

Improving through Improv-ing



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A tutorial on the use of improv exercises and games as a training and motivational tool in drama

175+ games and exercises for your group

DramaShare

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Improving through Improv-ing

Kind of a catchy name, doncha think?

Fact is that the concept, (the potential of improving dramatic skills through focusing on improv), is true, and solid. Fact is there are a whole buncha true concepts in this manual . . . I didn't actually count them but my guess is there may be like 21 true concepts . . . or maybe 12, not sure which, but try to stay awake and keep your eyes open as you go through this manual . . . those true concept thingies have a bad habit of whooshing right by you if you aren't looking for the suckers . . . So listen for the "whoosh" would likely help.

One thing I do know is, in addition to lots of good information about the use of improv, we have over 175 proven improv suggestions and warm-up/team building ideas in this manual. These ideas have worked in hundreds of churches and groups around the world. I know that this material will make your group into a better, more cohesive and committed ministry.

Regardless, what we are talking about here is "improv". . . Or "improvisation" if you are a purist. . . . But then I am not sure what a purist is . . . Likely a reformed Baptist is my guess. . . But don't quote me on that. . . You may notice that I make a lot of comments about Baptists . . . I figure I can do that, me being a Baptist and all. . . . At least I was last I heard . . . maybe I oughta check and see if they cancelled my subscription . . . Maybe just hold the line on the Baptist thing until I get back to you, OK?

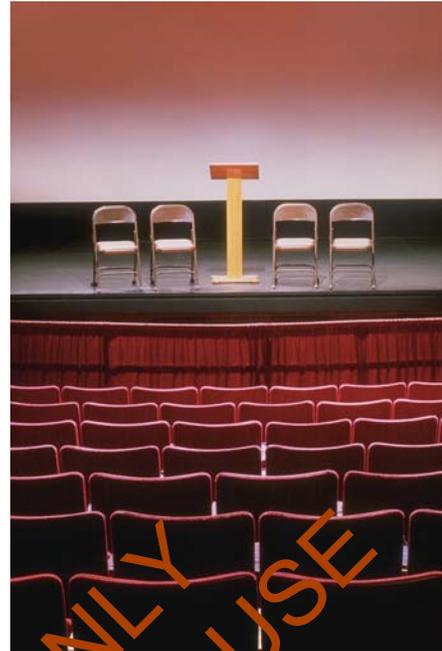
Where were we? . . . Oh yeh, improv-ing And what is it?

Fact is, although I use improv a bunch, and like it a lot, I am not sure I can flat out say what improv is, leastwise not a straight up answer you can go and haul to the bank, or bet the farm on it type of thing. . . . Not that us Baptists are into betting and gambling anyhow. . . . And even if, as a denomination, Baptists were into gambling, fact is I would have to ask to be excused . . . see I am



Scottish. . . . I only gambled once in my life, lost a ton of money . . . three dollars as I recall . . . taught me one of life's most valuable lessons . . . "never gamble with a guy name of Tessie".

You may have noticed I keep getting sidetracked . . . which is a good thing if you're into improv. See improv is kinda like . . . you never know where it's gonna go, or why, . . . it's kinda like catching a bus in a town where they don't post the bus routes, so you don't know where you are going until you get there . . . Fact is here in our town we had a fella who took over the



transit system a few years back, decided to do just that, take all the route identification off of the buses, so no one knew where they were going to at all. . . The guy was a Pentecostal . . . not that that mattered as far as no route names on the bus. . . but man you should have seen the celebrating, praising the Lord, and carrying on every time a guy happened to get on the right bus and got to his desired destination! . . . And all the people who didn't get to the right destination? . . . I tell ya, never have heard talking in tongues the way those upset transit riders carried on!

Which brings me to our first improv . . .

It's called "A Bus With No Name"! . . . Good name, doncha think?



Any number of players . . . That way no one is left out, . . . another stroke of genius, you ask me. . . Which brings up a point. . . In improv get-togethers try your level best to avoid having people standing around doing nothing. It gets boring and silly. So if some participants aren't directly involved in the improv try to give them a useful job where they will monitor or learn from those who are in the improv right this moment.

Anyhow, one of the players will be the bus driver. . . So the guy that gets picked for to be the driver is all proud and uppity that he has the leading role. . . Don't tell him for a bit that he is the one who has to take the flak from the riders over not getting to the right place at the right time, OK? . . . And he has to explain to everyone that the new "No Name" transit policy is the best thing since, well, property taxes. . . Likely if you have a politician in your drama group he could pull this role off is my guess.

But in this improv, (and in improv in general), you will quickly find that the folks on both sides of the steering wheel will come up with thoughts, ideas, and puns far more useful, interesting, and hilarious, than anything I could ever suggest to you in advance. . . And therein is the magic of improv. . . It develops a life of it's own, and all you need to do is guide and nudge to ensure that everyone participates and no one is misused or hurt.

Fun huh?

Let's get started by looking at what are the simple rules surrounding improv, and what has happened in my life to make me a believer in . . . improv-ing. . . Now I wonder, does that make me an improv-ing Baptist? . . . Or an improving Baptist? . . . Best we stick to improv is my guess.

Who is DramaShare?

DramaShare has been around for, wow, over 20 years now. We started the way most ministries start, unintentionally. Back then we were youth leaders in our church, trying hard to motivate kids, with varying results. It has always been my opinion, . . . (I have a lot of those), . . . that in order to stay



Some Improv-assistance

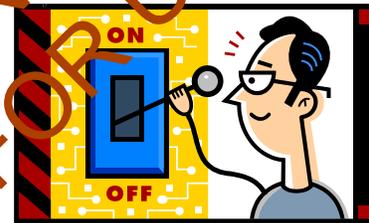
“Pulled From the Air” Ideas or PFTA, (pronounced pftah)

I have many habits, (some good, some so-so), that I do when directing or when leading a DramaShare workshop. One of these, when I am about to present an idea or an exercise, is to say “PFTA” and reach up with thumb and forefinger and pick an imaginary note from the air, “read” it and announce it to the group. And I use the same tactic when leading improv.

In this book I use the “PFTA” tactic as well. When there is an important idea which I think deserves additional consideration, it will be a PFTA moment. Now you may think that some of my PFTA moments are not as important as I do, but may I ask, please humor me, OK? Give my PFTAs a try. I think they may be important to you and your group as well.



Another standard technique or “thing” I do within improv is what I call **SWITCH**. Basically SWITCH is used to force a sudden change. Example you may have a two person improv such as the “Vacuum Cleaner Salesman” in which the salesman is trying everything possible to make the housekeeper buy his machine, then when the director calls out “SWITCH” the housekeeper is begging to buy the vacuum cleaner from a salesman who insists the purchase would not be at all right for this housekeeper.



Anyhow, throughout this manual you will find PFTA's and SWITCHes. Never know, they might even help. Just in case they don't help at all I didn't charge extra for them.

One DramaShare member gave us a great idea, keeping a box of index cards. In it there are different sections with a different word on each card. We suggest that the cards be laminated to last longer. You can color code the edges of the cards, to make it easier to keep them in the right categories. Sections include:

People: (mother, secretary, garbage collector, movie star, etc.)

Occupation: (doctor, lawyer, sailor, etc.)

Place: (spaceship, backyard, church, amusement park, ice cream shop, etc.)

Simple Activity: (reading a book, changing a tire, painting a house, etc.)

Emotions: (surprised, exhausted, withdrawn, anxious, etc)

Objects: (mirror, soda machine, can opener, apple, scissors, etc.)

Movie Lines: ("If I only had a brain", "Go ahead, make my day.")



These are some of the things that have worked for us, chances you will find many more of your own.

What Is Improv?

Like I mentioned earlier, that is an almost impossible question to answer. Improv is nothing, and at the same time it is everything. It has a very short lifetime, perhaps only a few seconds, it only happens once, never to happen again. Improv is nothing since every time it is done it is a “first time thing” which has never been done before.

Improv is everything in that it can include components of anything and everything that has happened before, and many things which have happened only in this one situation.

Improv is something that never will happen again since, even if all the characters and thoughts and guidelines are the same as once before, the likelihood that it will all come out the very same are slim and none. By changing one word or the slightest action the entire drama takes on a new meaning and a new life. And, in fact, if the same identical scene ever happens again it can not be called improv since it then is a scripted play.



Improv, (especially multi-player improv) is “spur of the moment” since, regardless of how much we might think things through, rehearse and prepare our thoughts, our improv is impacted by the reactions of others, (or the lack thereof), and by the passion of the moment, (or again, the lack thereof).

Improv is something molded from nothing other than an idea and one’s imagination, and is massaged and refocused by the interaction, reactions and inspirations of others.

Improv is mime, but you don’t need to be a mime to do improv. (However I am a firm believer that basic mime knowledge is a great asset for those in improv. Inversely improv experience is wonderfully useful in understanding mime).

Improv is just a case of doing what comes naturally.

Improv is easily staged, costs little or nothing, can be done anywhere, anytime, and there are no age or gender barriers. Those who are disabled are at least as good at improv as anyone else in the community. For good improv all we need are a person (or persons), a bare stage and a basic idea and we are in the improv business.

Improv, like all drama, combines speech, movement, gestures, emotion and expression, so improv is the ultimate in training for all the skills you will ever need on stage.



Why do I love improv?

I believe that my most important role as a drama director is teaching, and improv is the ultimate teaching tool of drama. Improv teaches acting, but much more importantly it teaches reacting. So very often on stage we see a group of actors, all of whom seem to be in their own little drama, seemingly oblivious to what other actors are doing or thinking or feeling. And the result is a performance that is not even attractive to the actors themselves, let alone to those who



SPORTS IMPROVS

Batter Up!

Any number of players

Everyone has turned out for the community baseball team's first game. And it appears to be the first game for all players, they have no idea what the game is all about or the rules.

Some players decide to picket the game because they were called out and it just wasn't fair, others want to build a McDonalds at third base, and generally goofy ideas.



What Size/Weight is the Ball?

Players are in a large circle, the director throws a "ball" to one of the players. As the ball is thrown the "thrower" shouts out the word(s) which describes the ball. Example, it could be "baseball" or "tennis ball" or "shot put" or "football" or "BIG beach ball" or any other ball. The idea of this game is to have the one who is catching the ball instantly react to the size and weight of the ball.

In the first few rounds the ball will be thrown to the next person in the circle, later the person throwing the ball may throw it to anyone in the circle. Also the "thrower" may throw it very fast or "lob" the ball, encourage the "catcher" to sense the speed of the delivery, and, (based on the weight and delivery), make hands/body "give" to show the impact of the ball as it hits the catcher's hands/body.

Toss Out a Story, Any Story

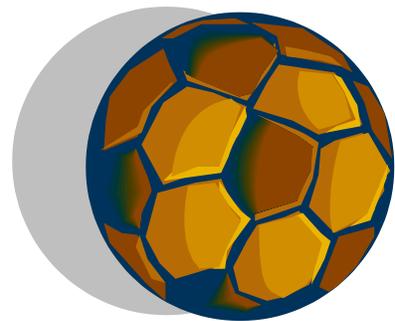
Any number of players

Players stand in circle, director hands the first player a ball. He throws ball to the next person and as he does he says the first word of a new story, throws the ball on to the next player with a word, and on and on. The idea is to make up a story which flows and takes on a life as it goes around the circle.

Example, first player: "Once" and the catcher throws the ball to the next player and says the next word in the story, could be "when" next player "people" next player "were" next player "living" next player "on" next player "the" next player "moon" and so on.

Discourage or possibly even limit the use of "easy" words such as so, but, no, yes, or, and. The story can be silly or serious but should "make good sense" or at least good listening.

After a few rounds of going around the circle you can switch to the ball being thrown to anyone in the circle.



Miscellaneous

Lucky Me / Unlucky You

Players stand side by side in a line, facing the same direction, take turns telling good and bad news. Invite a player at one end of the line to start the story by saying a sentence that begins with "Lucky for me . . ." Example, "Lucky for me the number I always use was the one drawn in the lottery." The next player in line has to tell the bad news: "Unlucky you, you never bought a ticket." The next player tells the good side again: "Lucky me, my friend had bought a ticket for me." Next player might say, "Unlucky you, your friend decided to keep the ticket for himself". And so on.

Once you get to the end of the line, start over at the beginning. If your group is an even number the director enter the line so that those who are "Lucky Me" on the first round become the "Unlucky You" on the next round.

Make sure players are paying attention to the story as it develops so that they know how to react when it gets to their turn. The story be rapid fire, without too many long "dead air spaces". This will help the class learn to work as a team. Keep the game going until it is close to reaching the "BORING" point, then switch players or start a new game.



The Vacuum Cleaner Salesman

One of our favourites.

Two actors.

A player knocks on the door, is selling vacuum cleaners. The salesman is new, (and not very good), to the job, but is desperate to make a sale. The homeowner is busy and very not interested, trying to get rid of the salesman without being overly rude. Salesman gives all the amazing attributes of the vacuum cleaner, (the more wacky the better), but the homeowner is not at all convinced. Every stated feature of the vacuum cleaner is met with an objection (valid or silly) by the homeowner.

Try to think of the wackiest sales pitches and the silliest objections. Salesman might open his briefcase and take out a bag of dirt, dump it on the carpet, to which the homeowner responds that the electricity has been shut off and how is the salesman going to get the dirt out of the rug? The homeowner might use as an objection that dirt has been totally eliminated in that city, why would a vacuum cleaner be needed?

Continue on until the game starts wearing down, at which point the director shouts out, "SWITCH". At that point the homeowner wants desperately to buy the vacuum cleaner and the salesman tries to talk her out of buying it.



Here Again, Miss America!

Any number of players

The girls are preparing for the evening gown competition of the Miss America pageant. One girl wants to intimidate the others, one girl wants to make friends with the other girls, one has a fear of cameras, another is gathering information for her thesis on aging giraffes, another showing off her really amazing Arnie Schwarzenegger routine.



Or Maybe Mr. America?

Any number of players

The boys are preparing for the strongman competition of the Mr. America competition. One boy wants to intimidate the others, one boy wants to make friends with the other boys, one has a fear of cameras, another is gathering information for his thesis on aging giraffes, another showing off his really amazing impression of Arnie Schwarzenegger's aunt.

What Are You Doing Around This Joint?

Any number of players

A drug dealer is peddling his wares to a group of people. Some want to beat him up, others want to hush him up and quietly move him away without causing a scene, someone wants to invite him home for Thanksgiving dinner, another wants to read to him from the Bible.



Camera, Action!

Any number of players

A group of hungry actors have shown up for an audition for a new blockbuster movie with Director Ima Tyrant.

None of the actors can possibly do anything right in Ima's opinion but all are trying in their own ways to convince Ima that they are perfect for the role.

The actors need to come up with wild and weird performances which will convince Ima to sign them.

Mother Goose on Trial

Any number of actors

The central character(s) in a well-known nursery rhyme or children's story are on trial for . . . well, the dastardly deed is up to the actors to decide.

The director is the judge, thus being able to "steer" the proceedings to some degree, or to liven the scene if it is going flat. The players decide on who is going to be the guilty party, the prosecutor, defender, and all other players are called as witnesses for the defence or prosecution.

The audience can be used as the jury.

Treat the scene as serious courtroom drama but with outlandish happenings and evidence. An excellent game to develop improv skills.



What Made Them the Way They Are?

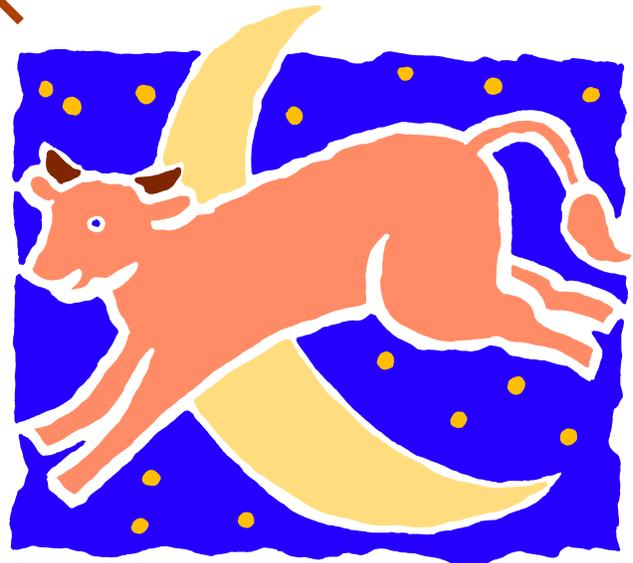
Any number of players

A group of psychiatrists interrogate and probe deep into the mind of nursery rhyme, children's book or TV cartoon characters, trying to analyze why they became the creature they are today.

Operatic Nursery Rhyme

Any number of players

Director has a book of nursery rhymes, reads the nursery rhyme to the players, the group, (in character as opera singers), discusses that nursery rhyme. Avoid simply "singing the lines" but rather discuss the merits and morals behind the nursery rhyme.



Ill Gotten Gain

Two players

Kids playing on the playground come across a wallet with one hundred dollars in it, but no identification. One wants to keep the money and the other wants to take it to the teacher.

Both give good reason for doing what they want to do.

Play Ball!

This exercise is our favorite training game, displaying movement and progression.

Have three people mime being a pitcher, catcher and umpire.

Ask the group what happens in this situation in a real game.

Catcher kneels, sends a signal to the pitcher.

Pitcher reacts, studies the signal *

Pitcher may refuse first signal, shakes head, in which case catcher sends another signal.

Pitcher nods head, affirmative, checks runner over shoulder, goes into delivery, throws the ball, complete with follow-through **

Umpire gets ready, watches as the ball comes toward the home plate ***

Catcher reacts to catching ball, gets ready to make a base throw ****

Umpire makes call, complete with gestures *****



The most important consideration in all this exercise is discovering the source of all reactions. It is absolutely crucial to note that the first indication of any reaction must always be in the eyes. Before anything happens, something is seen, witnessed, visualized. The eye notes something happening, widens, becomes intense. And it is from the eye that all reaction radiates, out through the body to the extremities.

Example,

- the pitcher watches the catcher,
- when the catcher's signal comes the pitcher's eyes will register awareness
- next the facial muscles will react,
- the head will nod,
- the body will begin to move, preparing to throw the ball
- the leg will kick
- the shoulder will begin to recoil and rotate
- the upper arm is raised
- the elbow bends, the wrist snaps outward
- the fingers open, releasing the ball and directing its flight



Note that all movement will always begin from the eye, moving to extremities. In using this game you should have a rubber ball available in order to show the difference between what we actually do when we throw a ball and how we tend to lob the ball when miming.

Bringing the Bible Alive

Last year I took a modular course at Tyndale Seminary in Toronto called, "Bringing the Bible Alive: Drama and Storytelling". One of the techniques our instructor, Gail Fricker, told us about was an interactive treatment of the feeding of the 5,000. You would do it with a group of 10 to 25 people. (Maybe I'm limiting the numbers here--maybe you could do it with 100! My memory for numbers is lousy.)



Have the audience brainstorm about the geographic, historic and cultural backgrounds behind the story. Take notes on a chalkboard or flipchart. The leader would need to have a clear knowledge of this information.

Then "build" your set in the room. Everyone participates. Designate one area as the lake. Identify beach and hills. Which direction is the closest town? The piano bench is a rock. The mike stand is a tree. That group of chairs over there is a hill. This chair is a boat. And so on. You use the whole room, so you'll want chairs that can be moved around or gotten rid of. Once you've established the set, you can't change things.

Then you brainstorm about who was there that day. Jesus. Disciples. Little boy. Who was in the crowd? Pharisees. Soldiers. Families. Shopkeepers. Fishermen. Carpenters. Shepherds. Crippled. Blind. Thieves. Prostitutes. Young, old, rich, poor, sad, happy.

Some believed in Jesus. Some didn't. Take notes. Then everyone picks a character. Guide them through choosing a name and personality. It's best to choose somebody to play Jesus ahead of time so you can get somebody with the needed poise and maturity. Finally, you slowly take the group through the story, using the biblical text. Give them the introduction and then have them mingle and interact with each other in character. Move through the story bit by bit so they live it. This is a very bare bones outline. Unfortunately, we never actually experienced this. It takes an hour or more to go through the whole experience and we ran out of time, so Gail just explained how it works. Now I can't find my notes.

I have used the method once. I did the story of Mount Carmel with a group of Grade 3 and 4's. It worked pretty well although I think it would be better with an older audience. It's something I'd like to develop more and I'd love it if there was a resource I could use. If there isn't, I'll just have to write up something myself. And how do you write up improvisation?

