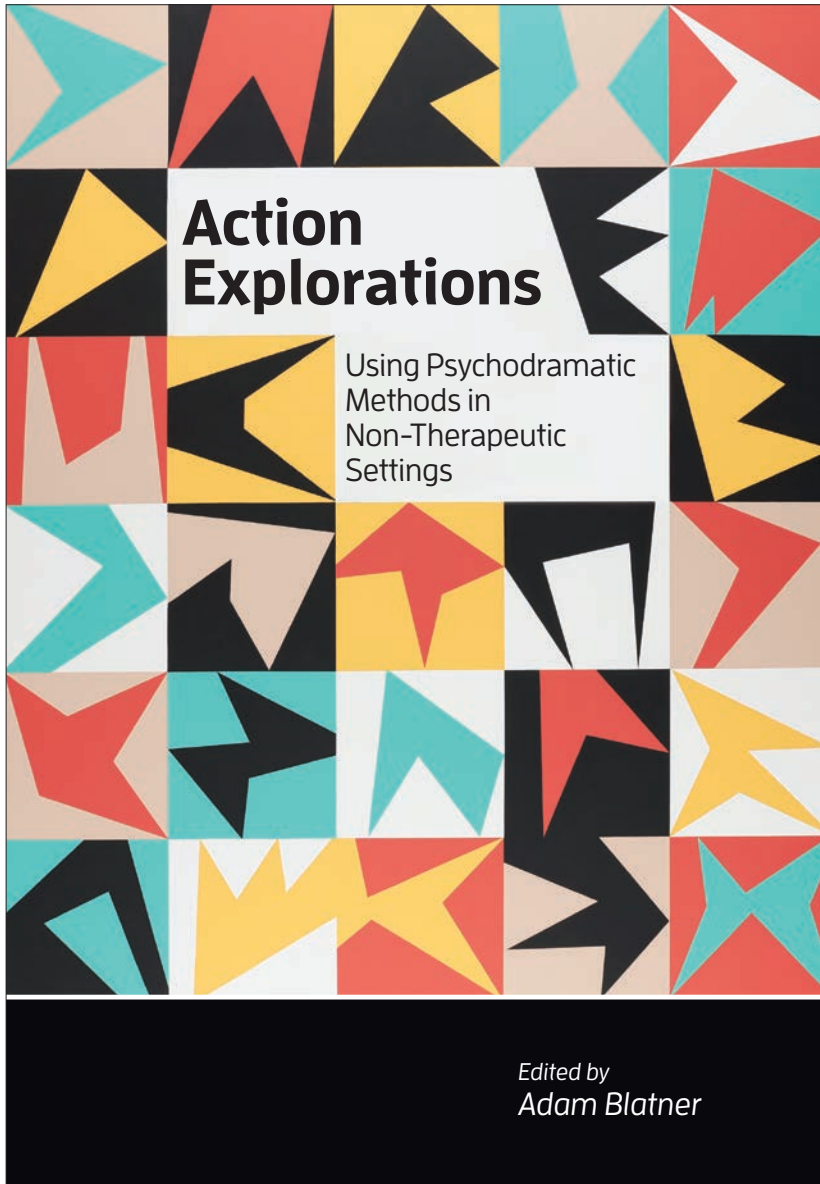


Enhanced Simulations Beyond Psychotherapy

An Introduction to Applied Improvisation
Beyond Comedy and Before Therapy

Robert Lowe

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An Introduction to Applied Improvisation Beyond Comedy and Before Therapy

Robert Lowe

Jacob L. Moreno was an Improviser before he was a therapist. Improvisation¹ is an ancient survival skill developed by all mammals, and probably other species. It is found first in the joyousness of play and playfulness. Improvisational Comedy has a distinct branch in the history of human theatre.

Applied Improvisation² is a maturing, formal field of study with a burgeoning professional consulting practice, in a growing global industry. AI is being successfully used in the areas of organizational development, all levels of education, personal development, business management, action-based consulting, disaster preparedness and relief, and the medical field.³ Improvisation principles are being introduced in coursework in prestigious business, and law schools across America, and increasingly around the world. Literature in the field is expanding both in quality, and quantity.

Modern Improvisation as a “thing” is less than 100 years old, and a basic introduction is all that can be accomplished in a single chapter. You may find any number of statements that can make you tilt your head, and squinch your eyes in question. If this happens please look to the bibliography, and the growing body of literature for clarification.

1 The words Improvisation and their adjectives are capitalized as they are in my books in an effort to help formalize the images of the profession.

2 The terms, Applied Improvisation, AI, and Improvisation, will be used pretty much interchangeably.

3 Boynton, Beth, *Medical Improv: A New Way to Improve Communication (With 15 activities you can teach)*, 2017.

. . .

This introduction begins with the passion of Improvisation, and by distinguishing Applied Improvisation from therapy. Terms of art will aid understanding, and a distinction will be made between AI and comedy.

We will touch on Improv as an Action Methodology and its illuminating back story, and we will discuss the major schools of thought and practice.

Mention will be made of successful Applied Improvisation practices, and some of the powers of Improvisation will be detail There are suggestions for putting Improvisation into work and play, deeper considerations, and specific steps about how to get there.

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AI engages powers of craft, art, psychology, sociology, philosophy, and science. In 2000, my book, *Improvisation, Inc.: Harnessing Spontaneity to Engage People and Groups*,⁴ was the first in North America to specifically detail using this methodology for working with business, organizational development, and human communication and collaboration, though there had been other books dealing with various aspects of the applications of Improvisation.

When modern Improvisation began, early in the 20th century, it was a subset of sociology and Improvisational Theatre. By mid-century the rise of a global movement had been seeded. There are distinctions from other forms in which improvisation techniques may be used that are needed to achieve a clear introduction.

The fields of simulation, Role play, Psychodrama, Sociodrama, psychotherapy, and Improvisation all have made distinguished contributions to the history of human development. Each has methods, and means, that are specific to their professions. Each with strengths and weaknesses that vary within their values, uses, and constraints.

Because of the durable histories of these unique systems of working with people, we can run into misleading understanding when the names of these fields are used while introducing applications of Improvisation.

When working beyond psychology, and outside the theatre, the terms “Role Play” and “simulation” have taken on “brand” identity. A common thought when the term is used is, “Oh, I have done that before, so I know what this is.”

A subtle reason to exercise caution in the use of these terms is a phenomenon which leads to something we call “script writing mind.” This is ultimately the desire to control the moment, and usually appears in people who are new to Improvisation. It is a very normal response; an effort to get a leg up on what is going on. It starts with labels. “If I can name it, I can control it.” The problem

⁴ Robert Lowe, *Improvisation, Inc. Revised 2017: An Applied Improvisation Handbook*, 2017, Atlanta, GA, RLJ Publications.

is that labeling tends to cover creative spontaneity. Effective Improvisation creates interactive practice in not labeling things.

An Element of Passion

When Improvisers describe the uses of this lovely art, the most consistent themes are in terms of passion, life change, love, and human connection. These are all factors that may be used by individuals, or groups of practitioners engaging in simulation, or Role Play, Psychodrama, or Sociodrama. At the same time there have been no global movements in these marvelous arenas. This is because these fields are used primarily as techniques, methodologies, tools, with education paths, and required credentials.

Improvisation is more than a technique operating through its own lens. First, it is a tool making tool. Then it is a personal and professional practice. It is a discipline that can take an entire lifetime to fully develop. Improvisation is accessible to all ages, and backgrounds.

One can approach Improv from a host of directions as: audience member, workshop attendee, as an independent troupe member, theatre troupe member, teacher, director, Artistic Director, or Program Manager. It can also be approached from the perspective of an Applied Improvisation student, practitioner, specialty program participant, developer, leader ('Autism Improvised', legal education programs, Medical Improv', *etc.*), or academician. In the industry we have at least one published Ed.D, and emerging Master's, and PhD programs around the world.

The available path to high level leadership runs from non-governmental service to business and corporate management, to local leadership, to global leadership, to genuine innovator, and to author. Among the most successful current professional practitioners there are individuals generating six and seven figure incomes, and new companies engaging growing numbers of employees.

Beyond this there is fame, fortune, and influence available in the entertainment and media industries. Stephen Colbert is a prominent Improvisation artist. Actor, author, Alan Alda has become an Improvisation educator in the world of scientists, and "Saturday Night Live" has a bully pulpit.

Following this growth and development are tens of thousands of children being introduced to Improvisation from elementary, and middle schools, through high schools, colleges and universities across the nation, and around the world.

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Further distinguishing definitions may be helpful in considering this presentation of Applied Improvisation as a unique methodology. By my definition,

simulations at the professional or formal levels, are technical events.⁵ Among the highest examples are in training fields with airlines, and naval pursuits, space and ocean exploration, and fire and disaster control.

By this definition, Role Play in therapy, training, and organizational development can rarely reach the definition of simulation, except as in a technical setting such as having an Air Traffic Controller take the pilots chair in a real airline simulator. The developing field of Virtual Reality devices and programs is creating new considerations in this regard.

As this anthology is about action exploration outside the therapy fields, further comments regarding “Role Play” will be as used in business and organizational development, rather than coming from technology. The roots of Role Play here are in the theatre, Improvisation, and the work of Jacob Moreno. This model uses scenes and scenarios that prompt participants into taking part in a variety of “action explorations.” These all occur in the mind, and in the interchanges.

As described by Adam Blatner,⁶ Role Play is a venerated derivative of Sociodrama, and “It has been known as a method in education since the late 1940s, but there were enough problems with its use that it hasn’t fully ‘caught on.’” It has also been used in business and Organizational Development for nearly as long. This is the arena from which the “labeling” phenomenon most often arises. Adam Blatner also notes that “The most common problem with role playing is that of the leader not appreciating its essential nature: It is an improvisational procedure, and improvisation requires a feeling of relative safety.”

. . .

Improvisation is a physical as well as a verbal activity; an engaging action method. It is not a thought process. It is the active embodiment of accommodation learning.⁷

As a fundamental survival form it is also a requirement of the ability to play. It is a major component of all interesting human conversation, and appears, now and again, in all art forms including: music, dance, fine art, sculpture, architecture, street theatre, and performance art. Applied Improvisation is a

5 My experience with simulators started as a four year old when my brothers let me “fly” an early Civil Air Patrol trainer. More formal training came with a U.S. Navy Officer Candidate School WWII ship convoy simulator, and with the first Navy OCS computerized battleship simulator, and with a number of Navy Fire Fighting School simulators.

6 Adam Blatner, “Role Playing in Education”, <https://www.blatner.com/adam/pdntbk/rplayedu.htm>

7 Piaget’s definition of a primary learning format.

wonder much like language, musical notation, and DNA. When its alphabet is understood whole worlds can be illuminated.

. . . .

A delightful definition of Improvisation comes from *The Hitch Hiker's Guide to the Galaxy*.⁸ A massive computer is asked the answer to the ultimate question of “life, the universe and everything.” After 7.5 million years of calculation, the computer says, “The answer to the question of life, the universe, and everything is . . . is . . . 42!” It happens that in ASCII computer language code the number 42 stands for the asterisk symbol (*), which translates as, “Whatever you want it to mean,” which is a great meaning for the “applied” part of Applied Improvisation.

The bottom line is that this common human survival skill is described today as the foundation, and philosophy of a global movement based in the most natural human balance between expression as a confident, vulnerable, genuine individual, and engaging as a vital member of a collaboration — wherein the aim is change, laughter, communication, safety, spontaneity, and the playfulness needed for survival and prosperity by advanced mammals on this delicate and complex planet of ours.

In its finest forms, Improvisation is most beautifully defined by the title of the great oral history by Jeffrey Sweet. Improvisation really is, *Something Wonderful Right Away*.⁹

AI vis a vis Therapy

Many have asked why I have kept my Improvisation at the level of humor and laughter in all venues. Improvisation works best when there is a safe working space for interpersonal development, and where spontaneity and creativity are primary factors. The conditions in the processes of Improvisation, can reach deeply into the individual psyche. Exploration into matters that are too serious can open tender issues that may not be able to be adequately supported in group gatherings.

The use of Improvisation as therapy is a very serious matter. Without the presence of a trained and credentialed therapist, and without a therapeutic contract, and appropriate support, and ethical systems in place, its use can be quite disturbing, and possibly dangerous. At the same time there is a resurgence of interest in Applied Improvisation by therapy practitioners. The Second Annual Improv & Psychology Conference will be held in 2019.

8 A Hitchhikers Guide first appeared on BBC Radio 4, 1978.

9 Sweet, Jeffrey, *Something Wonderful Right Away: An Oral History of The Second City and Compass Players*, 1978, New York, NY, Limelight Editions

Even with care taken regarding language, structures, guidelines, and environment, personal realities may be touched on, and the Professional Improviser (Applied Improviser, workshop leader, teacher, or director) must be aware of ramifications of the depth of this work, both for the individual, and for the gathering. This is also why I encourage foundational reading, as suggested by the bibliography.

The underlying, and saving truth is that laughter is its own healing wonder, which can clear problems as they surface, without specific intervention or intention on the part of the leadership. In the presence of laughter, we simply feel better to begin with. Laughter has long been known for its restorative qualities. Being in the presence of laughter generated by a collaborative human event is like being in an old growth forest on a sweet spring morning. Wholesome laughter can have the same effect as a deep embrace. The nature of good Improvisation is such that laughter is its constant companion, and laughter, with its varieties and intensity are a most amazing barometer, thermometer, and group analysis tool.¹⁰

When Improvisation is working, we begin to move in a new state of consciousness; a mindset in which our first instinct is to simply accept whatever is going on as an offer with which one is to become engaged. The added commitment is the guidance and support needed to use one's most genuine self and thus to help everyone involved to play together. The state, and the laughter become infectious.

Terms of Art

There is an emerging technical language in the field of Applied Improvisation, with terms of art, and of distinction that are important within the discipline.

Improvisation is the concept of using nothing except what is at hand and a set of relationship tools for generating spontaneity, creativity, communication, and unknown-unknowns.

The form is used in theatre, in comedy, in most music, dance, fine art, presentation art, poetry, creative writing, Zen pottery, parenting, and in simply being a human being.

Honesty refers to the convention that if one has thought of an idea before the current moment, or has used a line or idea before, it is no longer Improvisation.

Call Back is a term for a comedic technique used wherein someone refers to a word, or idea that was mentioned (or suggested by an audience call-out) earlier in the current performance or workshop. If not over-used, it pleases, surprises, and demonstrates that the players or participants are also listening all the time.

¹⁰ Improvisation, Inc. "Wholesome Laughter Leads the Way", Page 128.

Improv is an abbreviation for the entire field of Improvisation, or any part of it, or its general use in the world.

Improvisational Comedy Theatre is among the oldest, and newest forms of the theatre arts. Its modern form began in 1955 with “The Compass Players” in Chicago, Illinois. Its most ancient use being prehistoric.

“*The Improv*” is a franchise business name of a great number of Stand-up comedy clubs across America.

Impro is a word coined by Keith Johnstone to describe the altered state of consciousness which is active when a person, or group, or whole theater are engaged at the highest levels of possibility. It creates a palpable sensation. Somewhat akin to being “in the zone” in sports metaphors.

Side Coaching is the term for a technique taught by Viola Spolin where the director or teacher makes comments, from outside the playing area. The players are instructed to completely ignore the comments as they play. The comments are not intended to effect adjustment at the time offered. The remarks are intended to provide feedback, and to encourage more functional action.

Debriefing is an organized discussion about whatever just happened, whether following a show, during a rehearsal or workshop, with the group of participants, within any set in the group, or with individuals.

Rehearsal is a term often used by an Improv Troupe when working toward a public presentation. The work may include games to be played, and perhaps the players to be used in particular games, and the order of the games to be played, and sometimes the director or emcee is selected.

An Offer is any premise or situation presented by any participant, or observer.

Games (Exercises, techniques, forms, structures) are all mechanisms used to advance scenes, and explorations in Improvisational theatre. Viola Spolin detailed many, and more are being invented all the time. For work with non-theatre people it is often best to use terms like exercises, techniques structures, and forms.

Sketch Comedy is normally sets of people presenting scripted work which is often developed using Improv methodologies.

Stand-up Comedy is normally one person telling jokes or stories with punchlines. This will be explored in detail below.

Applied Improvisation vis a vis Comedy

The entry of Improvisation into the realm of the serious is both inhibited, and advanced by its strong associations with comedy, which is often seen as the epitome of the not-serious. In the pursuit of Applied Improvisation, it is helpful to understand the development, growth, and range of Improvisational Theatre, and its relationship to comedy.

A distinction is to be made when referring to Stand-up comedy because it is only vaguely related to Improvisation. Stand-up has its foundations in

jokes and punch-lines. Its history comes from ancient parodists, story tellers, and songsters, and thereafter primarily from Vaudeville, night clubs, and early television. While there are some interesting intersections with clowning, and Marionette, Improvisation and Stand-up do not share a history until recently, due to prominent cross-over players.

Improvisation for presentation has its origin as far back as the Etruscans to Oscans, and the “*Fabula Atellana*,”¹¹ with great later contributions through The Comedia dell’arte, (also known as “The Italian Comedy”), best revealed by Pierre Louis Duchartre’s 1929 work, *The Italian Comedy*; a truly magnificent presentation of the era. Theatre greats, Konstantin Stanislavski, and Berthold Brecht influenced early Improvisation pioneers. The practices and philosophies of the two arts are exactly opposite in many ways.

Stand-up comedy is usually a solo endeavor, Improv is almost always a collaboration. Stand-up is normally scripted; Improvisation does not work with scripting except in specialty formats. A Stand-up show can be repeated; an Improv show cannot. Stand-up depends on jokes and punchlines; Improvisation prefers not to use jokes at all. The goal of Stand-up is laughter; the product of Improvisation is relationship. Failure in Stand-up is called “dying on stage”; failure in Improvisation is called another chance to build something new out of thin air. A stand-up practitioner is called a comedian or a comic; an Improviser is called an Improviser. Both produce laughter, though for quite different reasons. Improvisation came from the desire to promote positive social change. Stand up is developing further in this direction.

Stand-up is as different from Improv as throwing pottery is different from oil painting. However, Improvisation is attracting a great number of stand-up comedians who are finding the skills of great value.¹² Many Improvisers will go through a period or course in Stand-up to strengthen individual presence and personal comedy timing. There are also, some great comedians who have come directly from Improvisation, including Robin Williams, Dave Chappelle, and Jonathan Winters.

Improvisation as an Action Methodology

Improvisation is both an old friend, and a newcomer to the world of serious methodologies. This action is what we call “Applied Improvisation.” It is a complex, self-developing, and rapidly expanding system with structures, axioms, principles, tools, techniques, and patterns that can be actively applied to virtually any situation, in any venue, at any time, where people are engaging

11 See <https://prezi.com/oi4nmx4dtmsf/etruscan-and-oscan-theatrical-influences-in-rome/>

12 See the international work of the Applied Improviser Belina Raffy, and her development of “Sustainable Stand Up” comedy at www.sustainablestandup.com

one another. At the same time, the methods can gather huge amounts of information about the people, and dynamics involved in a gathering.

Before committing to an exploration into this young field it is good to understand that Improvisation is about taking action, and teaching action, and it is accomplished by guiding communal activity. As an explorer and leader in the field, after about a chapter of discussion, it is time to get up and do something about it.

The objective of this chapter is to introduce a doorway to what can be accomplished with Improvisation. After a basic introduction the next steps require showing up where Improvisation is happening, and immersing oneself in the practice, for at least a few hours per week, over a course of at least a few months. This is quite easily, and joyfully done, and it is pretty much a minimum investment if one wishes to use Applied Improvisation effectively while working with others, or oneself.

The first action step is to attend a live Improvisation show, or another, with the work of this anthology in mind if you have been before. The next action will be to take at least one set of introductory Improv classes leading to a showcase. These will almost certainly be available in your nearest large, or next to large, city or at a college, or university near you. Watching Improvisation on television has value, and is quite fun yet, it does not count as a live Improv show because, so far, almost all television work has been presented in edited form.

The next required action in this quest is reading. Most of the important published Improvisers, will be included in the guided bibliography at the end of this chapter. There is also an extended bibliography in *Improvisation, Inc.*, along with a work-in-progress historical timeline.

There is also great value in watching selected videos: TED talks, interviews, classic shows, and from related fields; with examples below.¹³ These do not qualify as live performance.

If you are adventurous you may seek one (or more) of the 150 Improv Festivals going on in a given year, in any of 14 countries, on five continents, around our little globe.

Back Story

Improvisation and psychology share a developmental crossroad that leads through sociometry and sociatry therapies from the work, and play, of Jacob L. Moreno. He brought *Stegreiftheater*, “The Theatre of Spontaneity,” to New

¹³ TEDx by Dave Morris <https://ed.ted.com/on/1wZorQmq>

Interview with David Shepherd, (history) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t5wgtkgCH3A>

There is a Mike Nichols and Elaine May classic performance on YouTube: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MYSjdiFPkY>

A fine demonstration of Aikido may be viewed at <http://www.dailymotion.com/video/x2ik3n>

York City around 1925 where he and his playmates read newspaper headlines, and immediately created scenes from the suggestions. This was long before he became seriously interested in psychotherapy. His work, still influenced by Improvisation, founded its own branch leading to the development of Psychodrama.¹⁴ Adam Blatner tells us there are now more people engaged in Applied Improvisation than in Psychodrama, and drama therapies combined.

Improvisation continued its development through sociometry and into sociology, entertainment, and play. Serious Improvisation has a rich history leading to the inevitability of its applications. It was first a nearly magical delight, and then a technique, then a discipline, a field of study, a philosophy, and now a professional “practice,”¹⁵ and a versatile action methodology.

Neva L. Boyd,¹⁶ was a teacher and an academic authority on the games of children of Denmark and Norway. From the early 20th century, through the 1960s, Ms. Boyd was a professor at Northwestern University, and a lifetime resident of Gad Hills Center, and of Hull House in Chicago. She is credited with being a pioneer in the field of “hands on” Sociology. Among other wonders, Ms. Boyd introduced the use of games as rehabilitation therapy in Veterans Hospitals across the America.

Neva Boyd’s student was Viola Spolin, who is considered the mother of modern Improvisational comedy theatre, for her explorations, her books, and her workshops, and for being the mother of Paul Sills, one of the founding members of the world’s first modern Improvisation Comedy theatre in 1955,¹⁷ and a co-founder of Chicago’s “Second City Improv Theatre” in 1959.¹⁸ Viola’s work and heritage has led the branch of Improvisation for comedy and audiences.

Schools of Thought

I am currently aware of at least eight basic “schools of thought” that have been most influential in the ancestry, history, and creations of styles being used to guide our work and students.

14 Moreno, Jacob, *Who Shall Survive? Foundations of Sociometry, Group Psychotherapy, and Sociodrama*, 1934, Washington, DC, Nervous and Mental Disease Publishing Company

15 Professionals are generally referred to as Applied Improvisation Practitioners, Consultants, and Workshop Leaders. As of 2018 Credentialing, and certification systems are developing on a global scale.

16 Neva L. Boyd, <https://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/people/boyd-neva-leona/>

17 Coleman, Janet, *The Compass: The Story of the Improvisational Theatre that Revolutionized the Art of Comedy in America*, 1995, New York, NY, Alfred A. Knopf.

18 McCrohan, Donna, *The Second City: A Backstage History of Comedy’s Hottest Troupe*, 1987, New York, NY, Perigee Books / The Putnam Publishing Group.

The premier schools come from the lives of Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone, David Shepherd, Willie Willey, Del Close, and Charna Halpern. Influential guidance has come from Frost and Yarrow in the UK, and in the U.S. from The 2nd City Chicago, iO in Chicago, United Citizen's Brigade (UCB) in New York, from Sanford Meisner and from other independent teachers. There are also a huge, and growing number of formal Improvisational Theatres around the world, many of which have created unique variations. Large communities are driving this global development of Improvisational Comedy activity—which is effectively serving as an “undergraduate school” system for Applied Improvisation practitioners, and the most effective sources of opportunity, clientele, and causes.

The most wonderful thing about these developments is that each and every way; each path, each school, each AI provider, and each expression of Improvisation is a very best. Each formulation appeals to different and diverse assortments of people. Each way can take a lifetime of work, play, and study, and the gathering storm is spreading, and growing like individual flower species, to attract people of different viewpoints and emotional tempers, while each school is ultimately a facet of the same diamond.

The marvelous anthology edited by Adam Blatner, and Daniel Wiener, *Interactive and Improvisational Drama: Varieties of Applied Theatre and Performance*, captures no less than 32 examples of forms being used and developed in the use of this fine art.

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For nearly 40 years it has been my privilege to have observed impressive social development in people of all ages and backgrounds who have been exploring participation in performance Improvisation. Moreover, it has been my great pleasure to have watched the lives, and families of a great number of people being transformed by incorporating the tenants and practices of this truly sweet, and gentle action methodology into their lives.

The spirals of Improvisation and therapy are turning back on themselves again, as wonderfully introduced by Daniel J. Wiener in *Rehearsals for Growth: Theatre Improvisation for Psychotherapists*.

From here we see a bountiful, global blossoming of Applied Improvisation.

Successful AI Practitioners

Practitioners today are successfully using Applied Improvisation beyond obvious business and general communication applications such as team building, problem solving, and presentation skills development. New explorations include work with people in the Autism Spectrum, with Alzheimer's patients and their families, with negotiation teams in clinical, and hospital settings, with students of all ages and learning abilities, in language education, with

people who have Parkinson's Disease, among drug abusers, among prisoners, in community building; with bullying issues in middle schools, in the work of disaster preparedness and relief in the Philippines, with the global work of the Red Cross/Red Crescent Climate Center,¹⁹ and with Central American refugee children coming, battered, and unaccompanied, across the border into the United States. The list grows as the movement spreads like dandelion seeds upon the wind.

The presence of Improvisation in all its forms has experienced extraordinary growth during the most recent forty years. The expansion of Improvisational Comedy on video, and in clubs, and theaters, has introduced the basic joyous concepts to millions of people around the world which has made it easier to present the concepts to people, businesses, and organizations not familiar with the form.

Applied Improvisation, and Improvisational Comedy can be found all over the developed world, with more than 6,600 members of the international association known as The Applied Improvisation Network (AIN),²⁰ and another nineteen thousand in other online networks.²¹ This past year has seen a growth in the number of professional conferences around the world as well.

Powers of Improvisation

It has long been recognized that we may experience an entire family in a home, a city in a single neighborhood, all life in a strand of DNA, all of thought in a single moment, and the universe in a drop of water. We have been told by explorers of the quantum fields that the center of any atom is in a relationship with the center of all atoms.

An extension of this reality is told by a story about the founder of the revolutionary martial art of Aikido. His name was Morihei Ueshiba, and he was called O Sensei.²² When asked how he was able to gather vast power in his just over five-foot tall body. It was reported that he said, "I connect my hara (the center of balance of the human body) to the center of the Earth, and let the Earth do the work."

19 Pablo Suarez, <http://www.climatecentre.org/about-us/our-people>

20 See <http://appliedimprovisation.network/>

21 A Google search of Facebook sites offers an introduction to the field: "Improv for Humanity", "Improv Orchestra", "United Atlanta Improv", "Improv Improv Improvisation Theatre", "My Improv Addiction", "Fans O' Fun", "Improvisation theatre groups for players worldwide", "Atlanta Improv Documentary", "Improvisation as Meditation", "Improv Spirit", and "Mindful Improvisation."

22 "O Sensei" means honored teacher. Stevens, John, *Invincible Warrior: A Pictorial Biography of Morihei Ueshiba, Founder of Aikido*, 1997, Boston, MA & London, Shambhala Publications, Inc

We connect our consciousness to physical and emotional realities engaged by the concepts of time and attention that are encouraged by the practices, and then we let Improvisation do the work.

• • •

As being shown by this anthology, every skill-set, and all studied practices have practical applications in varieties of circumstances. From the world of building, we get such wonderful success wisdom as, “Cut to shape, hammer to fit, and paint to match.” This kind of clarity can work wonders, from dealing with organizations, to creating colored paper art. Carpenters, and those who use saws tell us to, “Measure twice. Cut once,” applying directly to anything with permanent, dire consequences.

From running we get persistence, from music we get rhythm, manual dexterity, and emotion; from study we get focus, perspective, organization, and action; and from any “practice” or training we get discipline, embodiment, internal measurement, ritual, craft, art, science, discovery, invention, and more. While it is true that anything can be made to apply to any-thing. Improvisation is particularly flexible and facile in its universal application.

• • •

A deep power of Improvisation lies in the fact that the essential skills are natural to most mammals, and intrinsic to surviving in an uncertain world. The early methods in this skill development are referred to as play, curiosity, exploration, and practice being in ever changing relationships, with ever changing realities.

Another of the powers comes from the fact that when used in its optimal wonder, it operates simultaneously on all levels of experience: thought, imaginary, emotional, physical, verbal, vibrational, electromagnetic, metaphysical, and spiritual included. Each of these levels can be accessed, and used, to influence the others. The structures of the processes prompt participants to keep moving between various levels of experience, and eventually to the ability to do so in daily life.

The magic, for me, is that one does not need to know that all of this is going on for the benefits to inure to the participants. The “games” are fun. The engagement with all of it is fulfilling and satisfying. It calls on me as an individual, and as a member of a collaboration to imagine and achieve an enlightenment, change a life, educate a workgroup, delight an audience, and to be part of a global movement all at the same time.

Putting Improvisation to Work, and Play

A first, most important value in Improvisation is its great simplicity. It is a fun, activity centered practice, founded on as many (or as few) as 25 simple

guidelines, In less than an hour we can teach half a dozen best practices, and a few “games” that will allow almost anyone to engage any-one, or any gathering in the activities and exploration of this art.

The learning of any five to fifteen key principals will allow a conscious, diligent and playful person to work effectively with others in any venue, from the home, to the streets. to the community, to the classroom, to the stage, to the boardroom.

With 25 or more of the “exercises, techniques, forms, or structures” mastered, with any of a number of good books in hand (see the bibliography), and with a generous heart, one can begin to teach the craft/art/philosophy/science of Improvisation for play, for personal development, for community and issue activism, and as a profession. Remember, as noted above, an immersion in the activity of Improvisation is truly necessary for the best use of this work.

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As with all great endeavors 90% can be learned within a year or so of gentle, laughter-filled wonder. The other ten percent, and more complete understanding, will take the rest of one’s life.

The foundational source of Improvisation is in the complexity of mind, including the conscious, unconscious, subconscious, semi-conscious, altered states of conscious, the unknown unknown, and the over-mind.²³ Each of these complex and interactive aspects of perception, contain implications in the work of Applied Improvisation that can be accessed, and used in a nearly universal set of venues.

We demonstrate natural unconscious, or semi-conscious improvisation in many unplanned, usually physical activities such as walking quickly over uncertain ground, or making our way in the unfamiliar dark, walking in a crowd, or talking with a stranger. Subconscious reactions are often triggered by new experiences of human engagement in the playfulness. Clear, grounded consciousness is developed for effective listening, which allows us to accept as offers, new information, and interchanges that generate unexpected, unplanned responses. The responses generate new information and interchange. This cycle helps us to maintain the sense and presence of our most genuine personal self, in current time.

In Improvisation we teach folks to adopt an attitude, and a verbal response to new information in the form of the words, “Yes, and . . .” This discipline creates a commitment that requires accepting what is offered, and offering some new information or element to the interchange, which when accepted with “Yes, and . . .” begins an exchange cycle. Engaging thus, with the guidance of

²³ de Chardin, Pierre Teilhard, *The Phenomenon of Man*, 1959, New York, NY, Harper and Row Publishers.

an Improvisation Leader, allows individuals and groups to activate exceptional interpersonal connections, and to generate delicious levels of communication, creativity, spontaneity, and collaboration.

We live in a world of multileveled rhythms. In good Improvisation there is a simple rhythm based on the “Yes, and . . .” personal exchange.

“Hi there. I’m Adam.”

“Yes, and I’m Eve.”

“Yes, and you are the Moon.”

“Yes, and you are the Sun.”

“Yes, and we are the world.”

Dealing with the fire of Improvisational Creativity will almost always look and feel somewhat disorganized. This is partially because creativity at this level produces truly new things that have not yet been labeled and categorized. Goal orientation in an Improvisation activity generally limits the scope of the process, and of the promise of the event. As we begin to heed, and engage in Improvisational guidelines, frameworks, feedback, and tracking devices such as debriefing, we begin to understand that disorganization within can generate reorganization on the outside, without the need for “scripted” intervention.

Experience has shown us that we can achieve greater outcomes, and discover the communications and connections needed for people to meet specific ambitions which can be more perfectly articulated, with the insight gained during the Improvisation event.

We find an equilibrium in Improv that comes from a reality that our minds, and experiences seek to create equivalents, and familiar patterns. While there are direct correlations between what we think, and what we are doing; between what we believe is going on, and what is happening in reality, these relationships can be easily twisted askew and made subject to the whims of our massive neuro-electric system, and wave fields. When we engage in professionally guided AI events, the relationships can also be acknowledged in the presence of light, collaboration, joyfulness, and safety, and thus allowed to work with the same kind of unexplained influence as gravity.

The human electrochemical system works, whether in imagination, or reality, much like any of the four fundamental physical powers of nature: weak nuclear force, strong nuclear force, electromagnetic force, and gravitational force. Our mental/physical systems create field events, in which relationships, and changes occur, creativity bends space, and enlightenment is generated by forces functioning at a variety of angles in response to one another.

The action field of Improvisation can be described in terms of multiple sets of vibrations. We are made of vibrations, and we live as compound-complex waves, that interact with each other in noticeable patterns. Our available sound waves interact in very physical multi-harmonics, as with a symphony orchestra,

or sonic boom. Rhythms, natural and otherwise, do wondrous things with each other, and with our own psychological and psychic senses. We talk of these wondrous vibratory patterns in terms of “environment,” and “atmosphere.” We use words describing feelings, and emotions to explain events and places: “It feels comfortable here.” “It feels safe here.” “That feels funny.”

Deeper Considerations

For a long time, I considered myself to be capable of speech. The skill developed before I even knew what it was. Then I began the study of speech, and human communication, and have spent 55 years in the wonder that all the possible thoughts that can be expressed, in the English language alone, have yet to be even touched by the available combinations of 26 letters, and 14 punctuation marks. Applied Improvisation works like this. It is not possible to exhaust the range of any of the forms or structures.

For a long time, I walked, and danced, polkas and shoddishes, waltzes and Tangos, two steps, and the hora, thinking, without thought, that I knew how to walk and dance. Then I discovered the divine martial art of Aikido, where my teachers taught me the concept of *maai*, being the perfect distance between my center of gravity, and the centers of gravity of all people and things with which I can interact as a conscious being.

I have spent 40 years learning how to transport my weight, and physical design through our pervasive gravity field, in dynamic relation to other moving bodies: people, falling things, doors, cars, cats, and more of the unknown unknown. I still did not really know how to dance. Then I met Judith Greer Essex who opened the portals of Improvisational Dance, and my body being took flight in the freedom of the structure, just as a bird does with the structure of her wings. Awareness of these elements of physicality are fundamental to the uses of high level Applied Improvisation.

For a long time, I sang, and played instruments, thinking I knew how to make music. Then Jonathan Glazier introduced me to the work of Harry Partch, which introduced me to the infinite number of intervals, and the endless combinations of sound available in a single octave, and the capacity of the human ear to hear so much within such a small range of sound vibration. This led to variable tuning intervals, and whole new modes of music, not based on a 12-tone scale;²⁴ music extending into the nature of chords and multileveled harmonics. Attention to personal and group harmonics advances deep Improvisational life and group changes.

For a long time, I thought I understood rhythm; that I knew how to keep time with the music. Then came Improvisation and I was delighted to discover

24 Partch, Harry, *Genesis of a Music: An Account of a Creative Work, it's Roots and it's Fulfillments*, 1949, New York, NY, De Capo Press.

that rhythm is not to be understood at all; it is to be felt in the beat of the heart, the tap of the toe, the sway of the whole body, the motion of the people, places, and things brought to our attention when we are engaged in “Impro.”

. . .

Everything is always revolving between giving and receiving, which is a highlight of Improvisation. Our world provides the perfect exercise with our breathing. As we breathe in we take in our portion of oxygen which has been exhaled by our planets generous plant life. As we breathe out, we exhale a share of carbon dioxide which is chemical food for our interdependent benefactors.

We cannot take in, nor expel, more than some certain maximum of breath, we can, however, breathe unevenly. We tend to hold, or misuse, our breath when faced with uncertainty or perceived difficulty. It is interesting to know that the patterns are about evenly split between holding after an inbreath, or after an exhale, or in rapid or uneven breathing. Each of these responses creates imbalance. The imbalance will show up in the actions of the body, mind, and spirit, and in the relations of any gathering.

Rhythmic interchange is fundamental to a most powerful aspect of Improvising in all its forms. It provides real time practice in expressing our own, genuine, vulnerable, human individual self, while working in true, deep, fast paced collaboration with others, with our participants, with audience, with cohorts, neighbors, families, and even with ourselves, and the day we seem to be living this day.

The way we feel and move creates wave patterns which we can generate, or moderate—both within our bodies and minds, as well as in and around our environments. Applying these realities to Improvisational gatherings encourages the appearance of true spontaneity, the search for which was a primary motivator for Jacob Moreno.

. . .

Time manipulations provide a marvelous aspect of working with Improvisation. We can conceptualize our experience within time; that is within the present moment, or outside time; that is recalling the past, and beyond time; that is considering the future. We tend to operate in mixed time frame perception with past, present, and future all engaged at once.

Applied Improvisation suggests that when one needs to consider and make plans, it is best to set aside private moments, and to do whatever works best to orient oneself to current time. When speaking of current time, we mean jet pilot current time, marathon runner current time, new mother presence, as

well as *Be Here Now*²⁵ current time. In this state, one can be aware of the past, and mindful of the future, yet not emotionally, or culturally attached to either. It is a lovely state of mind in which to Improvise, to make plans with a world of possibility, creativity, and spontaneity as part of the very structure of the doing.

These steps can also be taken for a clear review of the past, accomplished in current time, as well as with fussing over the future done in current time consciousness. Improvisation forms provide active practice in being engaged with others while in a current state of mind.

The practices required in becoming aware of the power of the current moment are all excellent for developing public presentation, stage, interpersonal communication, and public Applied Improvisation muscles. The positive effect on one's personal life is a collateral wonder.

Each of these time manipulation activities can be done as a personal practice, or as a group game. Each can be done with, or without context. Each will be productive and fun in a direct ratio to the strength of our commitment and enthusiasm. These, along with the developmental suggestions above, will often bear completely unexpected fruit.

Getting There

Small, successful, incremental steps toward the *Impro* generated, creative-collaborative state of consciousness and action, is important when working with Applied Improvisation. Having complete faith in the small set of moments we experience as “now” requires macro-understanding, and micro-action that will achieve extraordinary results. The little, moment by moment things we do, add up to the results we achieve. Only in magic, and genuine inspiration does a whole thing simply appear out of nowhere.

Another perspective that assists the use and development of AI is created by framing Improvisation activity, in terms of analog and digital flow patterns. These depend on the density of the focus of the leadership, and of the gathering. This is the same language that reveals light, indeed all electromagnetic activity, as the action of waves, and as physical photon packets, at the same time, depending on focus.

Imagining works wonderfully in an analog, free flowing state of mind. Action seems to work best as a digital event; doing this, or in making that; though the action of an artist, or a craft person can be both simultaneously. General processing (organizing, prioritizing, matching) is usually a cross-over as with a Venn diagram, and seems to work best when one is switching rapidly between the two perspectives, with attention paid to the rhythm of such a thing. When hard planning is the task, (blueprints, business plans, agendas, logistics),

25 Baba Ram Dass (Dr. Richard Alpert), *Be Here Now*, 1971, San Cristobal, NM, Lama Foundation.

it seems that a clearly digital, measurable, and visible mindset, works well. Then when implementing action, it is often more effective using an analog-waveform approach; engaging and accepting others, and unknown, or unexpected factors with fluidity and the commitment to add material (melody), and vibrations (harmonies) as inspired in balanced Improvisational Symphony.

This duality is also present in our language. The noun is a photon, and the verb is a wave. Being able to see the world around us as both, at the same time, is the nature of “comedic awareness.” Timing, with its penchant for upsetting, or creating balance, is at the center of Improvisational mirth. The speed at which laughter generating timing operates is faster than the speed of thought and translation into language. It must come directly from the spinal cord to the vocal cords. Going through the brain takes too long, though the brain is there, as a watchtower, playing with time, space, and perception, while wielding a veritable pharmacy of hormonal and environmental influences. Developing these skills, and skill sets is worthy of long consideration, and lifetime practice. Such awareness can also be vital to living a rational life.

It has been my experience that, whether or not humor, and timing skills have been developed through nature, nurture, or study, they can be learned by almost anyone who will engage diligently in a group practice that requires being completely in the present moment, and is accompanied by love, light, laughter, and joyfulness, or, as we say in the business, by engaging joyfully in any of the number of paths leading to personal Improvisation, and discovering the essentially infinite applications available with this newcomer to serious Action Methodology.

. . .

We are rightfully concerned by realities of cause and effect, which is a good thing, up to the point that we begin to try too hard to control both sides of the equation through the process of discovery. When practitioners ask how I “make” certain things happen, my response is that, “It is not mine to ‘make things happen’.” Mine is to encourage the appearance of an *Impro* state of consciousness, as suggested by Keith Johnstone.

Though the state of mind varies with miscellaneous human communication factors, there are simple steps that help in achieving the appropriate mindset.

- Let go of the past and the future, and actively pursue staying in the current moment. (Unless the process is a true review as discussed above).

- Try to listen with the whole sensory system (we have at least seven senses²⁶). This requires listening to understand, and to be changed, and to engage with, rather than to merely react to what is being heard.
- We must offer our personal presence as an example of the commitment to accept everything and everyone, at current face value, with the promise to add something to the moment. (“I’m going to shoot you!” “Yes, and when you miss, it will be a great boon to more life than one.”)
- Do this while being mindful of breathing, posture, personal space, odd influences, and being thankful for the miracle of human beings working and playing together.
- We must then be prepared to present what we are doing for public view, engagement, interchange, response, feedback, and anything else from which we can learn.

With this frame of mind, we can collaborate equally in the dozens of immediate little decisions that are required to create action. When this state is engaged by the largest number of participants, wonderful things happen by themselves.

There are, as noted, maybe as many as 25 guidelines that help in the presentation and development of Improvisational Skills. Here are some that I like.

Show up. Be present. Listen. Give and receive in equal measure. Say, “Yes, and . . .”, Do not fear failure. Strive to be honest. Strive to be yourself. Look for real things. Move around physically. Go for relationships. Go for details. Help one another. Have fun. Play playfully. Go for love, light, laughter, and joy. Have more fun.

. . .

“As the Improvisation movement spreads around the globe, I see in the progression, the lowly dandelion. *Taraxacum Officinale*, which comes from the Greek words for ‘disorder’ and ‘remedy’.”

In her appearance she seems to be little more than a flat weed in the grass. On closer inspection it is discovered that her roots are nutritious and health giving, and her leaves a fine tea, and even wine do make.

Then up she sends a spindly stalk to a sort of funny looking, simple yellow flower; able to light up the under-chin of a child, creating laughter, then shared again, and again.

Suddenly a breathtaking ball of faerie fluff appears, for just a moment, before a puff of air sends flying its seeds of ‘Yes, and, I *am* listening to *you*’,

²⁶ The traditional five, plus, at least, a kinesthetic sense, and others.

floating, disbursing to seed again wherever there is enough love, light, laughter, and joy to encourage bliss.”²⁷

. . .

For the simple sake of the fun and the wonder, it will be a good idea to watch Bobbie McFarren and “The power of the pentatonic scale,” available on YouTube.²⁸

Here begins the action part.

Robert Lowe

Robert Lowe is an internationally known Improvisation elder, and founder, of Improvisation Incorporated, a pioneering educational consulting firm. His clients have included AT&T, Georgia Pacific Corporation, The Southern Company, and Medtronic, Inc., among many others.

In Atlanta, Georgia he is known as “The Godfather” of Improvisation, as founder of the first Improv Comedy Troupe, the first Improvisational Comedy Theatre, and the longest running college or university Improvisation program in the Southeastern U.S. He taught in the Communication department at Georgia State University for 13 years.

His book, *Improvisation, Inc.: Harnessing Spontaneity to Engage People and Groups*, published in 2000, was the first full work on the subject in North America. It has been translated into Arabic, and was revised as *Improvisation, Inc.: An Applied Improvisation Handbook*, in 2017.

Robert is the author of *Happy Vernday Birthcox: Revolution, Evolution, and an Uncommon Commune* (1970, 2015, Atlanta, GA, RLJ Publications), and *The Greater Number: A glimpse of our universe and sort of everything in it* (2018, Atlanta, GA, RLJ Publications).

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²⁷ Improvisation, Inc. “Epilogue” p. 244.

²⁸ See <https://youtu.be/ne6tB2KiZuk>

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