

Introducing the Far Games

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Improvisation

Improvisation is the practice of acting and reacting in the moment in response to one's immediate environment. It requires focus and engagement and, when practised with an understanding of the required competencies, it results in the development of new thought processes and the acquisition of new skills. Contemporary forms of improvisation apply to personal and professional development as well as actors' training and stage, radio and television entertainment.

Modern pioneers include:

- Viola Spolin (US 1906 -1994), creator of the Theatre Games and founder of Chicago's Second City;
- Dell Close (US 1934 -1999) initiator of widespread long-form games, and
- Keith Johnston (UK 1933), who first explained the importance of status.

Further reading:

<http://www.imprology.com/resources.html>

The Novelty of Improvisation: Towards A Genre Of Embodied Spontaneity:

http://etd.lsu.edu/docs/available/etd-0701103-135033/unrestricted/Charles_dis.pdf

The recreational scene

Improvisation was popularised by the show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* first created in 1988 on BBC Radio 4, later on Channel 4 television and ABC in the US. By the mid-90s the interest generated by the show started to tail off as the audience tired of the formula. Stand-up comedy was on the way up and most of the improvisation companies active in London at the time slowly disbanded. But the wheel has turned and improvisation is staging a comeback.

Thanks God you're here, a new TV format created in Australia in 2006 on Network Ten, has been sold in Belgium, Denmark, Germany, Israel, Netherlands, Russia, Sweden, and the United States; where the version began airing on April 9, 2007 on NBC. In England, new performing collectives such as the Shrimp Rockets have started to appear again along established fixture such as The Comedy Store Players.

Five years ago it was hard to catch an improvisation show in London outside the Comedy Store and the Spontaneity Shop. Nowadays there is hardly a night without improvisation being performed in one form or another, in the upstairs room of a pub, the stage of a fringe theatre or in more established venues. The Crunchy Frog (www.thecrunchyfrogcollective.com) lists such shows on their constantly updated bulletin board.

Improvisation in business

Improvisation based training can be a particularly powerful team-building tool because it effectively strips away hierarchical power and makes all individuals equal. Role playing exercises give each person the experience of playing both the dominant and subservient role in a relationship. For workplace relationships, this can have a powerful impact because it provides dominant characters with an opportunity to experience a subservient position and vice versa. The result is much greater understanding of the experience of colleagues and a useful way in which to boost esteem and channel the energy of the ego into a more productive and co-operative state.

The case for using improvisation in business training has been made in the US where it is now a common tool. In the UK such an approach is still not widely recognised. Perhaps because of our strong sense of hierarchy or the suspicion we have for anything involving our bodies outside of sports? Yet an increasing number of corporations are turning to improvisation for team building, staff retention, product development and interactive marketing to name but a few applications.

The Applied Improvisation Network is a professional body of affiliated practitioners using improvisation in the corporate world. Its European branch was created in 2006. Its website (www.appliedimprov.net) lists more than 100 practitioners around the world and is a good place to start investigating the business case for improvisation in the work place.

Further reading:
Using Improvisation to Develop Conflict Resolution Skills:
<http://mediate.com/articles/geradi1.cfm>

The Far Games

Remy Bertrand holds regular Far Games classes in London for beginners, improvers and advanced participants. The training is relevant to self and professional developers of all backgrounds. Experienced actors are often found working alongside beginners with no desire to become actors but a

need to overcome shyness, grab some presentation skills or get in touch with their creative side.



The Far Games' website includes workshop templates and more than 50 games often published for the first time.

Principles. If the environment permits, everyone has the capacity for creativity and improvisation. Yet most people would deny it. "My mind would go blank if I had to do that in front of others and I would feel ridiculous". It is therefore important to generate a non-judgmental atmosphere where failing is encouraged as a genuine sign of risk taking rather than stigmatised as some kind of personal short coming.

Learning by doing. Learning to improvise requires experimentation rather than forcing a ready-made list of dos and don'ts on participants. The learning process is structured by physically, intellectually and emotionally engaging games containing problems to be resolved by the players. There are no pre-defined solutions and, within the rules of the games, players come-up with their own answers.

Permission giving. Some people can find it hard to expose themselves, to listen carefully, or to give up control over what happens next. Resisting change is in our nature and the permission to change is a complex and intimate process. Therefore players – especially beginners - shouldn't be put under the spot light but rather be given enough time and mental space to relax and self-adjust.



Warm-up. Training sessions begin with warm-up exercises designed to help players become more aware of their environment and the other players. Putting the emphasis on the outside world diminishes their self-consciousness and allows them to get inspired by their surroundings.

Exercises and games. Examples of basic exercises include mirroring the movements of a partner or spontaneously acting out a scene with or without dialogue. The exercises are design to encourage focus, engagement and

agreement between players. As players become more literate, the exercises turn into more elaborated games where players, acting as an ensemble, are invited to improvise increasingly elaborated scenes and stories. Experienced players might take it to the next level and find out what it is like to play in front of a "real" audience.

Testimonials. Far Games classes in London started in March 2007 and this is what participants said:

"I've really enjoyed the course and I would like to continue the training."
Michelle Hotchkin (Architect)

"I've found the pace and energy very exciting and helpful for grounding of stage awareness." Liam O'Neil (Performer)

"I enjoyed the workshop last Thursday a lot and would be up for more."
Laura Doheler (Dancer)

"The work on high and low status was fascinating." Sylvie Battle (Therapist)

"I'm very happy that I've been taking Remy's workshop for beginners. In the six week course, he helps to lay a strong foundation for the learners, by aiding them to gain an intuitive feel for the general concepts of teamwork, status, and play." Marc Rowland (Maths Teacher)



The London Acting and Improvising Meetup group

In addition to the Far Games, Remy Bertrand is also running the London Acting and Improvising Meetup group. Meetup.com is an online social networking portal that originated in the US to facilitate local group meetings. Users enter their city and the topic they want to meet to explore, and the website helps them to arrange a place and time to meet. Meetup.com was popularised in 2003 when Howard Dean's presidential campaign supporters used the website to gather grassroots support to great effect.

The London Acting and Improvising Meetup group was created on March 2007 and already has more than 250 members. <http://acting.meetup.com/272/>



Remy Bertrand's Bio

Remy Bertrand got his first taste of the stage aged 13 as an extra at his local opera house in Avignon (France), and his first professional acting contract for theatre aged 15. After acting for French theatre and television and writing and performing stage music and radio adverts in Paris, (France), he re-trained aged 23 to obtain a BTS and become an audio-visual production administrator in Marseilles, (France). He went on teaching communication skills and running audio-visual productions before moving to London (UK) in the 90's where theatrical improvisation rekindled his love for acting. Running marketing and translation services by day, he undertook improvisation training with Spontaneous Combustion, the Cardboard Citizen, John Wright and the School of Night to name but a few. He started to teach impro at the French Centre, St Mungo's and YCTV in London, to post-graduate university students in Norwich and in Yemen, to the cast of the first ever Yemeni feature film "A New Day in Old Sana'a".

In 2005, he started to collect his notes to write the Far Games, an evolving collection of impro games for workshops and public performances built around the notion of collective leadership. He is currently facilitating Far Games workshops in London as well as heading the London Acting and Improvising Meetup Group. Remy is a co-founding member of the Applied Improvisation Network European branch. He recently appeared as an actor at the Union Theatre, hosting "Terror 2007", a collection of short plays from the award winning "Sticking Place" theatre company:

<http://arts.guardian.co.uk/theatre/drama/reviews/story/0,,2196621,00.html>