

VARIETY WEEKEND

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Making it up as you go

Improv can teach anyone how to deal with life

By Jonathan Bing

I spent a recent Saturday afternoon impersonating a naked jogger who'd just been arrested for streaking across a schoolyard. It's not the sort of thing I often do, much less in front of 15 other people in a dingy rehearsal studio on Santa Monica Blvd. However, I wanted to test a hypothesis: You can train someone to be funny.

Most improv students, including my classmates at Upright Citizens Brigade Theater, dream of sitcom deals. However, while very few people will join the cast of "Curb Your Enthusiasm," improv boosters say their classes also help you navigate virtually any difficult situation life throws your way.

"You let people find what's funny about you," says **Marc Campbell**, a former investment banker who founded the **Westside Improv**. "We teach people how to 'find the game,' whether it's rolling through a mistake in a presentation or looking for what's funny in people rather than what's annoying about them."

There are nearly a dozen improv houses in Los Angeles. On the surface, each boasts its own unique take on the form. Improv Olympic (aka IO, as the Olympics don't have much of a sense of humor for riffs on their name) offers "Truth in Comedy," which means don't try to be funny and the funny will follow. ComedySportz boasts "Clean comedy for the whole family," while the mantra at UCB is "Don't think."

However, virtually every improv theory turns on finding the game. Translated, that means learning how to isolate and heighten a pattern in a scene until it becomes completely preposterous -- and, in turn, funny.

"The Game" was a key concept for late improv guru Del Close, a longtime instructor at both Second City and IO. Close was also the co-author of "Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation," which UCB students are encouraged to view as holy writ.

My class was taught by Danielle Schneider, an eight-year UCB vet and a regular on VH1 "Best Week Ever." "Don't try to be 'crazy' and 'funny,'" she instructed.

To illustrate her point, Schneider leapt onstage, began dancing a jig and singing, "I'm so hilarious!" She was right. It wasn't.

What does work, according to Groundlings exec director Krista Gano, are the skills often defined as good manners, including eye contact, staying in the moment and listening.

"Improv teaches the tenets of life," she says. "It's thinking on your feet. It's powerful to know that you can be in almost any situation and get out of it."

Campbell first saw the benefits of improv while he was working in New York at JPMorgan. Pulling an all-nighter, he finally retired to the men's room and promptly fell asleep on the toilet.

When he woke, it was morning and his legs were still asleep. Instead of standing up, he went sprawling to the floor and under the next stall, where a colleague was reading the morning paper. Said **Campbell**: "Can I see the sports section?"

The story later became the cornerstone of his application to business school.

"As soon as I arrived at UCLA admissions, they said, 'Oh, you're that guy,'" says **Campbell**, who went on to become a student body president. He is now preparing to open a second Westside Improv outlet, this one just off Santa Monica's Third Street Promenade.

NOTE: Westside Improv changed its name to The Westside Eclectic in December of 2005.