

HOW TO
BE THE
GREATEST
IMPROVISER
IN THE
UNIVERSE

By Drew DiFonzo Marks

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FOREWORD

Welcome to the wonderful world of Long Form Improvisation. If this is your first book on long form improv, put this book down and go read some other books first. There are many great books out there that can teach you the basics you'll need before you can understand the advanced master techniques you'll learn in this handbook. I first and foremost recommend "The Upright Citizen's Brigade's Comedy Improv Manual". Also Mick Napier's "Scene From the Inside Out", and "How to be the Greatest Improviser on Earth" by Will Hines are wonderful reads as well.

But no matter what your improv background may be we can all agree on the first rule: Yes, End.

MONOLOGUES

Monologues in longform improv are an unplanned sharing of a performers truth. It is the first opening you learn in many improv schools and has created such long time running shows as ASSSSCAT and the Armando. But what makes a monologue good?

Lies.

Lie away. Get up there and lie to the world.

"But I was told by my teachers to be honest in my monologues and say things that are 100% real"

Exactly. That's why lying is so funny. You're audience is trusting you to be honest so you already have the advantage over them.

Here is an example of a monologue that is 100% real and 100% boring.

Suggestion: Apartment

***Player 1:** Apartment makes me think of living on my own for the first time outside of college. I went to a small liberal arts school in New England. After I graduated I decided to move to Los Angeles. I found an apartment on Craigslist. When I got to the building there was a fountain in the lobby which I thought was really nice. I met my landlord first. She was an older woman with a hearing problem. She said the elevator was broken so we had to take the stairs. As soon as I got out of the lobby I realized this place was not as*

nice as it seemed. We got to the 4th floor. I could smell the rat droppings before I saw them. I turned to my landlord to ask for an explanation but she had already started walking away. I yelled after her, but she used her “hearing problem” as an excuse to not turn around. I lived there for a whole year.

Not interesting. Not funny. Zero jokes.

A monologue like this offers no unusuals or interesting details to pull from. You want to stack the deck in your favor at the top of the show. Give your backline options of premises to pull.

Using the technique of “lying” that same monologue can be a great opening.

Example:

Suggestion: Apartment

Player 1: *Apartment makes me think of living on my own for the first time outside of college. I went to Harvard and was a janitor who solved math equations nobody else could. After I graduated I moved to Los Angeles because I asked to be in all the movies. I found an apartment on the dark web. When I got to the building there was a pit of gold coins and a duck with a top hat diving in and out of it which I thought was really nice. I met my landlord first. She was a ghost. She said the waterslide was broken so we had to take the stairs. We got to the 400th floor. I could smell the rats having sex before I saw them. I turned to my landlord to ask for an explanation but she had already started floating away. I fired a shotgun after her, but she used her “ghost problem” as an excuse to not turn around. I burned the building down. I lived there for a whole year.*

GENERAL GUIDLINES

- 1) If somebody initiates a scene to you with an emotional connection, make them a stranger. Its always funny and establishes the game of “Over Sharing Stranger” quickly and efficiently. Always a hit. Example:

Player 1: *“I’m really worried about my son’s health”*

Player 2: *“Uh... Can I just order the #6 meal?”*

It’s a solid go-to to have in your pocket.

- 2) When using an opening remember as many of the funny things from it as you can. Then rush out to initiate the first scene and quickly say them all at once. It ensures that the rest of the team has no ideas left, and that you will have said the most funny things.
- 3) If you are sitting down in a scene for a long time make the chair a wheelchair for no reason. Audiences love it and it gives you something to do. That's what we call "Point of View".
- 4) No phones in improv have caller ID. This is unacceptable. Whenever you are in a scene and somebody on the backline makes your phone ring, look at it, and out-loud exclaim who it is before answering. Make sure it a character that has nothing to do with the scene. It will confuse the member on the backline, and it is always funny to see actors fail.

Example:

Player 1: *"My Mom hasn't called me to wish me Happy Birthday yet..."*

[Player 2 on backline makes a phone ringing sound coming from Player 1's pocket]

Player 1: *"Wow! It's my friend Ramona from college. She was always so lippy. I thought she was dead! Hello?"*

[Player 2 on backline struggles, messes up, audience goes wild]

- 5) When using a name in a scene, try to use an audience member who's birthday it is. They love it. It makes them feel special and they and their friends will usually cheer when it is said.
- 6) Write your scenes before the show. The best compliment you can get in longform improv is having an audience member not believe what you did was actually improvised. That it was "too good" to be made up on the spot. So let's give them what they want. Instead of doing warmups of any kind write jokes and work them into the show. Sometimes paying an audience member \$5 to yell out a suggestion you want makes this easier.
- 7) When doing a courtroom scene always be the stenographer. Make sure you get that part. It's the easiest role and gets the most laughs. Even if somebody else has started miming a typewriter say to them "Your Honor, you should be behind the bench not on your laptop" and establish that you are this role.

- 8) When doing a scene on a movie set scenes support it by holding a boom mic no matter what. This will lead to multiple boom mic operators. That's a solid game. 3 boom mics minimum. This is known as the "Rule of Three".
- 9) Playing the opposite gender can be tricky but sometimes necessary to serve the scene. You want to make sure you are being respectful and accurate, not doing a broad caricature that could be seen as crass. Here are simple ways to convey to an audience that you are playing the opposite gender that are respectful and intelligent. Remember: Show, Don't Tell.

For Men: *Mime holding your boobs. Women are always doing this in life so it is something we should put into our work. The more we can make our scenework relatable and grounded the easier our comedic ideas will be to convey. Remember: Truth in Jokes. And raise your voice crazy high like a chipmunk too.*

For Women: *Be in a fraternity. Play the odds here. From what we know of our world most men are jerks in frats so this is a wise actors choice to make.*

- 10) Use real objects. Your actual phone, your wallet, anything in your pockets etc. It gets a quick laugh, and a series of quick laughs is a cohesive piece of theatre.

GROUP GAMES

- 1) If somebody on your team initiates a Group Game that is in the style of Pillars of Light (AKA Presentational) its best to be the 2nd person out there. This is because if you are the 2nd person not only do you play a big part in establishing the pattern, but you can do an even better move and make it so Player 1 was talking to a wall like a crazy person.

Example:

[Player 1 steps out and addresses the audience]

Player 1: *I am a taco, hard and crusty on the outside, but spicy on the inside.*

Player 2: *Uhhh, Carl? Why you talking to that wall? We're trying to start the meeting in here ya crazy loon.*

This quickly establishes the game of “Wall Talkin’ Carl” which is a classic.

- 2) It can be tricky to know when in your show the Group Game is. It’s best to avoid this trap and simply announce to your audience (and more importantly your teammates) that you are initiating a group game. Do this by screaming “GROUP GAME TIME” very loudly, and then begin your scene.
- 3) A common group game trope is the “Everybody get in here” initiation. This is commonly followed by establishing an office of some kind, and a marketing problem they need to solve. Example:

Player 1: *Everybody get in here!*

[The rest of the ensemble steps into the scene and awaits to be given more information]

Player 1: *Nike needs a new slogan!*

This is the moment where most improvisers make mistakes. Commonly you will see at this point character choices be made, or patterns established around the relationships with people in the office, or other funny ideas that get explored and heightened. These are all traps. What you should do is actually come up with a new slogan for Nike.

In 2015 the Nike corporation spent \$2.4 billion dollars on advertising. If you were able to come up with a new slogan for Nike the monetary gain would be incredibly worth your time. Advertising agencies work tiring hours and have meetings with clients on and off the clock. According to www.payscale.com the average salary of a Creative Director at an Advertising Agency in 2015 was \$117,163. And that’s a job they do full time. You just need to do their job for a few minutes in-between the beats of a free Harold. I cannot stress enough how important it is to come up with new advertising slogans for major corporations in your improv. A few elite improvisers* have been handed this initiation and managed to come up with a new slogan for a company. They later sold it and never went back on stage again. This is the ultimate goal of any art form.

*This is the connection between Del Close and the fast food chain Del Taco.

WHAT TO WEAR

This is the most important chapter. What you wear on stage is more important than anything you say or do. You can have all the improv training in the world, but nobody will know it if you walk on stage looking like you don't know what comedy is.

Funny T-Shirts are a must. Go buy some right now. If you wear a funny t-shirt it shows the audience before you even say a word that you are funny and care enough about the craft to go out of purchase a shirt. That's what is known as "commitment".

There are many types of funny t-shirts. I have divided them into 3 categories.

T-shirt Tuxedos

Self Explanatory.

Front Jokes

This is a t-shirt that has text on the front that is presents a joke. (Life's a Beach, I'm With Stupid, I Just Wanna Have ABS-solutley All the Pasta!)

The 1-2 Punch

This is where a shirt has words on the front that you read, but it isn't until you read whats on the back of the shirt do you fully understand the entire joke. This is great in longform improv because when you are on the back-line the audience will read your shirt, yet not fully understand why it is funny. When you sweep edit a scene for the first time, revealing your back to the audience for the first time, they will see the words on the back of the shirt, and lose their minds. This type of patience is what makes this "long form" not "short form".

PATTERN GAME

This opening, like all openings, is designed to create comedic premises that stem from truth. It requires listening, creating patterns, and an experienced ensemble.

When somebody says a specific in a pattern game, repeat it and add more to it. It heightens their idea and gives the team more to use later in the show. This kind of listening and building is essential for forming premises.

Example:

Audience Suggestion: PAINT

[Team forms a U and begins their Pattern Game]

Player 1: *Bucket.*

Player 2: *Two buckets.*

Already Player 2 has created more information than was previously established; another bucket. And it organically comes from what was said before. This is called “A to C”. A being the original word said, B being what it makes you think of, and C being what B makes you think of. It creates new information while still being connected to what was just said.

A = “Bucket”

B = “Bucket makes me think of a buckets. Now I have 2 buckets in my head”

C = “Two buckets”.

Make sure to listen this intently in openings so you can repeat the last thing said and make it plural. It’s better to have too many ideas than too few. If patterns are clear the team can build out those premises easier. Using the last example:

Audience Suggestion: PAINT

[Team forms a U and begins their Pattern Game]

Player 1: *Bucket.*

Player 2: *Two buckets.*

Player 3: *Three buckets.*

Now we are in a world with a lot of buckets and that’s funny. This “triplet” established by Player 3 has locked us into a pattern of buckets. This show is off to a good start. However the trick here is how to make a pattern clear, without being predictable. The obvious next choice is to say “Four buckets” but your audience may be ahead of you on that. You want to surprise your audience with new and interesting choices that are on game. Example:

Audience Suggestion: PAINT

[Team forms a U and begins their Pattern Game]

Player 1: *Bucket.*

Player 2: *Two buckets.*

Player 3: *Three buckets.*

Player 4: *Two buckets.*

Player 4 has made a new choice while still following the teams direction. This keeps the team together but not redundant. Plus, its a callback from something said one line earlier. Calling back anything ever is a good idea no matter how little time has passed or if it it was ever funny the first time.

A LIST OF GOOD SUGGESTIONS

As an improviser you should obviously be seeing lots of improv shows. When they ask for a suggestion know that there are good suggestions and bad ones. Bad ones don't offer up comedic ideas easily, good ones do. Some audience members arrive to shows with the intention of being the person who gets their suggestion used. You can tell who they are because they always scream out their word before the team is even done asking for it. This is a good thing that improvisers enjoy and isn't weird at all. Here is a list of suggestions that would help out a team if they heard this yelled out at the top of a show:

Fuck You	Falling Down
Improv	Boners
Funny	Slapstick
Ha Ha	Boogers
Goofy	Dildos
Farts	Yankees Suck
Funnier	Pud
Comedy	Doodie
Weiner	Wanking
Balls	Poo Poo
Ballz	Pee Pee

Potty	Mary Tyler LESS
A Funny Zoo	Peele & Key
FREE BIRD	SadTV
MadTV	The Uptight Indians Parade
The Kids in the Hall	Gathering of the Juggalos
The Kids in the Hat	Your Mom
3rd Rock From the Sun	More Cowbell!
30 Rock	My Wife (done in Borat voice)
30th Rock From the Sun	

EDITING

There are many types of edits: the soft edit, transitional edit, thematic edit, and the most commonly used is of course the sweep edit.

There is an uncommon editing technique that can seamlessly blend one scene into the next. It is widely underused and can be executed as such. If you are on an experienced improv team start learning this edit immediately.

Unlike most edits, this edit is performed by somebody *in* the scene, not somebody from the backline. Near the climax of the scene, at a pivotal moment when important information is just about to be revealed, the improviser looks directly at the audience and screams “LIVE FROM NEW YORK ITS SATURDAY NIGHT!”.

The is known as the “SNL edit”.

The “SNL edit” allows the team to know the scene is over, and everything before it was fake.

Mercy editing is also a valid tool to know. When a scene is not going well and the performers on stage are struggling get them out of there. If you were making a movie you wouldn’t choose to have your worst scene be your longest scene would you? But to make this edit supportive and non-judgmental as you do a sweep edit pat the backs of the people in the scene and loudly encourage them “Don’t worry, your next scene will be better”. This lets the audience know the scene is over, that they did a bad job, and it wasn’t your fault. This make you individually look good, and ideally will get somebody to buy you drinks after the show and tell you how funny you are.

OFFENSIVE MATERIAL

Do it.

INVOCATION

The Invocation is one of the oldest improv openings. It is known to be one of the more complex and advanced openings, but I disagree. There are simple tools and shortcuts you can use to make this opening easy and fun.

The format of the Invocation is to ask the audience for an object of any kind. Then there are 4 rounds of information given. The rounds are as follows:

It is...

You are...

Thou art...

I am...

These rounds serve a purpose. To create information about the object. To make it personal. To put it into a heightened theatrical sense, and finally to put the ideas created in the opening into character traits, ideas, and substance.

Example:

Audience Suggestion: Toaster

Player 1: *It is a toaster.*

Player 2: *You are a toaster.*

Player 3: *Thou art a toaster*

Player 4: *I am toaster!*

This is a perfect Invocation. They hit all 4 rounds efficiently and used group mind to all say “toaster”. Here are possible initiations that could stem from this opening:

[Player 1 steps out and mimes ringing a doorbell. Player 2 adds information to the scene by opening said door]

Player 2: *Hello?*

Player 1: *Hello. I am a toaster.*

Player 2: *AHHHH!*

[Player 2 runs off stage]

Many tools are being used in the above example. First, object work and spacial agreement. Before any words have been said the two improvisers are already working as a team. One creates a door, the other opens it. Then player 2 is being smart and not Yes And'ing too hard out of the gate. They want to be patient and allow Player 1, who stepped out to initiate the scene, get out their premise clearly. This patience is vital when receiving an initiation out of an opening. Player 1 does a clear job of setting up his premise. A premise is defined as a clear setting with one unusual element. In this case a man at his home opening the door to discover a talking toaster. And finally, Player 2 does a great job of responding to the unusual at the height of his intelligence. He is deferring to reality doing what he would really do when faced with such a thing. Screaming and away from things is a truthful response and should be done often.

Here is another potential initiation from that opening:

Player 1: *You are a toaster.*

Player 2: *What?*

This is a clear start to a scene and has options of where to go. We've established either somebody thinks their friend is a toaster (making them the unusual) or that a talking toaster does not now it is a toaster. Either of these options is a clear grounded game. Backline support can also answer these questions. It is their scene as well. Remember to take individual responsibility for the success of every scene. Here it is continued:

Player 1: *You are a toaster.*

Player 2: *What?*

Player 1: *Yeah man. You are a toaster.*

Player 2: *No I'm not you're crazy.*

[Player 3 steps off the backline and does a scene painting. He motions to player 1 and says "We see this guy is actually a toaster"]

Player 3's support move has locked us into a classic game: A toaster who thinks a human is a toaster.

Here is a 3rd possible initiation from the Invocation opening:

Player 1: *Thou art a toaster!*

Player 2: *Annnd scene! You were in a play and now its over.*

Immediate comedy. Player 1 creates a clear half idea from the opening asking their teammate to write the other half. Player 2 supports the reality set and adds information making it all a play and nothing was real. Great choice and a solid base reality. Here is a 4th and final possible initiation:

Player 1: *I am a toaster!*

Player 2: *Me too.*

[Both sit in silence not speaking for 3 minutes until somebody edits]

This is a grounded scene because toasters don't talk. These players chose to keep it real and commit as hard as they could to the reality of the scene. This level of performance is the foundation of good scene work.

FINAL THOUGHTS

It's vital to remember these teachings in every performance you do, but no matter what do not stop practicing. Do practice groups. Take classes. Always be training. Find people you love to work with and learn their weaknesses. Make them look bad. Make yourself look better. Find teams that aren't as good as yours and go up after them. Make them look stupid. Beat them. Compete in cagematches and rig the votes. Destroy other performers confidence. Do jams with inexperienced players and deny their ideas. Make them afraid to ever go back on stage again. Make everyone around you doubt their own abilities. Instill fear. Dominate. Kill. Do this and you will be the greatest improviser in the universe.

This book was helpful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Drew DiFonzo Marks is the funniest person alive.

“How to be the Greatest Improviser in the Universe” will teach you exactly that. There are other trap books out there that will try to swindle your money from you with hack techniques and predictable training, don’t fall for them. This book is the end all be all one stop shop for funny.



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PRAISE FOR HOW TO BE THE GREATEST IMPROVISER IN THE UNIVERSE

“It’s sad that while people like Will Hines sincerely want to educate, all you have to offer the world is snarky bits.”

SKANDER HALIM
UCB SKETCH WRITER

“This was a lot of work for a bit but you got a lot of attention for it so I guess it was all worth it?”

JAKE REGAL
UCB IMPROVISER

“This was confusing for me.”

KAREN SILBERT
STUDENT