One of the biggest mistakes an improviser can make is attempting to be funny.

In fact, if an audience senses that any performer is deliberately trying to be funny, that performer may have made his task more difficult (this isn't always the case for an established comedian playing before a sympathetic crowd — comics like Jack Benny and Red Skelton were notorious for breaking up during their sketches, and their audiences didn't seem to mind it a bit. A novice performer isn't usually as lucky, unless he's managed to win the crowd over to his side).

When an actor gives the unspoken message "Watch this, folks, it's really going to be funny," the audience often reads this as "This is going to be so funny, I'm going to make you laugh whether you want to or not." Human nature being what it is, many audience members respond to this challenge with "Oh, yeah? Just go ahead and try, because I'm not laughing," to the performer's horror.

A much easier approach for improvisers is to be sincere and honest, drawing the audience into the scene rather than reaching out and trying to pull them along.

Improvisers can be relaxed and natural, knowing that if they are sincere, the audience will be more receptive to them. Audience members laugh at things they can relate to, but they cannot empathize if the performers are insincere.

*Ars est celare artem*, as the ancient Romans would say: the art is in concealing the art.

**COMEDY AND KUNG FU**

In a recent class, Del discussed the importance of taking improv seriously, and not letting the audience affect the integrity of the work. Speaking in the performance space — a theatre above a bar that features bands in between improv shows — he compared it to the work of martial artists:

"I feel a little silly at times, saying how seriously this work must be taken. Look around us. There's lots of goofy shit all over the walls, we know what's served on the tables, and we share the space with blues bands of varying degrees and quality. And we have an audience that will be satisfied with much less than we're capable of giving them. It is not that the environment is particularly supportive to group-experimental-improvisation performance art — it's more like the comedy saloon!

"When you walk into a dojo, there is a change that comes over you. The environment is supportive of the concept — which is to study martial arts. You've seen them when you walk down the street; people in there grabbing each other's pajamas and throwing each other to the floor.

"There are a few squares in our society that think kung fu is about kicking people's heads in, but we know differently. It is something else. It is a martial art. You don't walk into a dojo and say 'Good morning, master,
I'd like to learn how to kick somebody's head in, please.' They'd throw you down the stairs! It would be like going to Jesus and saying I'd like to learn how to walk on water, please.' I mean, there are more important things to do!

"Coming here to learn to make people laugh is equally absurd. To assume that making the audience laugh is the goal of improvisation is almost as absurd as assuming that you go to a dojo to learn how to kick somebody's face in. It's just not true!

"Still, they laugh. It is a side-effect of attempting to achieve something more beautiful, honest, and truthful, something that has far more to do with the theatre — which puts your attention on what is important about being a human in a community — as opposed to television entertainment, which is designed to take your mind off what is more important about your lives.

"It is easy to become deluded by the audience, because they laugh. Don't let them make you buy the lie that what you're doing is for the laughter. Is what we're doing comedy? Probably not. Is it funny? Probably yes. Where do the really best laughs come from? Terrific connections made intellectually, or terrific revelations made emotionally."

**NO LAUGHING ALOUD**

Physicist Niels Bohr once said, "Some things are so serious, they can only be joked about."

Likewise, the only way to do a comedy scene is to play it completely straight.

The more ridiculous the situation, the more seriously it must be played; the actors must be totally committed to their characters and play them with complete integrity to achieve maximum laughs.

*Airplane!* and the two *Naked Gun* movies are perfect examples. The three films' lines, situations, and sight gags are so outrageous that they must have a solid Anchor. Therefore, the Zucker brothers hired an established dramatic actor, Leslie Nielsen, to deliver the silliest lines completely deadpan. In *The Naked Gun*, his performance as Lt. Frank Drebbin is almost identical to his performances in the various TV police dramas that are being lampooned. Any twinkle in his eye or winking at the camera to let audiences know that he is in on the laugh would destroy the credibility and integrity he has built up, which make the jokes so effective.

One beginning ImprovOlympic student announced to coauthor Halpern that he was studying improvisation, but then planned to go on to "serious" acting. "What do you think you're supposed to be doing now?" she asked him.

Famed commercial director Joe Sedelmeier once said that when he auditions comic actors, he immediately dismisses anyone who asks whether the script should be read seriously or humorously. He knows that if they have to ask, they obviously don't know what they're doing. The only way to play comedy is seriously.
A JOKE AND A LAUGH

The most direct path to disaster in improvisation is trying to make jokes. This is so important, it deserves repeating.

Don't try to make jokes in improv!

Jokes are not necessary; they are a complete waste of time and energy that is better spent developing a scene. Get the point? Chances are if you're concentrating on telling a joke, you're not looking for the connections in a scene. And the connections will draw much bigger laughs than any joke.

Many actors don't understand the difference between a joke and a laugh. A joke is only one way — and seldom the best way — to get a laugh; jokes can get laughs but, obviously, laughs don't always result from jokes.

The most effective, satisfying laughs usually come from an actor making a connection to something that has gone before. The connecting line must be truly inspired by the situation on the stage at the moment, and usually can't be planned or recreated later. It is seldom the least bit funny out of context. A laugh resulting from a connection is a classic example of a moment when "you had to be there," and describing what happened later can't do it justice.

Standing on stage and telling the audience a joke in the middle of a scene sucks the energy out of a scene. Making a connection generates energy for that scene; as connections are discovered, they perpetuate themselves, raising the scene to a level which could never be reached by telling jokes.

JOKES

Jokes are more primitive, basic and direct — I tell you something I think is funny, hoping you will respond by laughing. A comedian who tells jokes is basically a salesman, trying to sell the audience a clever story or punch line, while hoping to be paid back in laughter. On a good night, he may sell his entire line, but on a bad night, he may suffer the equivalent of having every door slammed shut in his face.

A good improviser doesn't need to resort to jokes; jokes are born out of desperation, and the audience is the first to realize it. When players worry that a scene isn't funny, they may resort to jokes. This usually guarantees that the scene won't be funny.

When a player forces a joke, it is usually a comment about the scene. Unfortunately, if you are able to comment on the scene, then you are not really involved in the scene. Many of our great comedians will deliver a funny aside to the camera, although they are generally making a joke at the expense of emotional commitment. This may be fine for the joke-tellers, but when improvisers resort to such tactics, they quickly find that they don't have the faculties — or the writers — of a Jack Benny.

In so many of the classic Marx Brothers comedies, Groucho leans over to the camera and makes a funny comment about one of his brothers or Margaret Dumont. It works well within the context of the picture, but Groucho wasn't improvising. Besides, we all know how much emotional depth Groucho brought to his love scenes with Dumont. Likewise, on The Burns and Allen Show, George Burns is able to tune in a TV set to see what scheme Grade is cooking up, making his remarks directly to the audience. Funny? Yes, but it's not improvisation. It's
hard to be drawn into a scene when Burns can step out of that scene at any moment and make funny comments.

Funny asides to the audience have their place; commenting on a scene is even allowable in improv under certain circumstances, but only as long as you aren't involved in the scene at the time (unless it becomes a game in itself — a matter we'll discuss later). The situation is similar to a relationship between a man and a woman — the more they talk about it, the less time they spend on it.

Jokes frequently lead to groans from an audience — they rarely get laughs. On those occasions when they do get laughs, it is usually at the expense of the scene, because the level of commitment to the scene is lowered. Jokes tend to be employed as a last-ditch measure by insecure players when they are worried that a scene isn't funny. Unfortunately, too many players manage to establish themselves as bad improvisers and humorless stand-up comics in the same scene.

If a player begins making jokes at the expense of a scene, he has nothing to fall back on when the jokes fail. If a scene is not getting laughs, however, the performers don't need to worry, as long as they are being true to their scene. They only need to be patient. The laughs will come soon enough from connections — and the connections cannot be avoided.

**CONNECTIONS**

Audiences appreciate a sophisticated game player. When a player listens and uses patterns that have developed in a scene, it can elicit cheers from an audience which are much more intoxicating than the laughs that result from a few jokes.

Del Close remembers hearing famed comic Lenny Bruce talk on stage for 20 minutes without getting one laugh — and then suddenly tying together several trains of thought with one or two sentences, as the audience erupted in cheers at the brilliance they had just witnessed.

Those sorts of cheers are far more rewarding than a few laughs. When properly played, a Harold audience resembles the crowd at a sporting event rather than the audience at a nightclub. A Harold audience will react as if they’ve seen a Michael Jordan slam-dunk when they watch players remembering each other's ideas and incorporating them back into their scenes. We have witnessed standing ovations when a player pulls together eight different trains of thought in one brief monolog. Those cheers and screams can become even more addicting than laughs.

Making connections is as easy as listening; remembering, and recycling information. When patterns in scenes are noticed and played they create continuity in the scene.

A player must first listen to what his fellow players are saying, which he can't do if he's busy inventing jokes and trying to force the scene in one particular direction. He has to store the information in the back of his mind, not relying on it too heavily, but keeping it handy so he can pull it out when something in the scene triggers the connection. When such an opportunity arises in the scene, the player recycles the thought or action. The audience members make the connection for themselves, and respond much more enthusiastically than if they had just heard a punch line.
Connections are a much more sophisticated way to get laughs. When an audience sees the players start a pattern, they finish the connections in their own minds. They are forced to think just a tiny bit, and when they have to work along with the players to recognize the laugh, it is much more gratifying for the audience, which has had its intelligence flattered in the bargain.

The simplest, most basic example of connections can be seen in a pattern game.

THE PATTERN GAME: LEARNING TO MAKE CONNECTIONS

The Pattern Game is basically a word association game. The players take turns calling out words and short phrases inspired by previous words and phrases, in order to connect as many pieces of information as possible.

Connections made during the game moves will allow players to discover different levels of meaning to their ideas, as well as inspire additional ideas for the scenes to come. The Pattern Game is a great way to demonstrate the principle of "Finding Order Out of Chaos."

Among other uses, the Pattern Game is the beginning of the process of engendering a "Group Mind," something that we'll delve into much deeper in the chapters to come. When the Pattern Game is used as the opening exercise for a Harold, the audience sees the group developing its point of view toward its theme; this happens as the group shares information, ideas, and attitudes.

Different groups operating on the same suggestion will usually come up with totally different sets of ideas; one group can play the Pattern Game twice with the same suggestion and probably end up with different results. The game is really a process of discovery and exploration to prepare a group for the main event.

THE PATTERN GAME: EXAMPLE 1

Here are two separate pattern games, done by different groups, but both based on the suggested theme "dog":

Team A
"Collar."
"Police."
"K-9."
"Rin Tin Tin."
"Barking up the wrong tree."
"Firemen."
"101 Dalmatians."
"Open 24 hours."
"I read it in the Sunday papers."
"Sentence."
"Death."
"Bergman."
"Bird dog."
"Bird Man of Alcatraz."
"Prison."
"Bondage."
"Collar."

Team B
"Loyalty."
"Man's best friend."
"Barking."
"Sit."
"You can have the kids. I'll take the dog."
"Stay."
"Caged."
"Divorce."
"Heel."
"Barking."
"Cat fight."
"His bark is worse than his bite."
"He's a stray."

Team A's use of the "dog" theme revealed ideas about crime and punishment; Team B discovered levels of failed human relationships, in addition to animal-human relationships.

**PATTERN-MAKING MADE EASY**

As shown in the previous examples, the Pattern Game requires players to heighten the moves, but not to comment or explain them to the audience. It has to be played thoughtfully, and each player's response should be based on the meaning of what has gone before, not on wit utilized for a cheap laugh. If a player responds with the word "sex," the next player should know better than to respond with "fun" or "not enough." These may be personal opinions, but a better and more intelligent response would be to phrase those opinions into a move that forwards the game. "Sex" may make a player think of "blue eyes," which leads someone else to respond with "Paul Newman," prompting a subsequent player to name his favorite Paul
Newman movie. Combining the meanings of these moves eventually results in the formation of definite themes.

There are different methods of playing the Pattern Game and an experienced player will discover more sophisticated game moves. One of these is known as “skipping a joke”. If one player says "Harry Truman" and the next player responds with "Breakfast at Tiffany's," a hip audience will appreciate the fact that they've skipped over the obvious, "Truman Capote." The more familiar a group becomes with the Pattern Game, the more variations and refinements they'll discover.

All of the themes developed during the course of the game become themes for the Harold, and the tiniest, most innocuous phrase used is fair game for use in the main body of the Harold itself.

Even though the suggestion from the audience provides the inspiration for the Harold, the theme itself is developed by the players during the Pattern Game. The teams raise the level of the audience suggestion as they explore what it means to each of them — no matter how banal the suggestion from the audience may seem, the players will make it profound.

**THE PATTERN GAME: EXAMPLE TWO**

Some Pattern Games circle back to the first move made, but others encompass the entire outline for the scenes in a Harold, such as the following game based on an audience suggestion of "Camera":

"High school."
"High speed."
"Dope."
"Indy 500."
"Most likely to ..."
"Crash and burn."
"In memoriam."
"Viet Nam."
"Don't write on the wall."
"Smokin'."
"I caught you."
"Smile!"
"I think I got it."
"Clap."
"I think I got it."
"The answer is ..."
"Let's see what develops."
"I think I got it."
"Photo finish."
"By a nose."
"Buy a vowel."
"By the hair of my chinny chin chin."
"Buying a bond."
"Propaganda."
"Buy it."
"Viet Nam."
"Bye, bye."
"Dope."
"Speed."
"It happened so fast."
"Indy 500."
"High speed."
"High school."

This Pattern Game inspired scenes with numerous levels, following the lives of four youths through high school — a fast-paced life of fast cars, drugs, sex, and smokin' in the boys' room, progressing to their Viet Nam experiences. A scene about the Viet Nam memorial was inspired by connections to reading the bathroom wall in high school.

It all resulted from the simple method of ordering information through a unique method of communication — the Pattern Game.

**THE RULES OF THE GAME**

Throughout this book, we will be using examples of different improv games to underscore the comedic principles involved. There is some similarity to playing games like Hide-and-Seek, inasmuch as there are basic rules of each game that must be understood and followed.

Anyone can improvise, but like any game, if the players don't learn and obey the rules, no one will play with them. In childhood games like Cowboys and Indians or Cops and Robbers, if someone is shot, he has to "die." If he is taken prisoner and tied up, he has to remain tied up until someone frees him. A child who doesn't follow these rules won't be very popular in his neighborhood.

There are plenty of rules in improvisation, as a quick thumb through this book will show. However, one of the first rules is "There are no rules." Just about any rule here can be broken
under the proper circumstances; the guidelines in the following chapters demonstrate when a rule can be broken as part of an appropriate game move.

During his years at Second City, George Wendt says that the "no rules" rule could be both liberating and frustrating while improvising for Del.

"Our working relationship was extremely loose," he recalls. "Almost anarchic, to the extent that Del would either ignore scenes or give copious notes on scenes that were eminently forgettable! It was alternately enlightening and discouraging, as it would be for any improv company. You'd do a brilliant scene and you'd know it was brilliant, and the audience would know it was brilliant, and everybody would be very excited. You'd come backstage and Del would say, 'Nice work In the psychiatrist scene. Unfortunately, Mike Nichols and Glenn May did it in 1963!'"

Anything can happen in improv. The only rule that can never be broken is the rule of agreement. Experienced improvisers may decide to cut loose in a scene and break as many improv rules as possible, and the scenes are usually very funny (at least to fellow improvisers — they run the risk of being a bit in-joke to other observers). Even here, though, they are simply playing a game — the "Rule-Breaking Game," and the performers all agree to participate.

If the game rules of improvisation are followed, the players will "win" on stage. And if they play the game well, then everybody wins.

**KEY POINTS FOR CHAPTER TWO**

*Don't make jokes.*

*Let humor arise out of the situation.*

*Take the scene seriously.*

*Agreement is the only rule that cannot be broken.*

*Connections cannot be avoided; don't force them.*
CHAPTER THREE
Support and Trust

_The actor's business is to justify._
--Elaine May
St. Louis Compass Players, 1957

_The master weaver incorporated the mistakes of his students into a larger pattern._
--Sufi saying

Many years ago, Del was teaching an improv class during the same period he was directing The Committee in San Francisco. In order to impress upon them the importance of trust among actors, he decided to employ an exercise often used in acting classes. "We had a second-level balcony in our theatre," he recalls. "As a display of trust, I leaped off the balcony into the arms of the students. They dropped me.

"In order to give them the impression that they were not failures, I climbed up again and jumped off a second time. They dropped me again. I found out shortly after that one of those falls had broken my collarbone!" he laughs.

Fortunately, most "trust exercises" end far more successfully. Broken bones aside, falling off a platform doesn't even come close to the fear an actor feels when he realizes he is not being supported in a scene by his fellow players. That chilling realization is more like jumping out of a plane and realizing your parachute is still on board.

Support and trust go hand-in-hand for performers; they must trust that their fellow players will support them. The only star in improv is the ensemble itself; if everyone is doing his job well, then no one should stand out. The best way for an improviser to look good is by making his fellow players look good.

When former Second City and ImprovOlympic actor David Pasquesi won a Chicago award for performing, he accepted it by saying, "Our job is to make the others look good. By getting this award, I guess I'm not doing my job. I'll try harder next time!"

If the ensemble members commit 100 per cent to the group there will be no mistakes on stage.

"I don't see how any actor could not do that," says Chris Farley, emphasizing the importance of the actor committing to his scene. "What else could they do? That's what they're doing. They're on the stage for that purpose. Anything else is not giving 100 per cent, and if that's what you really want to do, then give 100 per cent."

Farley recalls that Michael Myers (his future Saturday Night Live co-star) was a performer in the very first Harold he ever saw, and was impressed at the way Myers and the others were so committed to the work that they were able to take chances during the show which they otherwise couldn't have.
"I remember watching Mike and being truly in awe of how everything evolved from a mere suggestion," remembers Farley. "Mike was able to use the audience quite a bit, going out into the audience and not being limited by the space on the stage, tackling any idea. Del talks about stepping off the cliff, and Mike is one that definitely steps off the cliff and takes a chance — takes many chances. He initiated and furthered the Harold to depths unknown — it was really amazing."

When performers truly commit to a scene, they take care of each other. Whenever someone makes what appears to be a mistake on stage, the others will immediately justify it and weave it into the pattern of the entire work. More often than not, those "mistakes" become valuable contributions to the piece. The entire ensemble winds up looking brilliant because, like the Sufi weaver, they acknowledge mistakes and incorporate them into the larger work to add extra texture and depth.

In other words, *justify!* If a scene fails because a player makes a wrong move the whole group must share the blame if they didn't justify the move. Each improviser shares a small portion of responsibility for the piece on stage. They must focus their concentration on the work of the group — *not* the work of any individual.

One other approach, according to Del, is to attack the stage — advice which Chris Farley took to heart during his very first improv class with Del.

"I got up there and tried to impress him with as much sweat and blood as I knew how, because that's all I had," says Farley. "I just went up there with as much physical movement as I could, because that's all I knew. I could do physical movement because I played football. Maybe I was too aggressive because I was nervous."

"I remember reading that Del told John Belushi to attack the stage, and so I tried to attack the stage like Belushi. He said 'Settle down, son! You're sweating too hard. You're like the guys they strap to the front of a battleship when they go into battle — fearless, but you have to have some control, too.' That's one of the first things he ever said to me, and he taught me the balance. He taught me everything I know," says Farley.

"From Del, I learned to face my fear. He taught me to follow that fear and trust that something will come to me, to step off the cliff and take a risk."

Of course, it's much easier to fearlessly attack the stage when a player can trust his teammates to support him. One of the best ways to teach support and trust — and reinforce the use of patterns and connections — is through a game called "The Hot Spot."

**THE HOT SPOT**

When "The Hot Spot" is played correctly, it's a joy to behold, and even more enjoyable to create. When it's not done well, it can be excruciatingly embarrassing for all concerned.

This game utilizes several of the previously discussed improv principles. The Hot Spot demonstrates how easy it is to make connections, even when players don't realize they are doing so; it also teaches the absolute necessity of players supporting each other. Students quickly learn that the game is more important than its individual players; egos have to be sacrificed for the good of the game. The greater the trust, the faster and funnier the game.
The rules are actually quite simple. The players gather on stage in a loose half-circle around an imaginary "hot spot," located down stage center. The group must create a musical pattern of ideas, using lines from real songs, inspired by a previous scene or the general theme of the piece.

To do this, one person stands firmly on the hot spot. He has the "spotlight," and must begin a song, singing loudly and confidently.

Before he can finish the second line, however, another player literally pushes him off of the hot spot. The new player loudly and confidently begins singing a different song that has been inspired by the one he has just heard.

He is immediately interrupted by a third player, who knocks him off the hot spot and begins singing another song, similar in theme. This continues at a fast pace, with players bumping each other away at a rapid clip (just as acts used to get the "hook" in vaudeville days).

Each of the players is responsible for keeping the game moving at a very fast pace by pushing each other off the hot spot as soon as the idea has been conveyed. Game moves may — and should, be — repeated to keep the pattern circling back.

EXAMPLE: If the theme of the Hot Spot was "Sex," the game might start out with players singing the following:

PLAYER ONE: "I'm just a girl who can't say no —"
PLAYER TWO: "But will you love me tomorrow —"
PLAYER THREE: "Girls just want to have fun —"
PLAYER FOUR: "When will you marry me, Bill —"

Obviously, this is the beginning of a pattern of songs dealing with commitment (or the lack of) in relationships. This might be inspired by the theme of sex.

Another example of the Hot Spot was used in a Harold inspired by the theme of "growing up." These songs actually built the story of a life, while returning to key points of that life:

PLAYER ONE: "Happy birthday to you —" PLAYER TWO: "I won't grow up! I don't want to go to school —"
PLAYER THREE: "Smokin' in the boys' room —" PLAYER FOUR: "When I was 17, it was a very good year —"
PLAYER ONE: "Happy birthday to you —"
PLAYER THREE: "When I was 21, it was a very good year —"
PLAYER TWO: "When Johnny comes marching home again, hurrah, hurrah —"
PLAYER FOUR: "Get a job, sha na na na —"
PLAYER FIVE: "Workin' nine to five, what a way to make a livin' —"
PLAYER TWO: "Take this job and shove it, I ain't workin' here no more —"
PLAYER ONE: "Happy birthday to you —"
PLAYER TWO: "When I was 35, it was a very good year —"
PLAYER FOUR: "When I get older, losing my hair, many years from now —"
PLAYER FIVE: "Old man, take a look at my life, I'm a lot like you —"
PLAYER TWO: "Day is done, gone the sun —"

Clearly, the players dealt with birth, childhood, school, the army, jobs, marriage, and death — a musical pattern exploring the idea of growing up in the Hot Spot!

As a theme emerges, the game takes on its own pace. The Hot Spot is similar to the Pattern Game, but the music and physical elements of the Hot Spot result in a wilder, more frenetic pace.

(This is also a good game for a large number of players, and is sometimes played with two or more teams; 10, 15, or even 20 players can create an effective, highly charged "Hot Spot" game.)

Even if the players don't have a song in mind, they should still be encouraged to push each other off the hot spot, for several reasons.

Primarily, this is a perfect opportunity for players to exhibit support for their fellow players. The best way to support the teammate on the hot spot is to rudely shove him off that spot.

The game is at stake here. If one player is stuck on the hot spot for too long, he grows embarrassed; even worse it makes the group look like it isn't working together. And if that player has to sing more than two lines, it isn't.

Again, the only way for the group to look good is for each of its members to commit himself to keeping the game moving rapidly. When a player jumps out without an idea, he discovers that a song sung off the top of his head at the spur of the moment usually connects to the theme better than anything devised while waiting on the sidelines.

The Hot Spot is a great opportunity for a player to put his mind to the test, to see how it kicks in during an emergency situation.

In the unlikely event that the song doesn't connect, the group makes it work by weaving it into the pattern. This is a chance for the other players to show their confidence in their fellow improviser's idea, trusting that it must be brilliant. If the group treats each of its players as a creative genius, they will be.

The Hot Spot is a high-energy game that's easy to learn, and as much fun to watch as it is to play.
KEY POINTS FOR CHAPTER THREE

*Respect choices made by others.
*There are no bad ideas.
*There are no mistakes. Everything is justified.
*Treat others as if they are poets, geniuses and artists, and they will be.
*The best way to look good is to make your fellow players look good.
Conflict is about as necessary as the Mad Scientist's daughter in a science fiction film. It's an arbitrary convention that need not be respected.

In the early days of improvisation, the molders and shapers of the art discovered very quickly that arguing on stage accomplished little, except to delay the action that would have naturally arisen in the first place.

"While improvising scenario plays at the Compass Theater, we discovered that when actors would go on stage, given the choice of agreeing or arguing, they would inevitably argue," observes Del. "Consequently, a scenario would last six or seven hours!

"'Hand me the wrench.'

"'I don't have it.'

"'Go get it.'

"'I don't know where it is.'

"'It's in the car.'

"'I don't want to go to the car.'

"'But I need the wrench.'

"'Then go get it.'

"... And on and on. What would happen if we agreed instead of disagreed? Problems would be solved, and there would be more action — 'Here's the wrench, and I'll hold the light for you.'

"Business is taken care of in a lot less time! Freud, in his essay 'Psychopathic Characters on Stage,' called *Hamlet* the first truly modern play, because the conflict is not so much between the characters as within the characters.

"It's too easy to find ways to disagree. It strikes me that it more interesting thing for the art form — and for the planet — is to look for ways to agree, rather than disagree. At the Improv-Olympic, the principle of agreement is taken even further by the 'Yes, & ...' approach."

This is, in fact, a major difference between improv and scripted material. Much of drama is based on conflict, but when a playwright is devising the script, the arguments do more than delay action. Performers like Laurel and Hardy could probably perform the exchange about the wrench as written and have audiences rolling in the aisles because of the familiar interactions of their characters, but during an improv, such bickering only delays the furtherance of action.

In the hands of a writer, a disagreement can reveal hidden aspects of characters, aim the scene in a new direction, or convey other valuable information. When two improvisers are on stage arguing, they are only preventing something more interesting from happening.

Fortunately, there is a very simple way for even a first-time player to promote agreement.
"Yes, & . . ." is the most important rule in improvisation (the corporate name for the ImprovOlympic is "Yes & . . . Productions"). By following this simple rule, two players can build a scene before they know it.

The "Yes, & ..." rule simply means that whenever two actors are on stage, they agree with each other to the Nth degree. If one asks the other a question, the other must respond positively, and then provide additional information, no matter how small: "Yes, you're right, and I also think we should . .." Answering "No" leads nowhere in a scene:

A: Do you want to go to the movies?
B: No.

Even a positive answer is insufficient:
A: Do you want to go to the movies?
B: Yes

The "Yes, & ..." rule will lead players to their scene:
A: Do you want to go to the movies?
B: Yes, and let's go off our diets and eat a lot of greasy popcorn.

OR
B: Yes, let's sneak out of the house through the basement.

OR
B: Yes — is anybody picketing anything? I feel like counter-protesting.

With "Yes, & ..." there are an unlimited number of scenic possibilities, and each player continues to supply information.

In this way, one step at a time, each player provides a building block, until they have easily, painlessly, constructed a scene. Answering "Yes, but..." stops any continued growth, while a flat "No" erases the block that has just been established.

Construction metaphors aside, this is a very relaxing way in which to work. A player knows that anything he says on stage will be immediately accepted by his fellow player, and treated as if it were the most scintillating idea ever offered to mankind. His partner then adds on to his idea, and moment by moment, the two of them have created a scene that neither of them had planned.

Agreement is the one rule that can never be broken: players must be in agreement to forward the action of the scene.

When improvisers meet on stage, they agree to accept each other's initiations; they must completely commit to the reality they create for each other without a moment's hesitation. No matter how much of an improv cliché the line has become, if the first player says, "Well, here we are in Spain," then everyone on stage accepts that they are indeed in Spain. The next player might say, "Look out for that bull," and everyone is in the path of a charging bull. And so the scene is built.
Each new initiation furthers the last one, and the scene progresses. The acceptance of each other's ideas brings the players together, and engenders a "group mind." Denying the reality that is created on stage ends the progression of the scene, and destroys any chance of achieving a group consciousness.

Denials are taboo in improvisation. Being a good team player means having ethics. One of the best examples of denial in improv occurred during the early days of Second City, when Del and Joan Rivers were in the same company, and it rankles him to this day.

One night during an improvised scene, Joan told Del that she wanted a divorce. Del responded as an emotionally distraught husband might, in the hope of getting her to reconsider. "But honey, what about the children?" She replied, "We don't have any children!"

Naturally, she got a huge laugh. Naturally, she had completely destroyed the scene.

Rivers' laugh was at the expense of the scene, and she lost the trust of a fellow player. Her reply was a blatant denial of Del's initiation that they had children.

(In fairness, it must be noted that Miss Rivers was capable of brilliant scenic improvisation — Joan Rivers is certainly a talented, successful stand-up comic, but stand-up comedy is worlds apart from ensemble work.)

What kind of an improviser goes for the quick joke at the expense of his partner and the scene? Usually someone who is weak, insecure, or egotistical. It is an act of desperation, done to control the scene or to try and look better. A player who chooses this road finds few players will work with him on stage, because they know they will be sacrificed for an easy joke.

When an audience watches improvisers setting each other up with information, supporting each other's ideas, and furthering the scenes, they see true art in action.

So far, this chapter has devoted itself to the importance of agreement and avoiding conflict. At the risk of confusion, there are ways in which an argument can be presented during an improvised scene.

While disagreement is not interesting, the tension that conflict causes may be. The players can agree to disagree (thus turning it into a game), as long as there is agreement between the players to further the scene. For example, a boxing match is not conflict. It is a fight, but it's actually a game played under an agreed-upon set of rules. Conflict in a scene between the characters may be used, but the conflict between the players must be avoided.

One of the finest examples of agreeing to disagree is the Monty Python "Argument Sketch," in which a man enters a room and finds another man at a desk:

"Is this the right room for an argument?"
"I've told you once."
"No you haven't."
"Yes I have."
"When?"
"Just now."
"No you didn't."
"Yes I did."
"Didn't." "Did."
"Didn't."
"I'm telling you I did."
"You did not!"

"I'm sorry, is this a five-minute argument, or the full half-hour?"

... And it continues on into a hilarious argument. Obviously the scene is tightly scripted, rather than improvised on stage, but there is a clear-cut game at its core. It uses what appears to be conflict, but is actually total agreement, to forward the scene through a disagreement game.

**GAMES TO TEACH AGREEMENT**

**Conflict Scenes**

One of the first principles taught to students at the Improv- Olympia is that agreement is much more interesting than conflict.

This is done by placing the actors in situations which normally cause conflict on stage. However, they are instructed to make unusual choices, so that the expected conflict will not arise. These unlikely choices lead the scenes in interesting directions that could not have been planned.

However, this exercise is *not* about conflict. It is actually about agreement, and what develops after agreement is reached.

Conflict is merely the starting point, which leads the players to discover what the scene is about. It is the *relationship between the players* that makes the scene.

Possible conflict scenes might include "The Arrest," "The Robbery," or even "The Last Seat on the Bus." One example of a conflict scene leading into an interesting relationship was "The Robbery."

*(A woman enters and finds a man in her home.)*

WOMAN: Excuse me, what are you doing in my house?

MAN: I'm robbing you.

WOMAN: I don't know that I would have anything that you would want.

MAN: Well, these paintings are exquisite! I can tell they're not originals, but they are worth something.

WOMAN: Thank you. I painted those.

MAN: What? I am impressed! This is incredible work!

WOMAN: I am so flattered — I insist you have it.

As the relationship grows, they continue to share their expertise in the field of art, while she assists him in taking her prized possessions.
Another example of a conflict scene was done by Adam and Rick, portraying a cop chasing a robber. Both actors were running in place, giving the illusion of an officer chasing a thief:

COP: *(Panting)* Hey — I'm 50 years old and a little overweight. Can we stop and rest for a minute?

ROBBER: *(Panting)* You're not gonna grab me if we rest?

COP: Promise. Just for a few seconds — on the count of three. One, Two. Three.

*(Both stop, heavily panting.)*

COP: Boy, this part of my job is murder.

ROBBER: It's my least favorite part, too. But, it comes with the territory. Speaking of territory — this is a pretty tough beat for a 50-year-old.

COP: Yes. Well, experience counts for something. I'm ready — how about you?


*(Both start running.)*

This scene continued on with the officer and the robber agreeing to stop every few beats, which allowed them to build an interesting relationship — proving once again that agreement in a potentially conflictive situation leads to an unusual choice!

The actors quickly discover that the audience laughs at agreement — a secret of comedy that very few people Audiences aren't used to seeing actors agreeing very often, and they rarely see people agree to the things improv forces them to agree with!

Audiences at the ImprovOlympic have become quite sophisticated through the years. They respond poorly when they see denials on stage — and a few players are even booed!

*The Ad Game*

This game is a Del Close Special. It teaches several lessons, but it's particularly useful for actors to learn the "Yes, & . . ." approach to creating.

Usually played with approximately six or eight actors, the group has five minutes to create an ad campaign for an ordinary product with an unusual quality. For example: cereal that plays music when milk is poured on it.

The group must come up with a name for the product, a package design, a slogan, a spokesperson, and a jingle to create an entire marketing strategy and finished commercial.

Naturally, the only way to do this in five minutes is through complete and total agreement — no negative thinking is allowed. Every idea is accepted enthusiastically and remembered, each step is built off the previous idea. In order to properly brainwash the actors with this theory of acceptance, the director may want to force them to over-accept, screaming "Yes!"
"Terrific idea!" "Great!" and other praises of brilliance after each idea is stated. This over-acceptance — particularly of stupid ideas — only makes the game funnier.

Most of the time, the players dramatize the game with lots of pacing, thinking, and enthusiastic shouts of agreement.

The Ad Game also familiarizes actors with important techniques for successfully creating a scene. The first, and most important, is the "Yes, & . . ." principle.

Everything is accepted, treated respectfully and most importantly, used. The other players treat all ideas as if they were their own, and take turns building on them. There is an unspoken agreement between improvisers on stage: "You bring a brick, and I bring a brick. Then together, we build a house. You wouldn't bring in your own entire house and slap it on top of mine. Together, moment by moment, we create a scene."

Since every idea is remembered and used, players shouldn't give more than one suggestion for each topic. One is enough; the first one is always accepted and used — once the product is named, suggesting a second name takes the game sideways. The Ad Game teaches players to go forward. There's no need for a second suggestion, since the group will make the suggestion work splendidly. In the Ad Game, the word "or" should never be used.

Since all of the workshop exercises are techniques for performance, they inevitably end up on stage in some form or another in Harolds (Of course, sometimes games are slightly amended in a performance situation for a particular Harold theme).

The following game was created by workshop students, based on the suggestion of a dog food that makes dogs talk (These students were clearly trying to test the theory that any idea will succeed).

AD EXECUTIVE: We have dog food that makes dogs talk. Now, who are we going to market this to?
RESPONSE: Lonely singles.
(All agree emphatically.)
AD EXEC: Okay, we need a name.
RESPONSE: Dinner Companion Dog Food.
(Shouts of approval)
AD EXEC: Great! We need a slogan.
RESPONSE: How about "When you're lonely, feed your dog?"
(Group praise)
AD EXEC: (Repeating all suggestions so far, so that all is remembered) Okay! Dinner Companion Dog Food. "When you're lonely, feed your dog." Hmmm . . . how are we going to market this? RESPONSE: TV!
AD EXEC: Yes! Now, who should we get as spokesperson for this type of product?
RESPONSE: How about the perfect conversationalist — Barbara Walters?
(Screams of delight)
AD EXEC: Perfect! What's this commercial going to look like?
RESPONSE: I see a candlelight dinner for two. A beautiful table exquisitely set.
OTHERS JOIN IN: And between the two candelabras is a gleaming silver can opener!
Yes! Seated at the table are Barbara Walters and her dog!
She is, of course, asking the dog a lot of very personal questions ...
Which he answers with charm and wit!
AD EXEC: Wonderful! Is there music playing?
RESPONSE: Yes! Violin playing "Talk to Me, Like Lovers Do."
ANOTHER PLAYER: The label of the can will have a picture of a dog dressed in a suit and tie, with a boutonniere in his lapel and bouquet of roses tucked under his paw.
AD EXEC: And above that, the words "Dinner Companion. When you're lonely, feed your dog."

Another example was an Ad Game played during a Harold with the theme of "advertising." The Ad Game was used to show the important role advertising has played throughout history.

The scene takes place between Jesus and his disciples in a brainstorming session for ideas to enhance the number of Jesus' followers. They immediately agree that rumors of a couple of miracles would be helpful, and agree to say that his mother was a virgin (although some resist this idea, thinking it too unbelievable).

Judas has an idea for a jingle. He sings "Silent Night, Holy Night/We're gonna rock around the clock tonight."

All the other disciples laugh and chide him for his musical ideas, especially his earlier suggestion for a musical play called "Godspell." He becomes angry and storms out. Trying in vain to get Judas to return, Jesus calls out to him, "Come on, Judas, turn the other cheek!"

Peter seizes this opportunity to use Jesus' statement as their new slogan. "After all," he says, "It's so much easier to understand than It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get to heaven'."

All the disciples agree.
Now a spokesperson is needed. Simon shouts, "John the Baptist!"
"Yes," all agree. "There's a man with a head on his shoulders." (The audience groans here set off the Joke Alarm, warning the players not to get too "jokey.")

In heavy thought, Jesus paces back and forth across the room. He says, "We still need something else. Something big that will sell the crowd."

Meanwhile, the waitress begins removing the dinner dishes from the table. Noticing that Jesus' plate is still full, she asks, "Is he finished, or is he coming back?"
In unison, the disciples scream with delight, "HE'S COMING BACK!"
Using the basic idea of the Ad Game, the players rewrote biblical history.

**KEY POINTS FOR CHAPTER FOUR**

*Yes, and ... Accept and build.*
CHAPTER FIVE
Initiations and Game Moves

**Giving Gifts**

Improvisation is like steering a car by looking through the rear view mirror, according to British director Keith Johnstone. You don't know where you're going, you can only see where you've been.

When two improvisers step on stage, neither one should know anything about the scene they are about to create — they basically start with nothing.

In improvisation, an initiation is the first information provided by one of the players. This can be a line of dialog, a gesture, or even an attitude.

A good initiation is vital to the scene, because it provides players with information that forms the foundation of their scene. The best initiations make assumptions, usually about their relationship, roles, Dislocations. Naturally, the other player accepts, embraces and builds on whatever is offered in that initiation, so the scene will be off to a rousing start.

A scene that begins with one player saying "Hello" to the other generally indicates a slow start, while a line like "Guten morgen, Herr Doctor, your experiment is on the slab" offers all sorts of potential to a fellow improviser.

Whatever the initiation may be, the players then take turns adding information. They'll soon discover that they've built a scene through their responses to each other's initiations.

**He who gives information is a gift-giver; he who asks questions is a thief.**

Questions — asking other players for information — are an unnecessary evil for improvisers. Instead of providing fellow actors with facts, questions place the burden of invention upon the other players. It's much better for an improviser to assume he knows the same information as the other actors, and use the opportunity to contribute his own share of information to the scene.

When a player asks a question, he usually has an answer in mind. So, why ask the question in the first place? If he wants to bring a particular idea into the scene, phrasing it as a question is usually a bad move. After all, his fellow player may not have the same idea that he does, and he may get a completely different answer than he had hoped for.

When two actors in a workshop were portraying a homeless couple, the wife had the idea to find a lottery ticket in the street. Unfortunately, her husband didn't know this, so when she pointed to the ground and said, "Look, what's that?", the husband replied, "Uh ... it's just a pile of shit."

The woman was flustered. "No," she said, completely denying his on-the-spot assumption. "It's a lottery ticket."

Wrong! It was a pile of shit. It would have been a lottery ticket, if only she had said so in the first place!
Of course, some questions are worse than others; some questions provide information, rather than require it. Asking, "Look, what's that?" is much less helpful than, "Look, is that a lottery ticket?" Of course, it's easier to simply say, "Look, there's a lottery ticket."

GAME MOVES IN SCENES

People are natural game players.

Some of the games are obvious, like Monopoly, Trivial Pursuit, and baseball. Dr. Eric Berne's book Games People Play deals with more subtle, psychological, interpersonal games that people play to get what they want out of a specific relationship.

Likewise, improvisers initiate game moves to indicate the types of games being played in a scene. The game provides the structure needed to solve the problem of the scene.

The games, or scenic structures, are always created on the spot as part of the improvised initiation. Picking up on the game move separates good game players from those who don't pay attention. When an actor discovers what his fellow improviser wants, he should, by all means, give it to him!

Some scenic games (games that develop in the context of a scene, as opposed to those performed as the result of a deliberate decision) are standard, easily taught techniques, like one-upmanship or speaking in verse, while others are invented on the spot.

Most of the time, the scenic game is discovered within the first three lines of the scene. When it is missed, it's usually because the players haven't paid close attention.

Film and television comedy are filled with scenic games. The Marx Brothers' "Stateroom Scene" from A Night at the Opera is really a game of "How Many People Can We Cram Into This Tiny Room?" I Love Lucy usually involved a game of "Try to Sneak Into Ricky's Act." In their slapstick films, Laurel and Hardy generally played a game that critics refer to as "Reciprocal Destruction," which is just what it sounds like.

Even Monty Python's "Argument Sketch," like the majority of their sketches, is a good example of a scenic game. If it was an improvised scene, a player would have no trouble discovering the game to play from the first three lines:

"Is this the right room for an argument?"

(Even though this is a question, it is loaded with information and clear intent to play a game.)

"I've told you once."

"No you haven't."

The game, or structure of the scene, is already crystal clear from those lines alone, and any experienced improvisers could step in here and keep it going.

When an improviser finds the game within a scene, he's found the scene, and that's why it's so important to pick up on any possible game moves. If a game move is clear-cut, it can excuse almost anything — as actor George Segal told Del, "Even if you're five minutes into a scene, it's not too late to put on a foreign accent!"
Life is what happens to you while you're busy making other plans.

— John Lennon

The games of ping pong and chess require very different strategies.

Chess players must plan many moves ahead, and players concentrate on pushing their own moves forward, despite the designs of their opponents.

In addition to being a physical game, players cannot plan ahead in ping pong; they have to react in a split second.

One player cannot "pong" until his opponent has "pinged." He can aim his return shot, and even try to anticipate the next volley, but ultimately he has to focus his attention on where the ball actually lands on his side of the table.

Unlike a chess player, he cannot be thinking several moves ahead — he has to pay attention to that moment. And that moment leads directly to future moments.

Improv is much closer to ping pong than it is to chess. Actors create an improv scene in the same spontaneous way.

An actor following each moment through to the next is constantly making discoveries, an ideal state for improvisers. If a player is planning ahead and thinking about the direction he wants the action to go, then he isn't paying attention to what is going on at the moment. Unfortunately for him and his fellow actors, what is going on at the moment is the scene!

This is a mistake that happens all too often, and may even occur with an experienced performer. When he thinks he sees where a scene is headed, he may steer it that way, without paying careful attention to what is happening on stage at that moment. He's living for the possible future of the scene at the expense of the present.

Unless it is part of a game move, improvisers should resist trying to fulfill the audience's expectations, says George Wendt of Cheers; fortunately this is easier in improv than for performers trying to develop material further.

“Always assume the audience is one step ahead of you?” he says, quoting one of most useful rules he learned while working with Del.

In improv, you almost never give the audience what they're expecting, because you're working on the fly — this really relates more to shaping the material.

"Always assume that the audience is going to get the easy joke. In other words, if an audience sees a set-up coming, they're less likely to laugh at the joke. If they see a set-up coming, you'd better do a quick 180 and give them something that they don't expect," he says.
"This dates back to the audiences that defined the Compass Players and the original Second City folks, audiences that were truly one step ahead of everyone else, that highly intellectual beatnik literati sort of coffeehouse crowd. But it holds true."

Wendt says the principle has also proven true in his television work.

"The concept of respect for audiences holds true in the most successful comedies, and I'll lump Cheers in with that. I think Cheers is quite clever, and a large part of the success of Cheers is due to a basic respect for the audience. I understand that in writing sessions, if two writers think of the same joke at the same time, they throw it out. Too easy. It has many corollaries, but I think you should always assume that the audience is one step ahead of you."

There's certainly nothing wrong with a prepared Harold performer, as long as the actor is willing to drop his preconceptions immediately.

For example, two actors are on stage talking about ordering a pizza, when a third player decides to enter the scene as a pizza delivery man. If one of the actors greets him with, "I see the new manhole covers have arrived," then his pizzas have immediately turned into manhole covers. He must be light enough on his feet to spring from moment to moment, according to the needs of the scene, no matter how brilliant his own ideas may be (or how little sense he thinks the other actors are making).

The only appropriate response the actor bearing the pizzas-turned-manhole covers can then make is, "Yes, here are your new manhole covers, and...," with the actor making one of countless thousands of choices to continue the action.

If something unusual or unexpected occurs, an inexperienced actor sometimes ignores it, thinking it isn't important because it's not in line with what he thinks should be happening. Wrong! The actor entering the scene, the audience, and even the other actor may all be expecting a pizza — indeed, it's probably the most appropriate move — but if one actor decides the man is delivering manhole covers, then he is right, and everyone must immediately accept it.

Everyone might initially view this as a mistake, but the only true mistake is for the other actors to ignore or negate him, and turn manhole covers back into a pizza. So the actors must justify the line, and can only do so by being in the moment. Remember, if everyone justifies everyone else's actions, there are no mistakes.

That unexpected line could be the interesting twist that shapes the scene right before the players' eyes. The pizza delivery is appropriate and expected, but the arrival of a person with manhole covers is guaranteed to make the scene more interesting!

After all, a scene is almost never about what the players think it's going to be about. Once underway, the actors follow the scene along, but they shouldn't try to control it. The scene is the result of the relationship between the characters, and the relationship that grows from those explored moments.

Nothing is ignored.
Nothing is forgotten.

And nothing is a "mistake."
THE REASON WHY

Since one of the most important responsibilities of an improviser is justifying what his fellow players say and do, everything that happens on stage is used to build the scenes — so there can’t be mistakes if it’s all accepted.

Of course, not^vgyrthing needs to be justified immediately. Everything heard should be remembered and eventually used; the players will make sense out of it before the scene is over. One of the primary uses of discovery is finding how some seemingly confusing element introduced early in a scene (and apparently forgotten) is found to have a vital place in the denouement.

One of the surest audience-pleasers in an improv scene is also one of the easiest to accomplish. A crowd delights in seeing a player pull out a forgotten scenic element just in time to solve a problem — like a chess player suddenly executing a checkmate, apparently out of nowhere.

An example of delayed justification is a scene between Mary and Robin. Mary looks over her doll collection, while Robin is sitting at a desk, engrossed in figuring out bills.

MARY: "I can't figure out why I keep finding the heads torn off my dolls."
ROBIN: "You owe me fifty dollars for the phone bill."
MARY: "I don't have the money for my share of the bill."

(The pair starts quarreling, until Robin gives up in frustration. Finally, she calmly walks over and tears the head off a doll.)

The two of them were able to justify the opening line brilliantly (although the ending of the scene appears obvious on paper, it is something else entirely when the audience watches it being created). The scene was not about pulling the heads off dolls; it was about the frustrations of two roommates. In improvising the scene, the players discovered the past history of their relationship. The missing heads obviously indicate that Robin has been frustrated by her roommate in the past, and allows for some interesting possibilities if the scene is continued in the future.

An actor can only justify scenic moves — and any seeming "mistakes" — if he is "in the moment," and not planning ahead. Two easy exercises to help develop this are the Conducted Story and the One-Word Story.

ONE-WORD STORY

The One-Word Story is one of the simplest of all improv exercises, and very useful for teaching the importance of staying in the moment.

Here, a group of players (usually six to eight) build a story one word at a time. The basic method sees the actors line up on stage and, beginning at one end, each speaking one word, forming sentences and telling a story.

This is quite easy to do, assuming the players don't try to plan ahead, but more difficult to do smoothly and well. The words should come quickly, practically without thinking (though of course they should be sensible, coherent sentences), but the group should make it sound as if one person is telling a story at a normal, conversational pace.

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One of the best ways to achieve this is by listening — paying attention to what is going on at the moment. It's impossible to think about what to say in advance, because one player can completely change direction, and a player who thinks baking only delays the story. The response should be reflexive rather than a carefully chosen word (this is in sharp contrast to scenes, where each response is slowly and carefully considered). The word "and" should also be avoided, and players must strive to sound like one voice.

As the group becomes more comfortable with the game, there are other devices to enhance its value. One variation has any player who delays in responding to step out of the group, eliminating the slower players one by one, as in a spelling bee; this teaches the group to keep up the pace. Naturally, inappropriate responses also cause players to lose (when played in front of a group or an audience, good-natured jeering often results). When a player fails, he is often forced to stage his own death before the audience and his teammates, preferably in some manner that reflects the story at that point. Another technique, particularly used in performance (or as an opening exercise) utilizes a theme, a title, or an audience suggestion for the story.

**CONDUCTED STORY**

A Conducted Story is a little more elaborate than a One-Word Story, but the principle is the same. Like the One-Word Story, this teaches players the importance of being "in the moment," and makes it painfully obvious when they are not.

Basic Conducted Stories require players to build a story together, as though they had one brain, but several mouths. The players line up in a semicircle on stage, with one of them crouched down at the front of the group to function as a conductor, just as a symphony conductor leads an orchestra.

The conductor leads the narration — generally one player at a time — by pointing at (or otherwise signifying to) the players so they know when to start and stop talking. The exercise often begins with an audience choosing a title, or an object that eventually is incorporated into the story. The goal of the group is to tell one single, coherent story with short segments, as chosen by the conductor.

When the conductor points at a player, he begins speaking immediately, picking up the tale precisely where the last player left off. He continues talking for as long as — or as short as — the conductor indicates. When the conductor suddenly points to someone else, the player shuts up instantly so that the new player can pick up the story from him.

The challenge for each improviser is picking up the very next word — or even the very next syllable — in the sentence. Each player has to listen carefully and watch the conductor at all times, so that he can stop on command. The story should not be choppy, but told in a continuous narrative voice.

During a scene, a beginning improviser often has trouble knowing when he is not in the moment. If he tries to think ahead during a Conducted Story, however, his mistake will stick out like a sore thumb. Players who think ahead trying to second-guess what comes next in the story usually end up starting a new sentence when they are pointed at, instead of finishing the sentence started by a fellow player. This is because the actor wasn't listening. The only way to succeed at a Conducted Story is to listen and pay attention every step of the way.
The pace of editing each narrator varies according to the whim of the conductor, but the Conducted Story is most entertaining when the players have to finish each other's thoughts.

In building the story, the players should be conscious of all of the necessary components that make a story interesting — elements like action, characters, emotion, ambiance, a cohesive story line and a resolution. It's important to tell the story as coherently as possible. Trying to make it silly or crazy often makes it less effective — since it's being created by several minds working together, it's guaranteed to get silly enough on its own. As a group, the players know that a resolution to their story is needed; with the common goal in mind, they will [ And it.

Various writing styles or points of view can be used to add dimension to the Conducted Story. Each player may rate in the style of a different well-known author (often selected by an audience), while still committed to carrying the story forward.

One memorable narrated story was actually performed by an ImprovOlympic team comprised entirely of psychologists. Each of them assumed the point of view of a different mental illness! While telling the story together, they separately revealed the symptoms of a psychotic, a paranoid-schizophrenic, a manic-depressive, a hypochondriac, and several others.

There are other devices more experienced players can use for workshops or performance, involving similar techniques and principles which force players to stay in the moment, and not think ahead. Some practices have resulted in several people portraying one character in a scene, and the actors have to speak at a normal pace, completely in unison (it's actually easier than it may sound). Other workshops have devised oracles, which speak one word at a time to address (and answer!) great philosophical questions of the universe.

KEY POINTS FOR CHAPTER SIX

*Stay in the moment. What is happening now will be the key to discovery.
*Nothing is ignored. Follow the unexpected twist.
*There is no such thing as a mistake.
CHAPTER SEVEN

Building a Scene

*Action begins with the disruption of a routine.*
— Keith Johnstone

**WHAT IS A SCENE?**

Two actors on stage do not make a scene.

A pair of performers standing before an audience, talking to each other about their mother-in-law problems, do not constitute a scene — they may just be having a jokey (if cliched) discussion. Several improvisers doing a Pattern Game or Hot Spot may interact in a very entertaining manner, but they aren't doing a scene.

So then what is a scene?

Every scene contains a few key elements.

Most importantly, a *relationship* must exist between the characters on stage. In improv, it's normally discovered through the course of a scene; the more quickly it is found, the faster the scene progresses.

Of course, the easiest way to advance a scene is for the performers to make assumptions. If the first line is, "I've come for my test results, Doctor," we already have a fairly solid idea of the relationship. And if the response is, "You have a very peculiar disease, Mr. President," the relationship is clearly defined. There is enough information for a scene; the groundwork has been laid.

Also important is the relationship between the players and their *environment* which is also discovered through improv. The scene between the President and the Doctor will be radically different if we discover it takes place in outer space rather than the Oval Office.

No matter what the setup, however, the *event* is crucial to every scene — the situation that makes this day different from all the rest. This is where the action begins. It arises from the game moves, which become the structure of the scene. It can arise from the very first sentence, or even before any words are spoken.

Many scenes don't start off as strongly or with as many assumptions as the previous example. Two actors walk on stage and may find themselves doing something more mundane or routine, such as washing dishes or tightening bolts in an assembly line. As the Keith Johnstone quote at the beginning of the chapter tells us, it is when the routine is disrupted that the action of the scene begins.

And what results is usually far more interesting than what was planned.
**KEEPING AN OPEN MIND**

There is a big difference between a strong, information-filled initiation that makes assumptions, and a preconceived notion used to control a scene.

For example, the opening exchange in the scene between the President and the Doctor starts out with an opening line and an assumption, but the player (presumably) isn't trying to promote a pre-planned scenario. If he was, the equally presumptuous response probably demolished any intended plot. The biggest mistake the first player could make would be to downplay his partner's response in order to continue shoving his scenario down the throat of his partner.

Having an idea is not bad in itself, especially if the actor conveys it easily to his partner through a simple initiation, such as a line of dialog or a physical movement. The simpler the idea, the better.

It is vitally important, however, for an improviser to drop his idea immediately the moment the scene takes an unexpected twist. Of course, it doesn't make much sense for one player to devise an elaborate plot for the scene.

When all the players are involved in its creation, the scene is much more interesting. Two heads are better than one, and in Harold, six or eight heads are even better.

A common mistake for some improvisers is to be led by the audience. If the crowd laughs loudly at one particular moment, the performer may be tempted to push the scene in the direction that the audience is responding to — instead of responding to his fellow performers.

Unfortunately, an audience doesn't necessarily want what it thinks it wants. A player is usually much better off listening to his fellow performers and director than the audience members. George Wendt remembers that during his days at Second City, it wasn't enough to make the crowd laugh.

"Del said, 'We don't care if it works for the audience — it has to work for us,'" says Wendt. "At that time, an improv scene that we may have become fond of because it got a lot of laughs had to work for Del, (producer) Bernie Sahlins, and (pianist) Fred Kaz — all three of them — or else it would not be considered for our Second City show. 'Don't tell us it works — we'll tell you if it works.'"

**START IN THE MIDDLE**

Exposition sucks.

Backstories and explanations are rarely the most exciting part of any book or film; generally they are a necessary evil.

In improvisation, actors are seldom hamstrung by exposition. Instead, they simply ignore it all, and begin their scenes in the middle!

Nothing is more boring or wastes more time than two improvisers starting a scene with "Who are you?" It is always helpful if the players know each other (or their roles) when they begin their scene; they need to make assumptions about their relationship right from the start.
When two players pretend their scene actually began five minutes before the lights went up, they make discoveries much more quickly. They spare the audience their excruciatingly dull groping around for information that should simply be assumed.

**SHOW, DON’T TELL**

An improviser accepts what his partner says as a gift, and builds on that idea. He may respond with another gift, and the two of them build their scene based on the information in their statements.

They must make *active* choices, rather than passive ones, and then follow through on their ideas. Everything said can be heard and used, even what might be considered a mistake. Since "action begins with the disruption of a routine," the "mistake" could be the disruption that begins the action.

Too many actors make the error of talking about doing something instead of doing it; a potentially interesting scene gets frittered away because no one is actually doing anything. If the idea is active, it leads, step by step, to the next idea. But if the idea is talked away, the actors never arrive at the next idea.

Suppose two actors are on stage, and one of them must choose whether to stay with his wife and children, or run off to a silver mine in South America. An inexperienced improviser might make the mistake of agonizing over the decision for several minutes, weighing the pros and cons. Boring! He might even choose to stay with his family. This is a more noble decision, but he's just chosen the routine, rather than the disruption, and we're left with no action. He's also wasted the audience's time wallowing in his angst. Chekov or Ibsen could probably script an interesting version of this scenario, but in improv, the active choice is the only one to take.

Given the choice, any experienced improviser must immediately leave his wife and family, and run off to South America. If it's only a thirty-second scene, so be it — this allows us more time for their follow-up scene, which will obviously begin deep in the South American silver mine. See how much further the active choice leads?

Scenes are much more interesting when the idea is seen, rather than *talked about*.

Active choices forward the scene.

Passive choices keep it stagnant.

There's really no choice, is there?

**LISTENING FOR THE GAME**

Careful players will note that the structure of any good scene is usually a game, one that is discovered in the first three lines of dialog.

A game doesn't have to be as specific and organized as some of the improv exercises explained throughout this book. Games are found within scenes. One example is one-upmanship, where each player tries topping the other with every sentence (and of course, the opposite — continuing to lower one's own status — is equally valid). There are countless other games that develop within scenes that have nothing to do with status. Players may find themselves saying the exact opposite of what they are thinking during the course of a scene; in another
scene, the actors find an excuse to touch each other every time they speak (this is also a good exercise to teach physicality).

Howard recalls one ImprovOlympic performance attended by executives of Budweiser, who were there to decide whether they wanted to sponsor that year's playoffs. When the "Baron's Barracudas" team took the stage, sure enough, the suggestion for the improv was "beer." However, the players instantly discovered an outrageously successful game: they began mentioning different brand names of beer, all in a favorable context. At the conclusion of the scene, they burst into a room, saying it was filled with "the finest beers in the world." They rattled off the names of dozens of beers — none of them Budweiser — and the response grew with each successive beer. By the end of the scene, the executives were on the floor laughing, and the name "Budweiser" had never been spoken. Thus, the players discovered the "Ignore Budweiser" game, which proved to be the most successful possible choice.

To discover the potential games in each scene, players must pay close attention from the start. They must be especially careful to notice their own lines, since players often aren't aware of the games they are setting up themselves. There is a part of the human brain that is very skilled at improvisation, and it is usually setting up a player's scenes for him (however subconsciously). So, he has to be careful not to get in the way of his own ideas!

When an actor pays the same attention to his own lines as he pays to clues in a murder mystery, he sees his scenes instantly. Unfortunately, players often let their egos get in the way. They think they have a funny idea, and that is what the scene must be about. While they plan what they think should be happening, they are ignoring what actually is happening.

Some improvisers are so busy searching for the scene, they don't notice it pass them by. However, if they force their egos out of the way and trust the choice made by the group, they'll all discover their scene together. They need to remember they are not playwrights — they are improvisers.

**PATTERNS IN SCENES**

Players must not only be alert to game moves, they must also be aware of the patterns in a scene — and then play them. For example, one way to end a scene is to return to the beginning
of that same scene, whether through a line, a gesture, or a completed cycle. All of life follows a cycle, and improvisation is no different. The patterns become part of the scenic game. When the players recognize the patterns in a scene, they'll set each other up for game moves to forward that scene. And when they understand the game they set up for themselves, and play it full tilt, they've got it made!

Find your game, and you've found your scene.

Del is fond of the "group mind" concept that develops during improv when everything works, and the ability to wire human minds together to become "Supermen."

"We are releasing higher and greater powers of the human being," he explains. "That is what we mean when we say that Harold 'appears.' A melding of the brains occurs on stage. When improvisers are using seven or eight brains instead of just their own, they can do no wrong! Time slows down, and the player has a sense of where he is.

"I was talking with Gary Fencik of the Chicago Bears, and I asked him what it felt like when they were beating New York in the playoffs, on their way to winning the Super Bowl. He told me that he knew what everybody was doing and where they were. He had a complete holographic image in his mind, a three-dimensional picture of the field."

A similar event occurs during a successful improv. "On stage, one has a complete picture of what is going on, and also a clear sense of all potential moves. They are almost laid out in time. The pattern-making mechanism is kicked on, and yet, one's intellect does not desert him," explains Del.

"Somehow, the improviser is in the balanced right and left hemisphere state. He can almost see time as a dimension, as he can almost see his potential moves extend physically into the future. It's then very easy to decide which move to choose, and then go with it. Since everyone is on the same wavelength, each player sees what the other sees.

"It's an absolute thrill, a tremendous surge of confidence, energy, and joy. I've given up searching for happiness, now that I realize joy is very easily achieved!"

**KEEPING ACTION IN THE PRESENT**

There's little point in a player discussing the past or planning the future in a scene. A good improviser shows us the now. It's always much more interesting to see it, rather than near about it. After all, this is a visual medium!

This also applies to actors discussing events that are happening off stage. If the audience is told that the most interesting action in a scene is occurring elsewhere, why should they care about the discussion they are seeing in front of them? An improv audience prefers watching the action.

All of this is a part of taking the active choice — show the audience, don't tell them.

**SILENCE IS GOLDEN**

Too many performers are terrified when the stage is quiet, but a few moments of silence doesn't mean nothing is happening. Just the opposite — it often leads into the most important moments in a scene.
An improviser needs to consider the most intelligent response he can give to a statement, and so he must feel he can take the time to stop and think. These moments of silence make a beginning improviser very nervous. He often tries to fill the silence with useless chatter, which only adds clutter to the scene.

Improvisers have no reason to fear silence — in fact, more experienced players learn to appreciate it. The silence creates tension and draws in the audience. There is action in thought, and the audience finds a player's response worth waiting for.

When an actor has a strong initiation, but becomes very verbose, he diminishes the importance of the line, and babbles away the energy behind his ideas.

By taking his time and being thoughtful about his work, a player ends up economizing his words: he discovers that he can say more by saving less. The actor's cliché is very true: less is more.

**THE RULE OF THREES**

For some inexplicable reason, things are funnier when they happen three times. Two isn't enough, and four is too many, but the third time something happens, it usually gets a laugh. This is a basic, but mysterious, rule of comedy. The same mechanism in the brain that likes to see patterns seems to thrive on this "Rule of Threes."

Del teaches pattern recognition in workshops, not to train actors to do it, but to demonstrate that all human beings already have an extremely sophisticated pattern mechanism in their heads.

"They needn't worry about things like structure — it's already there," he says. "The 'Rule of Threes' is a deeply ingrained biological phenomenon. "Nobody really knows why it's funnier when things happen three times, but I have a theory. We have three brains — the neo-cortex, the mammalian cortex, and the reptilian cortex. My theory is that each brain gets a joke at a different rate. Of course, it might be something else entirely!"

**KEY POINTS FOR CHAPTER SEVEN**

*Keep it simple. Less is more.

*Avoid exposition.

*Start scenes in the middle.

*Take the active choice to forward action.

*Be specific. Avoid generalities.

*Listen for the game move.

*Welcome the silences. There is action in thought.