

On the Spot Theater for Extraordinary Living

by Rachel Hamilton

I took my first improv class my freshman year at college and more than twenty-five years later, I still can't get enough. Improv is the gift that keeps giving. Over the years the focus of my devotion to this magical art form has shifted from loving improv just for being so wildly fun to loving improv for what it is to me now, which is nothing short of a spiritual path. The core principles that allow improvisers to create successful "theater on the spot" also happen to be excellent practices for being a great human being and for leading an extraordinary life.

Here are some of the guiding principles of improv that also work beautifully as everyday operating instructions.

Yes And – In the world of improvisation, "yes" and "and" are the two magical words that allow actors to spontaneously co-create theater together. An improviser can step onto a stage and offer any idea with full confidence that their partner(s) will:

Accept their offer – **Yes**
Add to it – **And**

Which could look something like this:

Improviser A: The stars are gorgeous tonight.
Improviser B: **Yes**, they are! **And**, look, there's the Little Dipper!

Or perhaps this:

Improviser A: The stars are gorgeous tonight.
Improviser B: **Yes**, they are! **And** Copernicus, I think you might be on to something about that sun.

The agreement that improvisers have with one another, to always "Yes And" each other's ideas allows them to be wildly creative because they know that wherever they go, they will be supported.

Discovery vs. Invention – Discovery is relaxing into the flow of a scene, without needing to know what's going to happen next. Discovery is letting a scene unfold without pushing it to be any particular way; it's fluid, it's authentic and it's exciting.

Invention is forcing something into a scene that comes out of left field. Improvisers invent out of fear, when they assess a scene as not being enough, not interesting enough, not funny enough, not fast enough. Inventions feel jarring and lead one to ask, "*Where did that come from?*" Some popular improv inventions include:

"I'm pregnant."
"I'm sleeping with your boyfriend."
"A spaceship just landed on your lawn!"

Inventions are disappointing because they take the actors away from the truth of what's actually happening and into something far less engaging. Inventions erroneously feel like reaching for safety when actually, discovery wins every time. Authenticity is far more satisfying for both the actor and the audience.

Mistakes are a gift – Mistakes give improvisers the gift of leading a scene into unknown territory, where they did not expect to be. It can lead to some surprising and hilarious outcomes. Some of the best moments in improv come from mistakes because an audience thrills at witnessing how the improvisers come up with highly imaginative solutions. Mistakes are wonderful teachers, as they keep us keep us limber, agile and in the discovery process.

Those are but a few of the improv practices that help me stay present, fluid and open, onstage and off. I love teaching and performing this amazing work, and I whole-heartedly recommend that everyone find their way into an improv class to discover how joyful and hilarious personal growth can be!

