate with each other. Using this exercise as a prelude to guiding my young participants through design thinking allows them to inject improvisational fun and serendipitous genius into the entire process.

**With the help of AI what do you think is possible?**

Applied Improvisation that is focused on igniting the human spark and fanning the flames of creativity is the key to harnessing the power of artificial intelligence, the other AI. ☺



Interview by  
ILENE BERGELSON

Ilene Bergelson is a presenter, educator and executive coach inspired by the principles of Applied Improvisation. Through her company, EmpowerSpeak™, she draws on best practices from AI, as well as her long career in the performing arts and coaching. Ilene has written numerous articles, created the audio series, *Light Bytes: The Communication Collection* and contributed to professional development books on career, presence and mindfulness themes.

[www.empowerspeak.com](http://www.empowerspeak.com)

# Staying Healthy: a Love Letter to the Professional Improviser

Words by

PATRICIA RYAN MADSON

I've been watching improv actors make magic for over thirty years. One of the deep joys of living in the San Francisco Bay Area of Northern California in the United States, is having access to a remarkable array of improvisational theater groups. I've been one of the lucky audience members for several thousand performances of "one of a kind" plays created out of sheer grit and magic on the spot. I've watched a number of groups come and go, form and dissolve, reform and spring back like the Phoenix. Among them were Pulp Playhouse, True Fiction Magazine, 3 For All, The Improv Playhouse of San Francisco, Awkward Dinner Party and two decades of BATS shows.

The community of artists who perform this work are both saints and eccentrics, in my opinion. Their talent and courage - and endurance over time - astonishes me. I've been a theater person for half a century. I taught acting at Stanford University, spent summers doing stock with the Colorado Shakespeare Festival, the Nebraska Repertory Theatre and several raucous southern Outdoor Drama productions. I have not, however, trod the boards of the improv stage. It's far too scary for me, I tell my students. I'm okay with a script. I like knowing when the show is over.

However, I *teach* improv, and like to think that my experience in the classroom, if not on stage, allows me a voice. What's on my mind is the mental and spiritual health of the men and women who are professional improv actors, especially those of you who do improv for a living or devote a serious part of your lives to performing. I am writing this as a love letter to you. You know who you are. You have been bestowing gifts upon me and your audiences for decades.

When you improvise a performance you are using 120% of your humanity. Becoming characters

that live and breathe and struggle and die and change and love and mourn takes a gigantic human toll. I'm guessing that when the lights go down after a successful show – or even a mediocre or lousy one – you are both exhilarated and exhausted. To improvise means that you are using the whole self: body, mind and spirit. You are using your deep knowledge database of literature, story, character, locale, vocal technique and social psychology. It's a miracle - especially in a long form show, but to a lesser extent, in short form improv as well. I can't think of any other human activity that uses all of our human capacity at the same time. Even Olympic



IMAGE COURTESY OF PATRICIA RYAN MADSON



IMAGE COURTESY OF PATRICIA RYAN MADSON

athletes, while using 100% of their physical and mental ability are not creating the scene and story on the spot before an audience. I think professional improv actors are Gods and Goddesses, or at least Superheroes. They are doing so much more than even great actors are called upon to do.

So, my advice is this: please take time off from this work in order to regenerate. Even if your physical health is excellent, your soul, spirit and mind need time to refuel. Improv actors need alone time, preferably in nature, away from family and social requirements. You need to ingest fresh nourishment. It's invigorating to read stories and books of literature and poetry. Take time to see movies and television dramas of quality as well as those of dubious worth. It's healthy to take in images, characters, cultures and genres to stoke up your arsenal of fiction. Travel - both domestic and foreign - can offer new images of life. It's essential that you make time in which you are *not* required to *perform and put out*. You need spaciousness, rest, and as Michael Harris suggests, you need *absence*:

real time and space in which you are not required to do anything. I'm convinced that a week or even a few days of this kind of regenerative space can produce large payoffs in terms of mental and physical health.

I'm sure this all sounds like a good idea, but when can I ever find that open week? It won't fall in your lap...unless you so exhaust yourself that you become unwell and are quarantined. Instead, I wish for those of you who give so much of your life on the improv stage - and in classes which are also high calorie

**“Why not spend a free afternoon alone in a great science or art museum just wandering the galleries and soaking up the beauty and wonder of art and nature; or try a walk in the park, slowly, without an agenda, possibly people watching.”**

life events - to set aside the time. Put it on your calendar as you would a work assignment. Then *execute* those few days, or full week, of refreshment

In addition to finding genuine sabbatical time, it is also important to find “mini-vacations” in which you cultivate alone time, with your cell phones turned off. Why not spend a free afternoon alone in a great science or art museum just wandering the galleries and soaking up the beauty and wonder of art and nature? Or try a walk in the park, slowly, without an agenda, possibly people watching? I have stressed the value of alone time. The kind of regeneration I'm advocating happens less often when you are with a partner or spouse. Find time to be alone. Read a fine book. Munch an apple. Savor a cup of tea.

If you begin to make a life habit of nourishing your humanity with spaciousness on a regular basis, I predict that your on-stage improv life will flourish and grow. You deserve this and you need this. I hope some of you will take this to heart. Let me know how it goes. ☺



PATRICIA RYAN MADSON

Patricia Ryan Madson is the author of *IMPROV WISDOM: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up*. Patricia is Emerita from Stanford, where she served as the head of the undergraduate acting program. In 1998 she was the winner of the Lloyd W. Dinkelspiel Award for Outstanding Innovation in Undergraduate Education at Stanford.

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# Improvisation is Tao in Western Context

Words by  
BRIGHT SU

In the hot summer of 1990, I was about to take the *Gaokao*, the college entrance exam in China. It was a big deal and I was in fight mode. That day, my grandma handed me a bottle of tea and said, “Relax and do what you can, not necessarily the best. If you are nervous, breathe deep and drink tea.”

“Don’t do your best?! Of course, I will do my best!” I thought to myself, not wishing to argue with my grandma. I grabbed the bottle and walked fast to school. Over the next three days, I tried hard, slept poorly and rushed my exams in seven subjects. It turned out to

## “Tao never strives, yet nothing is left undone.”

be...well...I underperformed and was offered a place only in a tier 2 college. I kind of failed.

Does this sound familiar? We might recall late improvisation master Keith Johnstone advocating, “Be average,” and “Be obvious.” He noted, “Please don’t do your best. Trying to do your best is trying to be better than you are.” This is exactly in line with Tao. *Tao Te Ching* says, “The Tao never strives, yet nothing is left undone.” (Chapter 37, 道常无为

而无不为). It equates to saying, “The Tao never does anything, yet through it all things are done.” The core teaching is *Wuwei* (无为) which translates as “non-doing” or “effortless doing”.

Johnstone even quotes the Chinese scripture in his seminal book, *Impro* (1979, p. 20): “The sage keeps to the deed that consists in taking no action and practises the teaching that uses no words.... When his task is accomplished and his work done the people all say, ‘It happened to us naturally’....”

When we are busy *doing*, trying our hardest, we are less capable of *being*. Human being is being



human. Just as flowing water does not compete for first place, so we have our own nature and ways of being wise. Johnstone is suggesting that being our average and normal selves is truer to our nature.

Improvisation is Tao in a western context. Improvisation is *The Way*. *The Way* is bigger than the Milky Way: It is universal wisdom.

One key improvisation principle is “Yes, and...” and that too, aligns with Tao. I see it as Tao’s *Yin* and *Yang*: “Yes” is *Yin* (passive, acceptive, shadow, empathetic, feminine); “and” is *Yang* (active, providing, shine, determinative, masculine).

There are so many (heated) arguments about the form, names and rules in improvisation. Whose improv is it anyway? If we understand improvisation as Tao, we may reach peace. *Tao Te Ching*’s first sentence states, “The Tao that can be told is not the enduring Tao. The name that can be named is not the enduring name.” (道可道 · 非常道。名可名 · 非常名。) The same can be said of improvisation.

When we introduce an improvisation rule, such as “Yes, and...” or “Don’t ask questions,” the rule is not the enduring improvisation. Improvisation also allows for opposites, such as “Yes, but...”, “No, but...”, or “Ask a lot of questions.”

When we categorize improvisation under names, such as “Harold” or “Montage,” that too is never the enduring improvisation. It encompasses more forms than any

list of names can contain.

Even when improvisation manifests in language, it is limiting, telling only one side of the story. When Viola Spolin says in *Improvisation for the Theater* 3e (1999, p. 3), “Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theater and learn to become ‘stageworthy,’” we see her point and appreciate the invitation. But anyone who has sat through a few bad improv shows also knows that not everyone should be performing in front of an audience!

Any rule, form or linguistic expression manifests or points to certain aspects of improvisation and cannot be the totality. True improvisation is ruleless, formless and beyond language.

In a philosophical nutshell, Spolin’s approach to improvisation is Zen (Mindfulness), while Johnstone’s approach is Tao (Wuwei). These are two different yet overlapping paths. Spolin again sums it up wonderfully: “The heart of improvisation is transformation.” (1999, p. 39)

In July 2001, another hot summer, I was about to attend my MBA program in the US. Everything was ready except the visa, and I knew that many applicants were being denied. My grandma had passed away by then, but her words were still with me. I patiently waited in line at the US consulate for the visa interview, taking deep breaths and sipping my tea. And yes, I talked to the officer for three

minutes, effortlessly. It was a success.

I’ve been fortunate to incorporate my spiritual practice with my improvisation journey. Improvisation is Zen and Tao in a western context. Play is my visa to inner freedom. And improvisation is the way to...anywhere...everywhere. ☺



JI XING XI JU  
(IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE)



BRIGHT SU

Bright grew up in China, has lived in the US since 2001, and began studying improvisation in 2008. He is the author of *Ji Xing Xi Ju (Improvisational Theatre)*, a 432-page book in Chinese about improvisation, published in 2020. He serves as Editor-in-Chief for the Applied Improvisation Magazine (AIM).

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# WHAT'S HOT



Here we cover news and conferences. This time, our Vancouver conference chairperson looks back from a hosting perspective, and two dedicated attendees share their personal reflections. We invite you to join us in indulging in the richness of photos on the ground. Proceed with caution, it's hot!

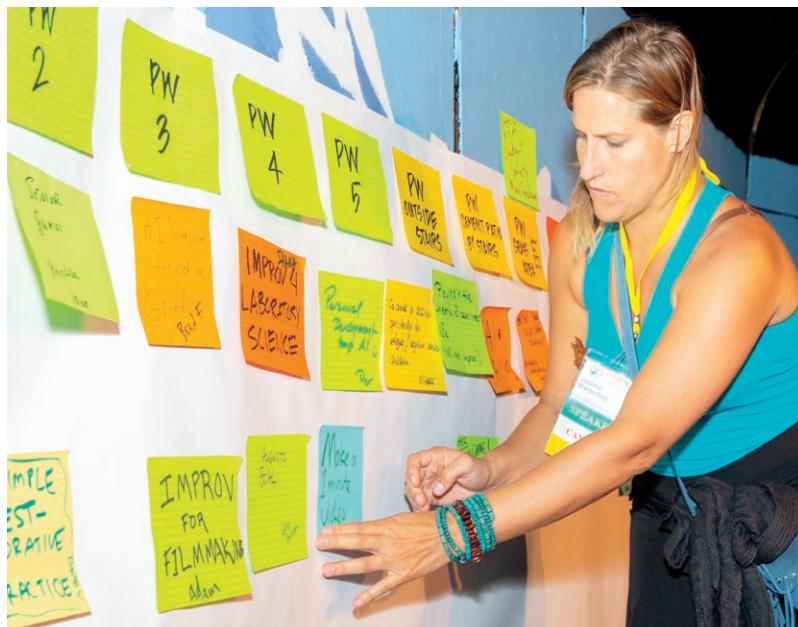
# AIN Conference Reflection

Words by  
TRACY SHEA-PORTER

A wonderful highlight of the summer of 2023 will always be flying from Toronto to Vancouver to attend my first ever AIN conference. Vancouver is a five-hour flight, and a three-hour time zone difference, so it was good that the mountains and the ocean beckoned, along with the beauty of the event location, Granville Island.

Arriving on Tuesday, July 25, ahead of my first Learning Journey the next day, was a good move. Settling into the room early helped navigate jet lag. It was through incredible luck that a Vancouver local was able to provide terrific accommodations via Avril Orloff, conference volunteer extraordinaire. There I was, situated close to Granville, and ready to rock.

My conference experience was already off to a great start due to the helpful and exuberant Anna Alexander, AIN Administrator, who tirelessly answered all questions, and ensured everything was smooth sailing. Plus, choosing to start the conference with Jeanne Lambin's *The Quest – Improvisation for Transformation* was an inspired choice, because Jeanne is truly, well, inspiring. She spent the morning guiding us – at The Improv Centre theater – so our minds and bodies could recalibrate to an "improvisational mindset" where we immersed ourselves in



connection. In the afternoon, we went off on individual "Quests", complete with directions on how to hold space for our adventure, and open to improv delights. This soulful start set the tone for a beautiful AIN Conference adventure.

On Thursday, I spent the day in the amazing Patrick Short's, *AI for Performers and Non-Performers Learning Journey*. This event was a total hands-on, dig into the exercises kinda day. Totally worthwhile, and infused with real-world AI techniques, with a particular focus on business. Right

up my alley. He even let us sit in on a live discovery call with a client, and he later booked the business too.

As I integrated my conference odyssey so far, on Thursday evening, David Diamond blew my mind with his provocative, *Building Bridges Through Improvisation* human art show. An interactive, captivating, fascinating, riveting event.

First thing on Friday morning, there was a wonderful *Warm-up with Improv* event led by Matt Weinstein and Carol Ann Fried,

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**"All the sessions had the power to transform me."**

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with the lovely nickname, "Pookie," to help everyone connect and get into the spirit. Did we ever. My only wish was that I could have attended every AIN session. I chose Kat Koppett's session *Our Value Proposition in Action: Focusing the "Why" in Appl"Y"*, which was a thought-provoking and informative time. Like all the sessions, Kat was totally experiential and invited everyone to form small groups, and to create an AI pitch to a fictional customer. This type of hands-on design action is crucial. Some groups were invited to present on stage, and Kat provided great tips on how to focus on customer goals and outcomes.

Let's stop here for a moment and talk about the conference volunteer team, led by the indomitable Kirsten Anderson. Everything about this conference – from the registration, conference topics, locations, food, swag – even the weather was spot on, and high-vibe, like a beautiful improv scene that leaves one joyous, and forever changed. That's how I felt about the entire AIN conference journey – beautifully altered and shaped anew.

All the sessions had the power to transform me. From the inspired, *AI for Difficult Conversations about Social Challenges* held by the fantastic team of Lisa Yeager, Bobbie Brown, and Karen Strong, to the absolutely phenomenal Q&A (wonderfully hosted by Nancy Watt) and TWO-SET IMPROV SHOW by Colin Mochrie (my jaw was on the floor). It was incredible to witness Colin's talent, generosity, and spirit through every moment. (I even got a treasured selfie with Colin which is a forever keepsake).

In the afternoon on Friday, my co-presenter, Steve Gravenkemper and I presented our own session, *Applied Improvisation: Creating a client-centered framework for achieving organizational objectives*. There were about fifteen people in the room, all passionate and providing terrific input through true caring conversations. The workshop exceeded our expectations. We left with feedback forms from everyone – all offering great ideas – and an opportunity to continue the conversation later.

I do think this is one of the strongest benefits of the AIN Conference: all the people that you meet, all the opportunities to share information, and to continue the collaboration and discussions, leading to a deeper understanding and connection around what AI can be around the world. This is the heartbeat of it all.

On Saturday, the deep sharing continued when I attended John Windmueller's *Connecting Applied Improv and Conflict Resolution: Theory and Practice* session. Wow! One of John's goals is to leave everyone in the room with AI tidbits, exercises, and practices that they can "steal" from him. Total generosity. Did I leave with any tips? A ton! Frankly, every session left me with an abundance of solid, adaptable ideas. It's because everyone does things a little differently.

We can all benefit from this sharing teamwork. The world benefits too. When fellow AIN leaders like Jessica Breitenfeld, Melissa





Dinwiddie, and Kat Koppett shared their uniquely different approaches to building their businesses, I was further inspired to do the same.

More tips were found at *Expanding Your AI Business with Strategic Collaborations*, in the room with Ellen Feldman Ornato, Jenny Drescher, and Nancy Watt. Learning about how these folks are adding client outcome surveys, through online apps and tools, added another dimension. This idea of “integrating platforms and assessments to enhance offerings” offers another layer and set of tools. So helpful!

I finished my day with a couple of hours of incredible *Silent Disco* starting at 9:00 pm. A great way to move the body, musically connect and dance the night away... enjoying the smiling company of people like Erica Marx, Ed Reggi,

Gary Ware and Jan Keck...all grooving to shared tunes on our magical headsets.

Did I mention the bunnies?

You know, all the little things add up to a great experience wherever you are. For me, it was at the Granville Island market mornings around 8:00 am, grabbing a toasted pumpernickel bagel, loaded with fresh veggies and cream cheese, then sitting by the water for some quiet alone time.

Or, hanging out on the lawn by the Granville Island Hotel, with those enchanting bunnies – the ever-present providers of deep reflection and in-the-momentness.

All these little moments that we find in new places, all the shared

**“It seems like I made two hundred new friends from all over the world.”**

meals, acknowledgements as we walk past one another, new people and conversations that we discover in the workshops – all the trust-building.

On Sunday afternoon, David Westerlund led an *Integrating Your Experience* session that invited us to get vulnerable and imagine ourselves living our dreams through reflection and communication. A delightful conference finale!

It seems like I made two hundred new friends from all over the world. Now, I feel connected to a wonderful and generous ensemble. I’ll be contacting you. Or please contact me. Let’s keep the conversations going, until we all meet again. 🌎



**TRACY SHEA-PORTER**

Tracy attended her first improv show in 1987, at Theatresports, Toronto, Canada. She then joined their improv classes, formed a comedy troupe, and never left the community. For 30 years, she worked in the business world in communications, marketing, and sales, while also continuing with improv. One day, her working world and hobby collided and today she is the CEO and Co-founder of Yes Unlimited, where she designs and facilitates corporate and education AI training and events.

# Creating Ripples: Embracing the Improv Mindset with the AIN Conference

Words by  
**JULIE TRELL**

It's funny how life is a series of ripples: each one leading to the next, shaping our experiences and connections. That's the theme I've been toying with as a result of an incredible first-time experience at the Applied Improvisation Network (AIN) conference in Vancouver in July. Absorbing the sunlight during a break between sessions, seated on steps where bunnies danced, the harmonious "Ripple" by Grateful Dead playing in my ears, I grasped how ripples perfectly represent my Applied Improvisation experience, particularly my engagement with the Applied Improvisation Network.

At the conference, I reflected on ripples' origins, sparked by Rebecca Stockley, the dynamic "Improv Lady" from my Camp Apple days. A former Apple Distinguished Educator, I imbibed her insights on the Story Spine and embracing mistakes, echoing through my tech roles at Salesforce, Workday Foundations. Her vision of a vibrant teacher's lounge mirrors the essence of the improv mindset.

That initial ripple led me to the AIN conference. Rebecca's encouragement and her suggestion to join the AIN Facebook group, along with invigorating online



Open Space sessions, drove my immersion into the AIN world. As a result, I reconnected with old circles from my past at the conference—my US West Coast and East Coast circles, those who understood my camp experiences, and my Jewish circle. The comforting sense of belonging aside, the striking unity prevailed—the shared "Yes, and..." understanding, making others shine. Undoubtedly, that sentiment was the space attendees collectively created.

Adding a touch of magic to the conference, I decided to introduce sparkles into the mix. I adorned

myself with glittering stickers and it didn't take long for someone to notice. As compliments flowed in, so did the sparkles. It was exhilarating to witness this ripple of joy as more and more people embraced the idea, donning their own sparkles and radiating a newfound sense of confidence. This simple act of spreading sparkle was like watching a wave of positivity sweep through the crowd—a ripple of fun and self-expression that effortlessly transcended individual boundaries.

The ripples extended to the joy of sharing my adopted Australian culture through Tim Tams,

sweet treats I introduced to the conference. While I knew about them, it was Mark Erdim who showed me how it's done. Sharing culture, showing others, and watching Joel Veenstra's face light up during his Tim Tam "suck" moment added another layer of connection. It wasn't just about biscuits; it was about creating shared memories and transcending geographical boundaries.

What struck me most was the AIN's culture of reciprocity. People would credit the origins of exercises they shared, reinforcing a sense of interconnectedness and mutual respect. This ethos was familiar to me—I've always believed in giving credit where it's due.

Among the myriad ripples that defined the conference experience, one that stood out was my two years of early morning online Open Space sessions. It was during these sessions that I shared a Values exercise recommendation with Melissa Dinwiddie, an act that would later take on a life of its own. To my delight, she not only incorporated it into her workshop on values, but also reported its resounding success. This ripple of sharing and adoption simply made me smile with gratitude.

In a serendipitous twist, I learned that Gary Hirsch was also employing similar exercises for his values workshops. The realization that ideas were converging and overlapping was fascinating, and a testament to the interconnectedness that

the AIN community fosters. It was a web of ripples, spreading creativity and innovation in ways I had never foreseen.

However, the surprises didn't end there. Gary's "Bot Joy" project caught my attention, a ripple of a concept that resonated deeply. I found myself contemplating how I could bring this creative outlet into my own sphere; a project that would enable others to experience joy. Gary's encouragement to "steal" the idea was a reassuring push, highlighting the spirit of sharing that defines the AIN. This ripple of inspiration was a reminder that every idea, every project, has the potential to spark new endeavours and offer others the chance to experience the joy of creativity.

**"AIN is more than a network; it's a living testament to the power of connections."**

As I look back on these ripples, they blend into a narrative of growth, unity, and shared experience. AIN is more than a network; it's a living testament to the power of connections. My hope is that these ripples continue to spread, strengthening the community within and beyond borders. With each interaction, each shared memory, and each collaborative endeavour, the ripples we create contribute to a more connected, harmonious world – a world that embraces the improv mindset and all the positive change it can bring.



PHOTO COURTESY OF JULIE TRELL

*"Ripple in still water  
When there is no pebble tossed  
Nor wind to blow  
Reach out your hand, if your cup be empty  
If your cup is full, may it be again"*

*"Ripple"*  
by Grateful Dead ♪



**JULIE TRELL**

Across two decades, Julie Trell has embraced diverse roles, from inner-city teacher to VP of All Things Fun, Meaningful, & Rewarding. Her career path evolved through technology, corporate foundation leadership, and startup acceleration, to her current role of Chief Play Officer. She thrives on fostering improv and growth mindsets in adults, evident across Atlanta, San Francisco, Singapore, and now Sydney. Her adaptability and open-mindedness, shaped by these global experiences, underscore the value they place on continuous learning.

# Reimagining the Conference Experience

Words by  
**KIRSTEN ANDERSON**

What might be possible if we took the time to reimagine more of what we do?

In July of 2022, a team of volunteers near Vancouver, British Columbia, in Canada, came together to plan the in-person conference to be held in July of 2023. Though most of us had not met in person, thanks to years of Open Space we knew each other at least virtually.

With a staggering nine out of ten organizing committee members never having been to an in-person AIN conference before, the choice of *ReimAgINe* as our theme seemed like a natural fit. We set out to play with the balance of traditions, rituals, expectations, novelty, and never-been-done-before additions.

Here are three insights from our consistent ReimAgINing process to apply to your projects and work:

## 1. Make It Fun

Carla Vigara, the chair of the Spain AIN22 conference, gave a piece of advice that helped as a reminder: “Don’t take things too seriously.” It wasn’t easy all of the time, but it was a touchstone that we kept returning to.

*TIP: Whatever the project or interaction, we can keep asking ourselves, “How do we make this more fun, more playful?”*

## 2. Align on Values

Who you work with matters to your success and enjoyment, and the 2023 organizing team was exceptional on both fronts! First, we discussed values and intentions around the planning process: how we as individuals and as a team would work together with an improvisor’s mindset. Second, we considered the values of the organization, and how these values would be demonstrated. We wanted them to shine through in all that we created in our communications and integrated into the conference.

*TIP: Align on values early, for your team formation, processes, communications, and objectives.*

## 3. Permission To Be Imperfect Together

We were not able to control all that happened at the conference but we were able to control how we reacted to it. In my opening remarks, I mentioned the classic

analogy of the duck gliding over water while the feet are quickly paddling beneath the surface. This was a pre-emptive reality check for us as volunteers and for participants that, yes, things would go wrong, and we would work intensely in the background to problem-solve. When overwhelm built up, we knew we had each other’s backs and were determined to make each other look good.

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**“We set out to play with the balance of traditions, rituals, expectations, novelty, and never-been-done-before additions.”**

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*TIP: Accept that there will be mistakes, “failures,” things that won’t go as planned, and that we will have compassion not only for each other but for ourselves.*

What were *some* of the specific, ‘never-been-done-before’ additions to the conference to represent the values of fun, playfulness, and connection?



PHOTO COURTESY OF KIRSTEN ANDERSON

**ThoughtExchange:** David Guthro created surveys for AIN members to identify priorities. The results gave us validation to keep gaps between sessions. These breaks needed to be long enough for those impromptu conversations and connection while also giving direction for our programming choices.

**Billeting:** Avril Orloff generously offered to help find and match up local volunteer host homes for those that could use help with accommodation costs. This generosity was such a hit, one of our recipients bought a learning journey for their host as an act of thanks and many new friendships were formed!

**Trading cards:** Brett MacDonald was the brain behind the random cards (similar to Pokéman or baseball cards) given out at registration to all attendees. They depicted each of the organizing team and featured speakers with amusing powers and weaknesses. This created an excuse to approach

those we didn't yet know in hopes of collecting and trading to complete a full set of fourteen, plus the elusive Colin Mochrie card.

**Doughnut Wall:** At our opening, we had a novel way to display award winning doughnuts on a wall of pegs. Eating these “hole foods” elicited surprise, delight, and mingling!

**Tiny Toy Toilet:** It even made flushing sounds so that participants could write down any small frustrations or annoyances they wanted to express, let go of, and throw in the toilet. This was one way we wanted to play with the idea of us being imperfect together. Our caring ombudsperson, Chris Esperanza, set us up for psychological safety as we heard where to take any serious concerns.

**Birds of a Feather:** cards placed in the centerpieces with different themes to bring people together

at our first lunch. These diverse and inclusive conversation prompts were an opportunity to find those who wanted to discuss topics of shared interest so that first-time attendees felt included early on.

*Silent Disco* had a hundred of us wearing headphones, listening to music, and dancing in the streets in unison under a full moon and a sky of fireworks. It was fun, public, improvised play, and human connection, embodying the identified values.

Back in July 2022, the organizing committee had set out to be imperfect, together. Valuing playful connection, we had a clear mission to ReimAgIne what was possible for the conference, our team, and 225 attendees from 16 countries.

The result was collective effervescence, worthy of a standing ovation, with relationships and ripple effects sure to spread beyond our community for years to come. ☀



KIRSTEN ANDERSON

After 25 years as an entrepreneur and play expert on GlobalTV, Kirsten sold her award-winning toy store to bridge her expertise in leadership & the bottom-line benefits of playfulness at work. International keynote speaker, facilitator, and founder of Integrate Play Solutions, Kirsten is helping teams improve creativity, culture, communication, and psychological safety utilizing Applied Improvisation and LEGO Serious Play.

[@KirstenPlaying \(X/Twitter\)](#)

## WHAT'S HOT





## WHERE WE ARE HEADING

As I reflect on the incredible journey we've shared through the magazine pages, I'm filled with gratitude for the vibrant community that has grown around our publication. Much appreciation goes to the Magazine Staff team members (see next page). The entire Editorial Team are all volunteers! The power of improvisation has united us all (the staff, authors and readers) in a unique and profound way.

Improvisation, as a dynamic performing art form, has gone global. We can find an improv show in Chicago, Oslo, Shanghai, Johannesburg, São Paulo and many corners around the world. With the passing of the much respected impro giant, Keith Johnstone (1933–2023), in March, generations of improvisors continue the journey, on and off the stage, blending the teachings from other giants, Viola Spolin (1906–1994) and Del Close (1934–1999). Performers are often Applied Improvisation practitioners, many of whom are active in neighboring disciplines, such as consulting, coaching, training, psychology and more. The communities cross-train!

Applied Improvisation has increasingly gained traction in the past 20 years. It is becoming global, and will transcend borders. Go wide and go deep!

Yes, and look at the authors in this Issue! We have 22 authors from 10 countries and three continents, with diverse backgrounds. For future issues, I call on and welcome writers from currently underrepresented geographies, such as Asia, Africa and Latin America. The stories and insights that you are about to entrust us with will not only enrich our understanding of this dynamic field but also inspire countless individuals to embrace the spirit of improvisation. I'm excited to see how the seeds we've planted together will continue to flourish.

Your feedback to this Issue is very much welcome. Please use [THIS LINK](#), it takes only a few minutes. If you would like to volunteer for magazine production or send in general comments or questions, please reach out at [appliedimprovisationmagazine@gmail.com](mailto:appliedimprovisationmagazine@gmail.com). Let's AIM HIGH.

Improvise on!

**Bright Su**  
January 2024

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Making your partner look good

Yes, and...

Atmosphere of play

Curious listening

Complete acceptance



Flexibility/Spontaneity

Focus on the here and now

Risk taking

Personal awareness/mindfulness

Balance of freedom and structure