

Improv Comedy and Sketch Weeklong Intensive Curriculum  
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## **Our Approach:**

There are many approaches to improv, comedy, and sketch writing that a single performer can take. This section outlines our philosophy so that it might contextualize the following camp schedule and help explain why we made some of the choices we made.

Having only a week to introduce potentially new minds to improv and sketch writing and have them performance ready is no simple task. Certainly, some students will come in having experience, but our guess is the majority of the students will not. This is why it's always important to start off with the basics. Even when we work with seasoned improvisers it's always best to start with the simple stuff to recalibrate and get the mind in the right headspace to do improvised work. Essentially, there are three main guidelines that we believe lead to good improvisation that we worked to ingrain in the students over the short week that they're in your care. The goal of the camp should not be to turn them into amazing, world-class performers, but they should leave the camp with a toolkit that will make them desirable and successful scene partners. This is accomplished by establishing three main guidelines (not rules) for comedy and improv:

### **1. Spontaneity**

Students should be able to trust their instincts in scenes. Improv works best when the self-conscious mind is not allowed to control scenes and choices. Students should be speaking from an inner emotional and truthful voice rather than thinking and planning choices. Obviously, the audience and content of scenes should always be considered so that scenes don't devolve into edgy and controversial topics. Likely, if students are actually being spontaneous these topics will not rise all that often, but they might. Later on we touch on how we think best to address these sorts of situations, but first and foremost spontaneity should be the goal.

### **2. Always make your partner look good**

In scenes of two or more, good scene work is always the result of active listening and strong offerings. In some ways we feel like this may be even more important than spontaneity. No one wants to play with someone who is actively demeaning the other scene partners and stopping scene progress with disconnected or contrary ideas and offers. To that end, it's always the goal of the improviser to make their scene partner look good. This doesn't mean that ever scene devolves into a string of compliments or putting improvisers on pedestals. It means that when an improviser falls into the position of the villain or the hero every other player is working to define their role and give them

something to interact with and react to. This is also the most applicable aspect of improv to the outside world, at least in our perspective. People always want to work with others who value their ideas and elevate the whole collective rather than just themselves.

### 3. Agreement

We find the often touted rule of ‘Yes, and...’ to be somewhat limiting. To a seasoned improviser, the nuances of this important concept are easy to understand but the potential ramifications of new improvisers misunderstanding it, we have found, can lead to potentially damaging scene work. Agreement comes in many forms and so does disagreement and it’s important that improvisers work towards agreement constantly. Perhaps an example is best here. Let’s look at how disagreement can disguise itself as agreement:

A: I went to the humane society and I adopted a dog today. (A fantastic offer about adopting a dog.)

B: Wow that’s so cool! I went shopping for groceries.

Certainly not as damaging as a no, but the offer of the adopted dog was left to die with the inclusion of grocery shopping for some reason. Improviser A certainly could have made an offer more focused on B but it was a fine offer that begs to be explored further. By introducing the grocery shopping into the mix there are now two independent ideas waiting to be explored and although improviser B technically agreed, their response caused the initial idea to be left at the wayside. Here’s an example of a way that scene could have worked out better:

A: I went to the humane society and I adopted a dog today.

B: Which one? Because I heard the one down on main street has been injecting their strays with superhero-serum to turn them into crime fighting pets.

Even though they didn’t talk necessarily about the specific humane society where improviser A got their dog (although they may have depending on improviser A’s response) they still agreed with them technically and also gave them a fantastic offer to continue the scene. You will also likely run into scenes with obvious disagreement where the only response one improviser can have is to act as if they are going insane:

A: Can we please address the elephant you bought  
and brought into our home, Gary?

B: What elephant?

Blatant disagreement is obviously going to deteriorate a scene quickly. And in the above scenario it forces improviser A to either be hallucinating elephants or require the scene to devolve into accusation riddled arguments concerning elephants. It's baffling how many improvisers tend towards simple argumentation in scenes (probably because they seem easier and safer) when rarely do audiences actually want to watch characters argue about whether or not someone brought an elephant into a house. Agreement, especially when it comes to the top of a scene, means you are always building on ideas not just adding onto a pile of ideas or taking them away.

\*note: along these lines students we have found also trend towards what Daniel likes to call "My dad could beat up your dad" scenes or "forcefielding." They are scenes that devolve into a back and forth of one-ups, like when children are playing on a playground and will use their imagination to conjure up some forcefield that blocks whatever is coming to them, or they go back forth describing why their parent is cooler than the next guy's. These sorts of scenes have no progression; at some point it is best for an improviser to decide that someone's dad is clearly the best. Try and nip these in the bud as soon as you can and the scene work will improve. However, refer to our section on notegiving on how exactly to go about doing so.

These three aspects are what we wanted our students to leave understanding, whether they knew consciously or not. Again, notegiving and challenges can also give students a chance to fix these problems with realizing it and will internalize these guidelines for good scenework.

Additionally, we also realized a need to allow students a great deal of freedom in terms of content. We believe that improvisation rests on the idea that no idea is ever wrong, that no matter how controversial a topic might be the spontaneous mind may insert into a scene simply because it's on the improviser's mind. How that topic is addressed in the scene is what's important. And likely, if students are practicing honesty in scenes we don't believe anything will ever be truly offensive. However, we did instill a couple of rules that would help focus the student's mind on creativity and away from purposefully edgy topics that are brought forth to elicit a momentary visceral response from an audience. We explain those in Monday's section. However, we wanted to make sure that even if a scene trended towards violence, sexuality, or other taboo topics we allowed the scene to run its course and end it when appropriate. After which we would give notes on content and playing for an audience. We believe that your students will learn the lesson on what content works when they have the chance to try for themselves. A laundry list of dos and don'ts at the start of the week will curb the student's spontaneity and cause them to recede into a

safe shell. Improv was never meant to be safe. It's meant to be rooted in emotion for everyone involved. Besides, these students are always told what they can and can't do all the time, they will appreciate a safe space where they can fail and succeed freely, because those spaces are becoming harder and harder to come by.

It should go without saying that this is our approach and there are many different avenues to good scene work. If you feel strongly about other aspects of improv or sketch writing feel free to modify the camp to how you feel it would be best. You'll probably operate the best when you're working on concepts that you value and find interesting.

Most importantly have fun, and definitely participate in games with the students this will make you more approachable since you're essentially lowering your status in the whole teacher/student relationship. And, when it comes to improv, a strong improviser can bring out the best in someone else during a scene. If you know that you're a strong improviser focus on giving the students a time to shine in the scene; our guess is this is probably the best way to learn good scene work: by actually experiencing it.

## **Week Overview:**

- **Monday:** Introductions and building a group dynamic through trust and boundaries. Learning to play through objectives. Introduction to sketch writing.
- **Tuesday:** Agreeing with offers and being honest. Further exploration of sketch writing.
- **Wednesday:** Exploring the limitless potential of characterisation. Finalize and finish sketches for performance.
- **Thursday:** Exploring the relationships between characters. Casting, blocking, and rehearsing sketches. Lots of games.
- **Friday:** Plan show order and rehearse. An abbreviated introduction to long form.

## **Daily Breakdown:**

### **Monday:**

Monday focuses on getting the students acclimated with the group they will be working with for the next few days. It's important to set up specific boundaries for the students to work in. Having boundaries is important but also dangerous. Too few boundaries and the group dynamic can be thrown off because some improvisers will feel insecure and unsafe; too many boundaries and you will stilt the spontaneous spirit within the students. Below we outline the boundaries we set. We found them to be satisfactory in maintaining the peace and making all the improvisers feel comfortable. Modify them to the needs of your group.

The second important aspect of the first day is learning to play with objectives. Even if you don't use the Stanislavskian term itself, learning to let the needs of a character guide your performance is primary to good acting in general. We like to demonstrate this to the students by making them use objective work without realizing it. Games like Tag are amazingly simple but force people to focus on a singular objective and change their tactics as needed. We have included two games, a little more complex than Tag, that help students find the feeling of working with objectives.

As far as writing goes, Monday serves as a day to get the creative wheels of the students turning. Likely, they aren't exercising this muscle as much, especially during the summer, so if you try and throw them directly into sketch writing they'll freeze and have the largest writer's block known to man. Even during the week we found the students struggling to write. Make sure the focus isn't on being creative, but writing. They don't need to pen the most interesting story since Shakespeare, they just need to write. Encourage every idea that comes out of their heads (while always staying in line with the boundaries you set for the group).

### **9:00 - 9:45: Introductions**

*Action Name Game:* Use the name game to try and coax the students out of their shells a little bit. They don't need to be so big with their movements but encourage them to push their boundaries a little bit.

Explain your approach: We like to explain how we personally approach the puzzle of improvisation. Like what do you value and look for in scene work. Whether or not the students will understand at this juncture try to explain succinctly in terms they might understand. Hopefully students will begin puzzling over how they will approach scenes even a little bit.

Two Way Contract: We used a large white piece of paper and taped it up somewhere where everyone could see it. Then we wrote out a contract after which every student and instructor signed the bottom. The contract had three parts: 1) our expectations for students, 2) the student's expectations for each other, and 3) their expectations of us.

For our camp, these are the guidelines/expectations that we used for our students: everything is correct, but everything must be original; no putting another improviser in physical danger; personal physical boundaries are personal; no profanity and the "grandma" rule.

The first rule is there to deter your students from dipping into potentially problematic areas. Since you are encouraging them to not mimic scenes, then if a scene happens where they happen to kill a dog, encourage them to avoid those scenes in the future. The second is there as a precautionary measure and as a method for good improv; it pairs well with the third rule in that regard. Improvisation relies on the performers being safely uncomfortable, in that, the subject matter and their physical relationship with their partner should not deter them doing scenes. If at any time you see or hear an improviser becoming uncomfortable reinforce this guideline. And a brief explanation of the "grandma" rule is essentially, scene content and language should be as if you are performing for your grandmother. They will not follow this rule all the time but it's a good baseline to keep referring to.

Tour of the Space: The only two spaces you will likely be using are the performance space and the bathrooms so this should be relatively short. It's up to your discretion what you include here, but we suggest keeping this moment relatively brief. An additional note: we allowed almost complete freedom as far as bathroom usage. It fits with the themes and the respect we were trying to reinforce in the camp. Allowing freedom stretches past the scenes. The more you treat your students like adults the better the scene work becomes.

### **9:45 - 10:15 Team Building and Improvisation Introduction**

*The Grand Machine:* When you first introduce this game, start by prompting students to join the machine. Encourage them to focus on what the machine *actually* needs. They should be interacting with their machine partners and shouldn't be a product or the object of the machine. For example, if the machine is clearly making and buttering toast if a student steps in as the piece(s) of toast, coach them to try and be part of the machine. This makes the students focus on the action and the machine as a whole, rather than just receiving all of the offers of the other students. Once they have seemed to get a hang of the game, allow them to introduce themselves to the machine.

### **10:15 - 10:45: Playing to Objectives**

*Blood and Potatoes* Some students may not be comfortable with these games because they involve close proximity and can actually be a little nerve-racking, allow them to sit out. When we ran this game we made the students promise before we even started explaining the game that they would not run no matter what. Since they can become lost in the game (which is the point after all) just keep giving them reminders that they can't run.

*The Bogeyman* It's important that you, as the Bogeyman, are always walking. The point of this game is not that they lose the game by getting caught the point is that they try and learn that they can easily win simply by standing next to each other and continuously shaking hands to stay invulnerable. *Let them come to this conclusion on their own.* Do not try and push them to the solution. The point of these objective games is to show them how they were playing to the reality and that scene work is no different. Just because they aren't playing a specialised version of tag doesn't mean that they



shouldn't be finding ways to "win" or, in acting terms, complete their objectives.

A note about Bogeyman: Daniel learned the game originally with hugs instead of handshakes. We switched it to handshakes to make the students more comfortable. We ended up having a student who was not comfortable shaking hands so we didn't end up playing this game at all. Always be aware of what your improvisers are comfortable doing.

### **10:45 - 11:00: Sketch Writing Warm-up**

**Commercial Warm-up** Each day, directly before the sketch writing portion start with a warm-up. These are the ones that we used and they were successful, but like everything in this curriculum are not set in stone. For this warm-up break the students into groups of three to four. Give them everyday objects (toaster, flower pot, stapler, microwave, etc) to build a commercial around. They should still function as originally intended but they should have excess features as well and are allowed to be zany. For example, one of the groups in our camp were selling an "everything included flower-pot"; it came with sunlight, water, a titanium pot, and worms to make more dirt. The commercials are required to be 30 seconds long, and include a catchphrase, jingle, price, and how exactly you buy the product. As the students are brainstorming in groups bounce around and listen to the ideas they have, encourage them to expand on small ideas they might have or really explore all the possibilities of their item. After they have finished, have them present them to the group one by one.

### **11:00 - 12:00: Introduction to Sketch Writing**

**Idea Board:** Like the two way contract, we taped a large sheet of paper to the wall and called it our "idea board". Using sticky notes to place the student's ideas on the Idea Board we had them brainstorm what they think made things funny. We included some of our own ideas or simplified their ideas as they went, but otherwise fill the board up with things that the students find funny. For us our three most important categories were: conflict, absurdity, and relatability. Also bring up the classic "rule of threes". Explain how a joke can

be done three times in succession before becoming old, given that each time something is different.

Sketch Examples:

Show your students examples of sketches that *you* find funny, that way they have ideas of what they're trying to write. We see sketch writing and playwriting as two separate forms. Sketches do not require as much work on characters and objectives as plays do, but they require tight and succinct writing otherwise the fast punchlines fall flat.

Brainstorm:

Now have the students come up with some ideas for what the sketches can be about. They can be fully formed or just a single topic. Whatever they may be, write them down and then place them on the board so the students can reference them and draw from them throughout the whole week. Once you have a few break off into two large writing groups. It's important to let the students know that at any time throughout the week when they see something funny in a scene or they just are struck with an idea they can come over and write it down and put it on the idea board. Often times, great sketches have been born out of improvised scenes.

Large Group Writing:

We split our large group writing time into two groups: Ahnika did group devising work and Daniel did solo writing. Both groups have their weaknesses and strengths, and both are worth working in. The group devising begins with people in the group throwing out ideas for a sketch. Once an idea can be agreed upon, the next thing to devise together is the setting of the sketch. After that, decide what characters are involved. Next, the conflict or problem to be solved is devised. Even though conflict is the most important part of a story, I do setting and character first because I've discovered that a group typically has an easier time coming up with and agreeing on a conflict after they've already created everything else the story needs. Once the setting, characters, and conflict are created, The resolution must be decided. This is often the trickiest part, and I found I would typically need to help out the most at this time. The last thing to devise together as a group is how the sketch will need to start - like with conflict, I find that ideas for beginnings come much easier when an end is already

decided. Now that the story has a complete outline (Beginning, conflict, resolution, characters, and setting), any remaining time can be spent coming up with specific lines that they might want to appear in the sketch; ie specific jokes they had come up with during devising. All of this is written down by the instructor and saved until Wednesday when the sketches for performance will be chosen - at which point the outline and specific lines can be used to create an actual finished script.

#### Small Group Writing:

Daniel's process for solo writing worked as follows: Begin by choosing what you want to try writing about. It can be anything. Next brainstorm all of the connecting ideas. For example if my idea was "cheeseburger" I would, as quickly as possible, write down all of the things I connect with cheeseburgers: ketchup, mustard, buns, McDonalds, Burgerking, Waiters, greasy food, grilling, etc. This will act as a word bank essentially that you can refer to whenever you need inspiration or an idea for your scene. Next choose a place to set your sketch and characters. Continuing my "cheeseburger" example I could decide to set my sketch in a burger joint and have my central characters by a waiter and a customer. Next, decide what might happen between those characters in that location. What kind of actions might those characters take in that scenario? My waiter might take the customer's order; my customer might eat a cheeseburger; my customer might get grease on their expensive tie. Once you have these things start writing dialogue and direction of what might happen. These lines might just come to you in pockets or in sequential order just write them down. The most important part about solo writing is literally writing everything down, any idea even if it's cursory and seemingly disconnected is worth writing down because it might just be the thing you need later. These solo writing endeavors do not need to develop into full scenes, they could even just be outlines, which is fine because the students will be doing the actual writing of scenes together later on. Float around and check in with students, especially ones with blank pages. Slowly walk them through the process one-on-one and encourage them to just put stuff down on paper. It doesn't have to be funny, it just has to be something. Encourage the students to practice this sort of writing at home when they feel inclined and

bring in scenes they worked on to pitch as one they write and perform during their showcase on Friday.

### **12:00 - 12:30: Lunch**

### **12:30 - 1:30: Introduction to Scene Work and Working Together**

*Three Line Scenes:* Use these three line scenes to reinforce good offers and acceptances. Encourage the students to focus on what their scene partners say and build on it. These are simple but can be really beautiful as long as the improvisers aren't just throwing around non-sequiturs.

*Three Headed Expert:* Three Headed Expert is best played when everyone is saying their words as soon after the last as possible. The key is to not think too much when adding a word on. The surprising thing is that our brains automatically do this already, when we hear a word we predict what will be coming after it. Try and encourage the students to tap into their impulse.

### **1:30 - 2:30: Playing Scenes**

*Freeze:* Freeze is perhaps the most well known and loved game by improvisers; its simple premise allows for a lot of freedom in scenes and choices, and for early improvisers, it allows to test and feel good scene beginnings over and over again. Encourage the students to just jump right in on their impulse.

### **2:30 - 2:45: Snack/Break**

### **2:45 - 3:15: Looking Forward and Reflecting**

*What's Coming Up:* We always liked to end our day walking the students through what we're going to be doing the rest of the time as well as the following day. We think this allows the students to get excited about what's coming next, and people just generally seem to respect you more if you articulate your plan.

*Rose/Thorn/Stem:* Rose/Thorn/Stem is a reflective exercise where the students sit in a circle and take turns talking about their experience at camp and listening to others. Continuing in either direction around the circle the student should first start with their Rose for the day, which is

the thing they liked best. It doesn't have to be about camp, it could be that they got to eat their favorite sandwich today for lunch or that they learned that they're getting a new puppy. Often times those non-camp responses may also be beneficial, it gives people a chance to become happily vulnerable without realizing it. Next, their Thorn is the thing they liked least about today. Feel free to encourage the students to critique the camp if they want, we found Rose/Thorn/Stem to be a fantastic way to gauge how we were doing as instructors. And finally, their Stem is something they are looking forward to at camp tomorrow. This one should be encouraged to be specifically about camp; these responses will help you tailor the following day to each student's aspirations and tastes.

Keep side conversations to a minimum and really get the students to focus on each other and how they are feeling. Use this to check in emotionally and get working feedback on the camp. You as the instructor should also do a Rose/Thorn/Stem as well, not only just as an initial example, but along with the students. Use this as a platform to encourage the students and their growth.

### **3:15 - 4:00: Fan Favorites**

#### **Student Choice:**

Ask the students which games they would have liked to play more. If you have more requests than you think you can fit into the time slot, just try to get through as many as you can and try to make sure that the students who wanted to play the game are the ones actually playing it. Feel free to fill in if there wouldn't be enough improvisers to play the game. If you don't get to a game that a student wanted, write it down and get to it tomorrow. Make this time completely about what they want to do.

#### **Tuesday:**

Tuesday focuses on the necessary skill of agreement in improvised scenes. We say agreement because agreement can take many forms and simply playing by the strict rule of "Yes, and..." can be surprisingly limiting. We have found that agreement is best built on a foundation of listening and responding to your partner. A simple way of making sure this always happens is that when your scene partner makes a factual statement about the scene, it is *always* true. One way this can be problematic is with non-descript offers. If you begin a scene miming mixing something in a bowl and your scene partner responds with "man, when do you think we're going to be done churning this butter?", you *are* churning butter and always have been. We cannot

stress how important agreement is. It forms the backbone of supportive team-based improvising, because without it scenes will always suffer.

The second aspect of Tuesday acts more as the planting of a seed for the rest of the week, but in our opinion it makes sense to pair it with agreement. Honesty in scenes is meant by playing the emotional weight of a scene accurately. This doesn't mean the context or circumstances of the scene need to be realistic, but rather that the content of the scene needs to be. You can play a polka-dotted, tap dancing, five hundred year old elephant, but that character *needs* to have recognizable and honest emotional responses, otherwise the audience will not be interested. This is admittedly one of the most difficult aspects of improv for the majority of improvisers that you may come across. Lots of improvisers create a degree of separation between themselves and the scene as a sort of protective mask, but just like in acting, it's necessary for improvisers to become emotionally available in scenes. The gibberish scenes are really helpful here, because it removes the trappings of words and other unnecessary things that often get in the way of emotional truth in scenes.

As far as sketch writing goes, just keep encouraging and prodding the students forward. For some of them, it is difficult to begin to write creatively like this. The fact of the matter is, most creative writing doesn't come by inspiration, that may certainly be the inciting moment, but rarely is a good script written to paper in one fell swoop. Creative writing can often be a trudging plod to just place things on paper and then return to them and edit out the bad bits in favor of better ones. Always be encouraging and never negating. The students will flourish if you accept every idea they provide to you, it's your job to get them started generating those ideas (or maybe just realizing that they are already generating them).

### **9:00 - 9:15: Warm Up**

*Vrooom:*

With all the morning energizers, your students will likely be tired and groggy, be prepared to be energetic yourself, lead by example and allow them to wake up all the way.

### **9:15 - 9:45: "Get To Know You" Activity**

People Bingo:

In order to further facilitate comradery between the campers we created a people bingo sheet. The squares contained questions like: "find someone who has the same number of siblings as you," "tell someone your favorite song and learn theirs," or "create a secret handshake with someone." Take part in the activity yourselves. Once the students find someone that can fill in their bingo sheets, they write their name in the square, but they can't use the same name twice. After everyone is done, go around and ask the students to tell everyone about one of the people who filled in a square.

**9:45 - 10:00: Learning to Agree***Living Scenes:*

When students make additions to scenes encourage them to make additions that are completely necessary. If there is already one houseplant, there doesn't need to be another unless the actors walking through the scene call for it. Also encourage them to become individual pieces of each scenery object. For example, a refrigerator is more than a single improviser standing stoutly as a large object, there are doors and food and shelves. The more the improvisors can work together to create whole items out their individual pieces the more interesting and focused their actions become.

**10:00 - 11:00: Further Explorations in Agreement***Presidential Debate:*

Generally the same suggestions for *Three Headed Expert* apply here. A new thing to grapple with is finding an identity as a singular person to conflict with the opponent. If the students are having trouble with this try suggesting that if one side answers one question one way the other should do the opposite. You as the instructor should handle the questions to begin with, make sure to just keep energy up.

**11:00 - 12:00: Writing Time***Half n Half Stories:*

Hand each student a piece of paper and have them write the beginning of a story. The story can be whatever they want, but they can only write up until some sort of climax or big event. Time them for eight minutes while they write; then, when the time is up, shuffle the half stories together and randomly distribute them so that each student has a new story. Have them finish the stories they received, time this second part at around seven minutes. The day we did this exercise we read the stories during lunch and then presented ones we thought were the most interesting or funny. Don't hesitate to make these stories into sketches.

*Writing Groups:*

From day to day, decide which students will be in which groups based on which group they have or have not been in and how you think they could potentially benefit from each group. Try and have them work on new ideas each day. A reminder that the actual writing of the scenes is saved for Wednesday. Even if what the

students come up with is a rough collection of ideas that's all you need for wednesday.

### **12:00 - 12:30: Lunch**

### **12:30 - 12:45: Refocus**

#### *Alphabet*

Use this game to refocus and challenge your students to focus on the others in the camp. The game isn't about going as fast as possible, it's about being sure that everyone is included. Try and direct the students to focus on making sure everyone is contributing equally. One direction to keep repeating is to continually remind the students that everyone should either be contributing more or contributing less depending on how they have been in the past.

### **12:45 - 1:15: Getting Back into Improv games**

#### *Blind Freeze*

This game is mostly to warm up the students to get them back in the improv mindset. With the blinded aspect, really encourage the students to jump right in and just pick a pose not knowing what the scene is going to be.

### **1:15 - 2:00: Playing with Gibberish**

#### *Gibberish Scenes*

These gibberish scenes are twofold in terms of purpose. Firstly, they are an opportunity to show the students that scenes do not need to rely on dialogue to make scenes understandable. As long as your characters are in need of something they can communicate their struggle. Typically these scenes play well if there is an object involved that can repel or attract a character, but this isn't necessary. Secondly, these scenes absolutely require improvisers to focus on each other to make the scene work. Because you're speaking in gibberish you actually have to watch the character's actions, which even strong improvisers can forget to do. Additionally, encourage the students to refrain from miming items as opposed to just using them. Playing the scenes realistically and honestly is the goal here. If you were going to use an umbrella you would simply open the umbrella, not cut out the space with your hands around the perimeter of the umbrella and then guide the opening. The audience will always figure it out eventually as long as you stay truthful to the scene.



*Foreign Movie*

This game is admittedly complex and difficult to play, but we would much rather give the students a challenge than have them become complacent. Encourage both pairs of students to make vague offers that can become more specific. For example, if the acting improvisers simply hold out their hands as if holding something this could become a list of different things: an apple, a time-bomb, a daily planner, etc. Then it forces the speaking improvisers to decide what these things are. The inverse could just as easily be true as well. Again, for example, if the speaking improvisers say “here’s what you ordered, chief.” The acting improvisers can reach for something and struggle under the weight of a very heavy and large hammer. Obviously, also encourage the students to not speak over one another and for the speaking improvisers to not be talking all the time, only speak when absolutely necessary. This helps reinforce good “give-and-take” skills.

**2:00 - 2:15: Break****2:15 - 2:45: Putting a Lot of Things Together***Inner Thoughts*

Admittedly, this game has undergone a lot of tweaking as we have used it over the years. Making the mechanics of the game work well is what this game really needs. The thoughts should be injecting scene or character changing material when they speak. In other words, *it should be something the characters can actually act*. For example, the inner thought of “I ate lettuce for lunch today” would likely not have any bearing on the scene (unless the scene is about a meeting of anti-vegan carnivorous people), however an inner thought like “I wish I hadn’t stuffed my shoes full of cheese,” while admittedly absurd, gives the improviser acting out the scene the chance to actually act something out and feel the squish of cheese in their shoe. Audiences want to see the thoughts pile up and demand things of the actors. The trick then is to coach the actors who are acting out the scene to not just forget the offers that their inner thoughts give them. This is a game that requires some feeling through on your part as an instructor, we certainly haven’t figured it out completely yet.

## **2:45 - 3:15: Looking Forward and Reflecting (Tomorrow's plan and Rose/Thorn/Stem)**

### **3:15 - 4:00: Fan Favorites**

#### **Wednesday:**

Wednesday focuses on characterization. Chances are good that if your students were most comfortable in the areas leading up to Wednesday, they may need help here. The inverse is also true. When doing the physicality exercise it's best to remind them that this is for them, and even though they may look wacky when they are leading with different parts of their body they should try their best to remove any notion of self-consciousness. It's difficult but it's something that will make performing less painful. Obviously, again, this should all be done through encouragement and lowering yourself. If you are going to ask your students to lead with your finger tips, for example, show them and do it first.

Sketch writing for Wednesday is largely logistical because you actually have to have them written by the end of the day so you can go home and transcribe them and print enough copies for all the actors. Obviously, watch for content in the sketches, but try and allow the students to make mostly their own choices. As long as they are writing and it's largely coherent they are accomplishing exactly what you asked them to. And allow yourself to congratulate them on their writing abilities. Commend the good work you are seeing from them and they'll be more inclined to do it in the future.

#### **9:00 - 9:15: Warm Up**

*Zip, Zap, Zop*

Typically this game is played as a contest. If you screw up the order or the rhythm you would be out and you have to exit the game. To us, this doesn't capture the essence of improv, so instead help each student focus on feeling and seeing the current and being part of the group energy. This is a fantastic focus/energy game because it's simple and easy and engaging. If you feel like your students really have the hang of the game, free yourself from the circle and move around the room as you play. This forces you to stay engaged and watch for the energy as it passes around the room. It's possible to maintain the same speed from the circle when you're freely roaming around, although it is more difficult.

#### **9:15 - 9:45: Physicality Exercise**

This exercise is an exploration of physicality in expressing stock characters, as used in Commedia Theatre. Begin by having students walk around the space as themselves. Specify that they should not be interacting with each other, this is an exercise for the

actor as an individual. Once they have gotten over their inevitable fit of giggles of how weird it feels to be walking around a space as an exercise, have them really focus on how their individual bodies move through space. Explain the concept of leading with a specific part of the body, point out what part of the body you yourself lead with, and have them explore and figure out what part of their body they lead with. Once they think they know, have them exaggerate leading with that part of the body. Throughout the exercise have the students walk at different tempos and levels of exaggeration to have them see how that affects how they feel. Have them stop and shake out any tension that might have started to form, and explain that you are going to try leading with the main parts used for stock characters - let them know that there are many options, but as a group you are just going to work through the most common ones. After each body part, stop and shake out tension and discuss what characters might lead with that part of the body. Also discuss how walking at different tempos affected the character. Before moving on to the next body part, tell them what sort of stock character is conveyed to audiences when actors lead with that body part and encourage them to find ways to incorporate the ideas in the exercise into their scene work for the rest of the week. The body parts to lead with include (in order working down the body): Top of the Head, The Nose, The Shoulders, The Chest, The Stomach/Belly, The Hips/Pelvis.

### **9:45 - 10:15: Feeling the Scene Exercise**

#### *First Impressions*

This is a simple exercise that Daniel came up with working with a troupe in the Spring of 2019. It's based off the ideas of "heat and weight" in the book *Improvisation at the Speed of Life*. It's easily one of our favorite improv books and worth reading. When Daniel runs this exercise he typically doesn't even have the actors get to talking when they first meet. It's surprising how much emotional information you can get from just looking how somebody's posture and mannerisms change when they interact with you. Really try to get the student's to feel each other's emotional status concerning each other, this will help scenes stay grounded.

*\*side tangent:* The following improv theory musing will probably go over students' heads so don't feel the need to try to explain it, but it might be helpful for your own understanding of scene

mechanics. Stanislavskian acting asserts that you can't play emotion, only action, obstacles, and objectives. A director saying "play it sadder please" is poor direction, the actor should always be given something tangible. The interesting thing about improv is you can actually start with emotion. Since the improviser doesn't have any text to work from sometimes they may have to just feel sad or joyful or whatever emotion their mind decides is correct. If they can first feel this, their brain can then figure out why. Once the improviser starts to experience the emotion they can figure out the why as the scene continues and play that. Part of this exercise is doing just that, although we don't expect the students to be on a level where they can grapple with that concept just yet.

### **10:15 - 11:00: Working with Entrances and Exits**

#### *Buzzword*

Buzzword is another one of those games that is difficult to get mechanically right, but it's a great game for getting your improvisers to focus intently on each other and what they are saying. Really encourage them to try and direct as much of their focus on the words: not only what their scene partners are saying but also what *they themselves* are saying. We had a beautiful moment where one improviser accidentally said her own word, and realized she had to exit. It was beautiful, and the audience ate it up.

### **11:00 - 12:00: Sketch Writing**

#### *15 Minutes of Writing*

Have the students write for fifteen minutes, without distraction. If they have music they would like to listen to while they write, that should be fine, as long as they are writing non-stop. Just keep encouraging them to write whatever they want, be it a poem, or a personal reflection, or a story. It doesn't matter if they finish the story, if it be one, only that they continue writing.

#### *Writing Groups*

### **12:00 - 12:30: Lunch**

### **12:30 - 12:45: Refocus (Alphabet)**

### **12:45 - 1:45: A Fun Game before the Hard Work**

*Lines from the Floor*

In preparation for today, you should write the lines as the instructor to give the students a sense of what the lines should sound like. We prefer to always make them full sentences, and the more they can be a little absurd in their nouns and verbs. Insults also work nicely here, such as “you can be such a stinky toad sometimes.”

Completely inoffensive but it gives a beautiful moment in the scene for emotional truth. Any person or character is bound to respond to an insult (or of course if the improviser can find a way to spin it positively, just as good).

**1:45 - 2:15: Deciding on Sketches***Choose Sketch Ideas*

When we ran the camp we pulled all the sketch ideas together into a stack and decided on which ones we thought were far enough to write. For us, a fair portion of them were the ones written in the large group since they had the most substance already. We presented the ideas to the students and had them vote on them until we narrowed the sketch ideas down to six in total. Depending on how you want to organize your show you may have to cut those down, but it’s better for the students to actually experience the writing of the sketches.

*Writing Groups*

Split the students into writing groups for each sketch idea. Allow the originators of the idea to have first dibs on if they want to write it. Once they have been split into groups send them on their writing way. Of course, you should be bouncing around giving advice when they need it, helping them with ideas when they need them, etc. Part of this is to just do the writing. Hopefully, the ideas should be fairly full in form so all there is to do is write the lines. I would say no matter how unfunny they are, refrain from writing jokes for them; it’s their work, and as long as they find it funny, that’s all that matters.

**2:15 - 3:00: Working on Sketches****3:00 - 3:15: Break****3:15 - 3:45: Working with Quirks***Dating Game*

Creating quirks is sort of an art form. The key is to make it complex enough that it takes time to get, but simple enough that it

doesn't take too long. Also, sometimes the guesser will get lost if it's too simple, they will come to think they have more to guess. We like to believe that sticking to physical modifications is the most successful with young improvisers. Quirks like "your hair is spaghetti," or "your hands are made of glass" work well because you just have to play the physicality and then the responses will come with it. Next you can try doing objective quirks: "you want to change every lightbulb you see" or "you have a fear of commemorative plates." The more specific you get the more of a gamble it is, it gives the improviser a lot more to play with either way. Eventually, you can introduce entities and personalities, a cool scene that we have seen before was someone was the grim reaper. A warning about entities and people: if you're playing a famous person, you always run the risk that the guesser won't know who they are at all, this is a horrible place to put an improviser in. Besides, the other ones seem more fun to play anyways.

### *Party Quirks*

A lot of what applies to *Dating Game* applies here too. But with *Party Quirks* there's a lot of give and take since you won't be asked direct questions as the improvisers with quirks, and you add another character dimension in the movement of the characters.

### **3:45 - 4:00: Looking forward and Reflecting (Plan for Tomorrow and Rose/Thorn/Stem)**

#### **Thursday:**

Thursday is all about pulling the characters and the performing techniques together with other people on stage to create what anybody really cares about in scene work: Relationships. Even if someone is doing an improvised soliloquy they are still forming and playing off of a relationship; it can either be one that has already been established or with the audience themselves. This is where listening becomes extra extra extra important. If you aren't listening to you characters emotional offers onstage you're going to miss relationship opportunities. If things have been going well you've already been doing relationship work you just haven't been focusing on it directly, but now is your chance. Perhaps, explaining the focus of the day before doing grid scenes will help facilitate the exploration of relationships.

Casting and blocking are again fairly logistical, but we have a few things for you to consider. For the purposes of the camp, if a student wants a role really bad, give it to them. The less you consider either the quality of a specific performance or the technical fit for a role (concerning gender, age, etc.) is probably for the better. Of course, when students start creating

stereotypical characters is when the line is crossed, but otherwise if they want to play the character, let them. Their enthusiasm will help given the limited time frame you have.

### **9:00 - 9:15: Warm Up**

#### *Bippity-Bippity-Bop!*

Chances are good you've played this game before. Slowly add the different rules as the students get used to them. Feel free to fill in with poses and elements you might know as well.

### **9:15 - 9:30: Notes!**

#### *Challenges*

When giving notes for improv it's important to consider how scenes functionally work. You really can't give notes the same way that you would for scripted acting. And with improv we believe that it is as important as, or perhaps more important, that you happen upon a new skill. You can have improv theory explained at you for hours but chances are good you won't actually be able to implement anything. Games allow improvisers to discover good improv habits while concentrating on something in scenes. That's why we write improv notes as challenge. For Thursday, we wrote specific challenges for each student, printed them out on pieces of paper and handed them out in this block of time. Students could choose to implement them or not, it was up to them, and if they did they could come to us and get more notes verbally if they wanted. Writing good note is fairly simple and straightforward. Say you want one of your students to be more specific physical choices because they tend to just bounce around the space, give them the challenge of playing a dancer or an old person who has pain moving their limbs, or for an improviser who tends to play high energy scenes where they start shouting from time to time, make them play a peacekeeper who wants every character on stage to get along. By happening upon these characters you can open an improviser's eyes to more possibilities than they often play. Part of becoming a good improviser is learning to be flexible, and these exercises should help with that. One more note about challenges, when giving an improviser a character to play, like a cowboy or an alien, encourage them to play the character as honestly as they can without relying on tropes and easy jokes. If they rely on jokes they won't tap into the reason why you assigned them the challenge.

**9:30 - 10:00: Acting Exercise***Grid Scenes*

This is an acting exercise that Daniel really likes to do; if you want to replace this exercise with one of your own feel free to. This exercise is designed to get performers to realize that the specific words don't really matter, and then to explore how they exist spatially with characters. To start stand still in an open area. Hand each of them one line from *Lines from the Floor*. Make sure the lines are each substantive enough, so that they're each at least five words. To start, each student can only use the words in their line. Once they have their lines they can begin to move around and say their line to characters they might meet. The catch is they have to walk around the space as if they are on a grid of straight lines. Once they have begun to move around the grid and saying their lines. Give them the objective that they silently, in their head, pick a single person that they want to avoid, and then eventually a single person they want to follow. Once they are accomplishing this task and saying their lines, give them the freedom to take whatever words they hear and make them their own. Essentially, the next rule is that they are allowed to say any words that they hear. So, if the students need more words they are required to interact with the other characters on the grid. They should continue to avoid people and try and follow their target. The grid will begin to get somewhat chaotic and absurd, that's fine. Encourage the students to not just continue saying the same phrase but that they should always be stretching the flexibility of their words.

**10:00 - 10:30: Juggling Multiple Characters***Triangle*

Triangle is quite literally the name of this timeslot: juggling multiple characters. The beautiful thing about triangle is that you don't have to continue exactly from where you left off when the scene was there last, in fact you probably shouldn't. The key here is to make sure the scenes are progressing. Even though the characters are set they can change their location and time from when the audience has seen them last, those establishing lines are still super important when the scene comes back around to those characters.

**10:30 - 11:30: Sketches!**



*Casting*

When casting the sketches, again I would give dibs to authors first to make sure that they have a chance to perform in the scene they wrote. Otherwise, if a student feels really strongly about a role it's probably best to let them have it. Make sure the roles are distributed evenly, of course, but otherwise this shouldn't take too long.

*Blocking*

If there are two or more instructors, share the load and block every other sketch. Don't be too concerned with the quality of your blocking just make sure there is some and the scene isn't stagnant, and that nobody has their back to the audience for too long. As blocking usually it can be a little boring for students, just encourage them to be respectful of each other.

**11:30 - 12:00: Return to Gibberish***Foreign Expert*

Foreign Expert shares a lot of the elements with foreign movie for obvious reasons, but it seems to be more difficult to get right, probably because both improvisers are responsible for the scene on their own. Really encourage the students to make big choices in terms of physicality and requests of their scene partner. Also, the goal here is to always keep it interesting. Sometimes these scenes can become stagnant. As long as the students are making big offers the scene works itself out. Step-by-step processes for the expert are always a good place to start, since they have a definite structure.

**12:00 - 12:30: Lunch****12:30 - 12:45: Refocus (Alphabet)****12:45 - 1:15: Stretching Physicality***Try That on for Size!*

For this game really try and push the students to reach far for what they might be doing. It can be just about anything as long as they're thinking outside of the box. Just encourage them to be as impulsive as possible. Don't worry too much about speed for the first few rounds, but then start to be strict about going faster and faster down the line.

**1:15 - 2:45: Sketches!**

*Rehearsal*

This rehearsal is just for helping cement the blocking in the students' heads. Again, the quality of the blocking isn't super imperative, just make sure the students hitting the punchlines they wrote.

**2:45 - 3:00: Give and Take***Dinner Party Exercise*

Similar considerations to triangle apply here. Try and encourage the students to track their conversations when they're not actually speaking, so that they're not picking up exactly where they left off. A further challenge can be for the students to not only pay attention to their own conversation, but to the other ones going and try and use the elements from those conversations to influence the course of their own.

**3:00 - 3:15: Break****3:15 - 3:30: Looking forward and Reflecting (Plan for Tomorrow and Rose/Thorn/Stem)****3:30 - 4:00: Fan Favorites****Friday:**

Part of the purpose of the exercises and games on Friday is to reserve energy for the show. Keep the students energized of course, but don't drain their brain power with large concepts (which is why you may want to skip the long form segment of the day). When there are breaks have yourself be available to do whatever the heck they want you to do with them. Play games with them, talk with them, do whatever it takes to keep forming the bond that, come show time, will blossom in ways you didn't think were possible. For example, when we ran the camp we had a student who consistently during the week would resort to edgy and fairly borderline material for scenes. The scenes they were in would often be crippled by this and would end quickly. It's worth noting that they had a liking for historical references as well, so along with his preferred humor choice I think you would be able to determine what kind of references they made. Regardless, during the last game of the show in which they were performing with a fellow student and Daniel, the two students ended building a fantastic scene in a dog park where the other student was a talking dog and they were a crusader who had brought their horse to the dog park. It was a truly brilliant scene, and it was likely possible because the other students nor did we as instructors shun the student into thinking their ideas were wrong or otherwise. He found his perfect approach in that moment and it was one of the most rewarding experiences in the camp.

**9:00 - 9:15: Warm Up***Bunny Bunny*

This energizer doesn't have much to it to be honest, but it's so incredibly fantastic. As long as the students are paying attention and committing to the motions and the words start ramping up the speed and volume until it's almost impossible.

**9:15 - 9:45: Plan the Show!***What Games to Perform*

Have the students throw out which games they'd like to perform for the show. For our show we had each of the students vote on which games they wanted to play once we had a list and we made sure we had enough spots in games for the students to play two a piece. Once you know which games each student wants to play then you can start working on the order.

**9:45 - 10:00: Quick Break***Decide on Order*

When deciding on the order, it's entirely up to you, but here are some things that worked out really well for us. If you need to fill some spots to keep the participation in games even, don't be afraid to improvise yourself in the performance. Knowing a student's strengths you can work to bring those out in scene work; plus it's just a lot of fun. No matter what, just try and keep the students in games you know they really like, improvising is hard work but it's really about having fun at the end of the day, so just tailor the show to them.

**10:00 - 11:00: Run***Full Run*

Don't worry too much about being perfect with this run, just try and help students get a feel for the show and with any transitional elements that might need to happen, such as moving acting blocks for set pieces.

**11:00 - 12:00: Lunch****12:00 - 12:15: Refocus (Alphabet)****12:15 - 1:00: Introduction to Long Form***Tell Me More!*

Tell me more is a long form that Daniel is developing, and really any long form can be used here, but we used it to give the students

a taste for what long form can be like. If you don't feel like it's working that well, don't hesitate to change to a short form game. Long form taps into different and modified skills than short form, but some students will really take to it.

**1:00 - 2:00: Another Run**

**2:00 - 2:30: Long Break Before Show**

**2:30 - 2:45: Quick Pre Show Peptalk and Energizer**

*Humba Humba*

Get the students ready with this classic camp energizer. Let them know how far they've and how fantastic they are. We've found that improvisation and comedy has to be based on a positive relationship, so it's necessary here to praise rather than negatively critique.

**2:45 - 3:00: Prep for Show**

**3:00 - 4:00: Show!**

*Have Fun!*

Enjoy the show! You worked hard to get your students to where they are now. Chances are good if you did your job right they are all fantastic performers. It's really a beautiful thing to behold.

**Games Compendium:**

*Action Name Game*

In a circle, go around and each person says their name paired with a simple physical action. After each person goes, everyone copies their name and their action.

*Machine*

Start by deciding on a simple task for a machine to complete à la a Rube Goldberg machine. Once the task is decided, one person is chosen to start the machine. To be a part of the machine, you do a single continuous action and a single sound effect to go with it. You continue repeating the action and sound until the game is over. The first time the game is played, actors raise their hands to add on to the machine. After the first time and the concept is understood, they can add themselves. Make sure to articulate that machines do not have to and should not in this case be a straight line. Make sure every part added is a necessary part of the machine

and there are no repeats (there aren't multiple people doing the same thing).

*Blood and Potatoes*

*The Bogeyman*

*Three Line Scenes*

*Three Headed Expert*

*Freeze*

*Vroom*

*Living Scenes*

*Presidential Debate*

*Alphabet*

*Blind Freeze*

*Gibberish Scenes*

*Foreign Movie*

*Inner Thoughts*

*Zip, Zap, Zop!*

*First Impressions*

*Buzz Word*

*Lines from the Floor*

*Party Quirks*

*Dating Game*

*Bippity-bippity-bop!*

*Triangle*

*Foreign Expert*

*Try That on for Size!*

*Bunny Bunny*

*Tell me More*

*Humba Humba*