

IMPROV NONSENSE:

ALL THE POSTS
MARCH 2010 - JUNE 2016

WILL HINES

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A NOTE ABOUT THE PDF VERSION

This book is huge. The table of contents alone is 20 pages, for cryin' out loud.

To make it easier to navigate around this monstrosity, pro designer Nick Jaramillo has added two handy features to the PDF version.

1. The table of contents is clickable. You can click on any chapter title and be taken right to that chapter.
2. In the FOOTER of EVERY SINGLE PAGE, you can click on the title of the book "Improv Nonsense: All the Posts" and be taken back to the table of contents.

Pretty cool, right?

For the "flowable" electronic versions—your EPUB, your MOBI—there should be a clickable table of contents provided by the software that you use to read them.

For the printable version, if we even make one available, you are on your own. Print is noble, but lonely.

Thanks!

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To my brothers Kevin and Brian being friends with me even when I do silly things like write about improv for 500 pages.

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INTRODUCTION

This book is a collection of every post from my blog Improv Nonsense. Oh man, almost every noun in that sentence requires an explanation.

A blog is an online journal. Improv Nonsense is a blog about long-form improv comedy. Improv comedy is the art of making up comedic scenes with no script, on a stage. "Long form" is the subset of improv in which there is very little structure. This is to distinguish it from "short form," which has strictly defined games with clear rules.

Okay, phew.

I'm the sole author. My name is Will Hines, and I've been one of the senior teachers and performers at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre since the year 2000. In Improv Nonsense, I'd put my thoughts, memories and stories about improv. It ran from 2010 to 2016. At its peak it had 20,000 subscribers.

Improv Nonsense is retired now. Well, I don't know. Technically, it's still running. It's up at <http://improvnonsense.tumblr.com/>. I may post in it again, but for now it's retired.

A lot of the essays are very insightful and helpful, like a series in which I break down the phrase "accept offers." Others are clearly misguided and wrong, like when I scold improvisers that they should simply "know everything" in order to handle the many subjects that get referenced in a show.

I also fielded many questions from readers. Some of those questions were really interesting, like when someone asked why there were always more men than women on the house teams at the UCB Theatre. Other questions made me get very short and terse, like when someone said they thought the UCB cut off its improv shows too early. Still others were silly, like anything that Craig Rowin asked, including, "In improv, what's better: improv or improv?"

Many times students will come to up me and say, “Hey, I found your blog. It’s really helpful.” They’ll also say, “It’s hard to read a lot of the posts—I lose track of where I am.” Or, “I wish it were printed out in a book.”

Okay, only one person said that last one. His name was Scotty. But when he suggested it, I really liked the idea of making a book, both as a way to conveniently present all of the posts from the blog and also to document for myself all of the work I put into it.

This is a pretty faithful reproduction of the blog. I didn’t correct the spelling or grammar. I didn’t go back and change any of my old essays, which I sometimes disagree with. I didn’t leave any posts out. This is the whole blog, as it ran.

If you were a fan of Improv Nonsense, or are a current improv nerd who wants to dive into six years—SIX YEARS—of improv-obsessed rants, or are just a strange completist who likes “complete” versions of ANYTHING... well, this is for you.

Thank you for taking a look.

Dear God, I had no idea this would be almost 600 pages.

Will Hines

September 2016

Los Angeles

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MARCH 23RD, 2010 at 2:51PM

MISSION STATEMENT

My plan is to indulge myself with improv ramblings, including my very one-sided overly generalized memories of show and groups past, thoughts of techniques and strategies—both for performing and teaching, and any other proclamations I usually save for when I'm in the corner booth of McManus at 2am after Harold Night. Follow or not, respond as you wish, but you have been warned!

MARCH 25TH, 2010 at 10:48PM

NEW HAROLD TEAM MEMBERS

Congrats to all the new UCBT Harold Members! You are all awesome. Thank you for caring about improv and for investing your time and energy in the UCBT improv world.

Some unsolicited advice (thx to Erik Tanouye and some others for help with this)

- When people tell you they liked your show, say “Thanks” even if you don’t believe them. ESPECIALLY if you don’t believe them.
- Don’t try to make this group into something it’s not. If you’re looking to do a show with your eight best friends, call them and put a show together. These people MIGHT turn out to be your best friends, but you can’t force that and it has less to do with how good your improv will be than you might think.
- No one will remember your first show or first entrance music in a few months. If you do a few shows and get great, everyone will remember you as a great team, so don’t put too much pressure on the “first” anything. Five years from now, no one will say “Elastic Police was a great team that did amazing Harolds, but at their first show, they came out to a RUN DMC song which I didn’t like.”
- You’re not getting paid enough to have a bad time.

- Don't blame the Harold night host or the audience if you have a bad show.
- You are not a better or worse person than you were one week ago.
- Dress well until you've earned the right to look like a slob.
- Watch other teams.
- Take your picture soon. You can always take a different one later.
- When you feel bad after a show, pick one specific thing to improve on and forgive yourself for everything else.
- Compliment your teammates honestly but generously.
- Know what warm-ups / openings / coaches you like and bring them up. But be cool with trying other people's stuff. And know that whatever opening you pick, one person will hate it and that person might be you.
- Instead of "Guys, I really hate this opening. It's really putting me in my head." try "When the time is right, I'd love to try a different opening."
- Most funny people are at least partly crazy, and you have to enjoy / tolerate / embrace that craziness to a certain degree.
- The name of your team will be the one that no one hates, not the one that anyone loves.

MARCH 25TH, 2010 at 11:07PM

BROTHERS HINES THANKS

Brothers Hines lost Cagematch tonight to a very cool and funny Reuben Williams show. We won 7 in a row, which we never would have expected and it was terrific fun!

I want to thank everyone who watched us and voted for us. It has been some of the most fun improv I've ever gotten to do. I feel like even though I've been doing this 10 years, that I learned a tremendous amount in the last 7 weeks—all by being able to do these long sets in front of a great, informed, supportive audience.

But most of all I want to thank my brother Kevin! I always knew he was good

at this but I don't think I really appreciated HOW good until these sets where I've gotten to play with him for this long. It is the easiest thing in the world and it's not because we're brothers, but because Kevin Hines does not miss a trick. He hears everything and uses it. He understands everything. And he knows how to let a scene be the kind of scene it wants to be.

In these sets—for maybe the first time—I felt like I wasn't thinking, that the callbacks would show up without forcing them (er, not forcing them TOO much anyway), that I could drop just the tiniest feather of an unusual thing and it would grow into the spine of a scene, that it was better to be a smart character than a dumb one, that it was okay at almost every moment to express my opinions that I feeling at that moment—that it would fit. And that's because I got to play with an improviser who makes everything better. I knew he'd catch everything.

And he was big and brave before the show. I started getting greedy these past few shows and started requesting things. Let's do a Harold, I said. And he said yes and ten minutes later we're doing a sound and movement opening. Let's do a big slow scene up top. He said yes and I'm performing acupuncture. Let me just say whatever I want—I'm going to just have conversations that I like. He said yes and I'm listing the last ten vice-presidents of the losing political party. We had plans for a monoscene where neither of us left the stage, and for a Harold in the Dark but we didn't get to it. Still, even to have it on the table.

Three weeks ago we did a Harold, and although it wasn't a great one—it was illuminating in a huge way. Without the ability to think ahead those third beats felt very real in a way I've never felt them. They felt like true third acts, revelations and climaxes that were interesting to me as we did them. And it felt brave to do it at all. I think I learned more doing that one Harold than I've learned in the last 4 years.

Tonight, our last show, I got to do what was probably my favorite show we've done. It wasn't our most successful, but we both liked it. And I loved it. And that's because we were much quieter and slow than we usually are. I'm usually a wordy player, and shamelessly so. I like listing things, I like dropping rambling monologues about stupid shit I've read on wikipedia. I like philosophizing and being overdramatic.

So tonight I asked Kevin if I could do a scene where I'd start with some physicality, allowing that my object work is sloppy and unreadable, and that he should just wait and that I would initiate—he just had to wait. My brother of course said yes because Kevin Hines is scared of nothing on an improv stage.

So we did an acupuncture scene, and he could tell when I pushing hard even though I wasn't actually doing so. And we did a bakery scene where I dragged him into the oven. And we did a date in the old west where we rode a horse up to a table on a cliffside and a bald eagle landed on my arm. And we drove the slowest train in the west. The games were weak and slippery, but the scenes felt very real to me. And I felt like I could have kept them going forever. It was the most effortless I've felt in a long, long time. It's happening at the same time as some of my favorite Stepfathers shows ever, and it doesn't seem like a coincidence. I'm tempted to say that it's all my brother's doing. It certainly feels like it.

I'm not saying they were anywhere near as good, but it felt like the shows I used to see Delaney and Dave do, or that I see Adsit and Gausas do. I AM NOT SAYING THEY WERE THAT GOOD. I am saying I got to feel that feeling I get when I watch those shows. I got to be the player I want to be. In front of 200 people at the coolest comedy theater on the planet.

And that's because I was smart enough to get on stage with Kevin Hines!

A fantastic trip—thanks to Charlie Todd for booking us and everyone who voted for us. For realz, yo!

MARCH 25TH, 2010 at 11:53PM

TWO KINDS OF LISTENING

I gotta hit the sack but before I forget I wanted to write that in doing these shows with Kevin I became aware of two types of listening, both important.

One is the top of scene listening. The yes-and, pre-game listening. I felt with Kevin that I could say or do anything at the top and he would get what I meant. And once I was confident of that, I started to be a more interesting person

at the top of my scenes. If I wanted to be a female character who was in in a bold mood, I could sit down on a chair, sort of cock my head to the side and half-grin, and he'd get it. Or something close. He'd see what I was trying to do and confirm it. I also felt like I could say anything, no matter how subtle and he'd understand it. Something simple like a man who hates his neighbor, or maybe something much more subtle, like a farmer who wants to use genetic seeds but resents what it implies about the weaknesses of nature.

Either Kevin would get it, or he would slow down and spend some time using yes-and to clarify what I meant, or what he meant. We would make sure we connected first at the top before doing anything else. Maybe it'd happen in one line, but it always always happened. No faking it and continuing. Connect and understand.

The second kind was a comedic listening—related but separate. Once we connected we could just chat and whoever dropped something unusual it would get noticed. Now that I think about it we'd miss this one sometimes. But we hit it enough that I felt confident that I could merely hint at something and he'd hear it. I remember we once did a scene of two people looking at a walrus, and at first we were just looking at the walrus and being chatty with it. As silly as that was, it didn't feel like that was the focus. But then I think I said "you're scary, aren't you?" and I knew that Kevin would notice that was slightly different, and he came back with something like "Yes, you're very dangerous aren't you Mr. walrus? You could rip our limbs off!" Once you know your scene partner will notice when you want something to be the focus, you get very relaxed. You know that the slightest push will create a scene.

I think they are different muscles, or at least they are the same muscle applied at different points in the scene. And it helps if you are only listening for one at time.

Step out—connect and listen for your starting point. Then and only then, start making work for the funny thing. If you can feel those things as separate steps, and you know when you have successfully done each one, you feel very very confident to step out and do the next scene.

THIRD BEATS: TRY INITIATING WITHOUT A CONNECTION IN MIND

I've been coaching Harold teams this year and the third beat is something we talk about a lot. There's lots of Harolds that zip along quite well but never build into the big satisfying finishes that you need to blow the audience away.

One way to improve them is to initiate a third beat scene without a connection in mind and then aggressively yes-and until you find a connection by surprise.

In watching the third beats at Harold night over the past few months, it seems like most scenes are very short—people initiate with a connection in the first line, or something that's obviously meant to be alley ooped into a connection. I don't think that's bad, but those types of scenes HAVE to be short—they don't feel right to continue for that long. And if they are not super hilarious ideas the Harold feels a bit flat.

Another type of scene is to initiate something that was mentioned as an aside somewhere in the Harold. Someone makes an offhanded reference that they learned about proper applause techniques in school, and in the third beat someone will initiate as the teacher running that lesson. Those are fun, but they also don't often feel like they have legs.

Or teams will do a run, where they are trying to do a bunch short callback and connections from the show. Sometimes that works, but it feels too much like a high wire act to count on. It doesn't really build. (Though I do think teams should be cool with doing mini runs in a third beat and should recognize them when they start. They're fun, just kinda empty)

Then Kevin and I did a two man Harold in cagematch, and we got to our third beats with 10 minutes left. I remember noticing the clock and thinking "we're screwed!" But since we HAD to keep going, we started revisiting each scene, and we did not start with a connection. I think i wouldn't have been able to—I was having trouble remembering what the scenes had been. I'd run through the Harold in my brain and as soon as I remembered someone

I'd initiate it with no regard of how good a third beat it might be. I needed something and couldn't be picky.

First I initiated as a neighbor whose house had been vandalized by Kevin—Kevin's character had said that his yoga was making him more confident and aggressive. I remembered Kevin had described knocking a hole in his neighbor's house because it blocked his view of the sun. So I was going to be that neighbor. My initiation was to lean out of a window and yell at Kevin to stop putting holes in my house. Kevin recognized that I wanted him to be that yoga guy so he starts talking and acting like the yoga guy.

Normally someone would enter there probably with some character from another scene but Kevin and I were too busy doing the scene to think. So we yes-anded away from the game of aggressive yoga. We described the damage to the house and I talked about my character's job and how I could understand that we all need to be more aggressive. I had no idea what to do. Kevin said he was going to continue to do whatever he wanted. I couldn't think of anything that my character would say so I told him that I was going to call the police.

Then and only then did I remember that I had been the leader of a secret police in other scenes who wanted to stop being mean. Excited that we could have a connection I said again "I'm calling the police" hoping Kevin would notice. He did indeed notice and he returned to a scene that we had where the secret police had been refusing to answer the phone. Big reaction from the crowd. Big reaction from me—I was as surprised as anyone that we had found that. I certainly did not have that idea when I initiated the scene.

And that might be the way to improve third beats. Initiate away from a connection, yes-and a bunch of info until you find a connection that is a surprise even to you. And if it is a surprise to you it will be a surprise to the audience. The idea is to make the third beats big a-ha moments.

Your own lack of imagination will save you I think because even if your intention is to just yes-and arbitrarily you will naturally drive the scene toward things that happened earlier—you haven't had time to think of that many new topics.

I've started running this with the Harold teams and I think it's not even that hard (for seasoned improvisers). In fact it might be easier than a run or

pressuring yourself to initiate with a connection. Or maybe this is the way we were always supposed to be doing them but we just got too good at seeing connections so we started with them?

I think ideally you should have a mix. Initiate with a connection and be ready to edit hard, then initiate with something that is not a connection and be ready to yes-and hard. Throw in a few moments that were mentioned as asides for fun.

It sounds right! I have no idea yet if it's actually going to make a difference.

MARCH 27TH, 2010 at 11:46PM

TEAM BROOKLYN: IN DEFENSE OF FAST SCREAMY IMPROV SETS

Any long-time long-form improviser should have a group or a show or something that lets them do loud screamy improv, where you and the other people are making playing it real the absolute lowest priority and you are just yelling most of the show and tagging out constantly. It is terrific fun. Don't let it become your default style but find a place to do it and enjoy it.

In December 2002 Kevin Mullaney put together "Team Brooklyn" which was any UCBT Harold Team person living in Williamsburg and had us do shows in Williamsburg. Every Tuesday there'd be three Harold teams and then us. It was Charlie Sanders, Brian Finkelstein, Will Becton, Mark Sam-Rosenthal, Jeff Campbell and me. First show was in the back room of the (now moved or maybe just totally gone?) Galapagos—a big echoey room where the seats were spread out and far from the un-miked stage.

Three teams went up and were greeted with mostly silence. We stepped out and told each other "make sure to be loud, it's hard to hear" and then screamed the entire show. No scene lasted longer than 60 seconds. The pattern we kept calling back was one member of a scene falling forward on his face. Tag-outs occurred roughly every five seconds. It was the most fun

I'd had in months! Something about Charlie Sanders always made me hyper and silly. Three years later we'd be on 1985 together and I was right back to doing handstands on chairs and things.

Anyway, every time Team Brooklyn performed it was a "fun first" show. It was exciting and liberating. I was at a point in my improv career (3 years, I guess?) where the rules in my head were so oppressive. I didn't feel like a top improviser or anything, just a guy who had been doing it a little while and who maybe wasn't even noticed that much compared with his teammates. Harold Night felt difficult and a bit scary. Team Brooklyn was a chance to let it hang out. Instant reactions from everyone, big decisions being made early and often. Lots of screaming. Terrible acting. A complete lack of reality and subtlety.

Terrible play in a lot of ways. But it made me more fun, more brave, more commanding. TEAM BROOKLYN!

One scene involved Charlie as a police chief asking his two employees (Becton and I) about what we were doing with our 401Ks. The conversation continued in a normal non-jokey way except during the entire scene Sanders was hiking up both of his pant legs until they were bunched tightly around his thighs. Edit.

Another one was 4 guys talking about girls, but we'd cut to a group of 4 girls talking. Later in the show we were 4 dogs sitting on chairs, and we cut to 4 cats. All characters in all of those scenes were masturbating.

Another show we said before the set "We're going too blue too often—let's not go blue." That ended with Brian as Jesus—still nailed to a cross—giving a blow job to Charlie as Buddha.

Another show had all of its scenes begin with "could you step into my office?" where each office was located within the office of the previous scene. It was not as good as that makes it sound, but it was terrifically fun to do.

Another one I remember trying to be a tough high school kid that wanted to kick everyone's ass and Charlie endowed me as having been accepted into Sarah Lawrence college.

One show I initiated with something like "I would like to do a scene about FotoMats." And Mark-Sam said "And what is that?" and I said "It's a yellow

building in parking lots where you'd drive up and drop off film to be developed." and he said "Okay." and got into position to be in a FotoMatt, and then said "May I have your film?" Edit.

A year later my brother formed Primal Bias, and we also went through a long phase of loud, screamy tag-out crazed sets, and I loved those shows too.

Those can all become terrible habits if you don't rein them in. But I think feeling the fun and recklessness of those types of shows is necessary. Have fun. This game's fun, right?

MARCH 28TH, 2010 at 10:36PM

RIP JOHN WARD ("DR. WIMPY")

Anthonyking: After Asssscat tonight, I received word that John Ward passed away this afternoon.

I didn't know John very well. I was only lucky enough to know him as a student, performer, and Improv Everywhere agent. But he always brought such a warm and happy energy to every interaction I ever had with him. And he made me laugh—hard—in so many unexpected ways.

The suddenness of this is pretty hard for me to wrap my head around. John was just at callbacks for Harold auditions on Tuesday—funny and energetic as ever. I'm very sad I won't get the chance to see him again.

Will Hines spoke to John's sister this evening. When he told her he was from UCBT, she said, "Everybody there made his life. He loved it. He just loved it. Before that, I mean, his wife died, he'd come down here sometimes. But when he found you guys that was out of this world. You made his life for the last several years and the whole family thanks everyone for everything you've done."

I'm so happy that John decided to be a part of this school, theatre, and community. He was a unique and wonderful part of the family.

You will be missed, Dr. Wimpy. Rest in peace.

Healywu: John was in my audition group last Saturday, he was so good

in it—I knew he was going to get a callback. We got there first and chatted for awhile before the rest of the group arrived. It was his 10th time auditioning. I didn't know him well but I am reeling right now. Totally shocked.

Caitlintime: Terrible news. I often think of him in his role as Santa in the 2008 mixtape '98 Christmas show. He was hilarious. He will be missed.

A shy, sweet and smart man. He was a kindred spirit to anyone who loved improv enough to bravely throw himself into it and become really good at it. He was an earnest, smart actor who made shows better and more real. We miss you, John.

MARCH 29TH, 2010 at 1:45PM

PAINTING OF ACHILLES

Iamachilles: This is the chair (and the row of seats) I was talking about in [his blog]. Notice the milk crates propping up the first two seats.

Immortalized in paint by Chelsea Clarke!

Beautiful painting, and expresses a feeling that lots of UCBT students go through—and I love the theater at those moments before shows—exciting but quiet.

I'm proud that Achilles is teaching with us now.

MARCH 30TH, 2010 at 9:56PM

PEOPLE PEOPLE'S STANDING OVATION

People People did their last Harold tonight and the crowd gave them a standing ovation. The members of People People (the People People People, I guess?) have been on some of the greatest improv teams ever at UCBT—Mother, Dillinger, Creep—and are all great players. But that's all in the past, and the collective memory of the UCB Theater seems so short that I feared this Harold would end and no one would realize it was a big deal to us old timers. Erik Tanouye and Kevin Hines and I were going to say something

in the introduction or maybe say something afterward—we wanted people to know: Hey, this is Tara Copeland from Mother, you philistines! This is Risa Sang-Urai, who was the center of that Harold that ended up taking place in her head and made everyone crap their pants for like two years! You clowns, we were going to shout, you don't know what you're looking at!

But we didn't do that. And People People did a great show. And then at the end the whole room stood up and bellowed cheers. They didn't need us to tell them. And Erik Tanouye ran up and gave Risa flowers. As touching (and deserved and lovely) as the John Ward tribute was, that standing ovation for People People is what made my night. Ah, I thought, someone remembers! How nice.

APRIL 1ST, 2010 at 3:10PM

IT'S OKAY TO ASK QUESTIONS

Of all the common rules we through at young improvisers the first one you can get rid of is "Don't ask questions." It's good for new people because lots of new people will do all kinds of things to not add info to the scene. But once you've had two improv classes you've probably settled down enough and are adding information. Questions can be good—they give the other player a chance to clarify, they express your position without muddying the issue. As long as you are in general adding information it's okay to ask questions.

Listening and reacting are way more important. Listen and if your reaction is a question, go ahead and ask.

As with all opinions presented on this blog, I will defer and back down at the slightest confrontation.

APRIL 2ND, 2010 at 10:57AM

STUMBLING ON A GREAT SHOW

I love when I see a great improv show when I wasn't necessarily expecting to. For example: one of my favorite improv sets I saw last year was by Alden Ford, Anna Rubanova, Steven Slate and Marielena Logsdon. They were up third at Alan Starzinski's Kaleidoscope show. I love Kaleidoscope—Alan picks 3 captains each week, and they each assemble an improv team. It's in the vein of Terry Jinn's various incarnations of The Project—fun and friends are the priority over high-stakes THIS MUST BE THE BEST EVER. There's a good vibe.

The sets there are often good, but they're also relaxed in a way that I'm not expecting a super-home-run show every time I go. It's for the good vibes and good players relaxing. Also when I'm there I'm usually nervous that I'm going to suck in front of a bunch of people that are in my classes. I'm a teacher, I've been doing improv longer than most of the people there, I should be good, right? I don't want to be one of these old dogs who can't bring the heat! So I'm not on the lookout to be blown away.

So I was sitting waiting to go up and sizing up the room. It was warm and stuffy as the Creek often is, and the room felt sleepy. I decided that I was going to be decisive and high-energy—start the scene with a definite MOVE—no languid discovering. My group was fourth so I figured the audience would be the most tired so we'd need to wake them up.

But then right before us went Anna, Steven, Marielena and Alden. And they did a patient, fun, smart set that was very hilarious. And what impressed me was they were a) natural and b) smart in a casual way. Their characters felt free to ask each other questions, and to point out things that didn't make sense. They moved their scenes forward but weren't in a hurry. It was the exact opposite of the energy I was looking to bring to my set, but it was clearly better.

The details of the show are fading to me—I just remember the tone. Shit, does anyone remember this show? I remember a scene where Alden was at a company and Anna and everyone was sort of ganging up on him as

having screwed about something. It was funny, but Alden’s response was this measured, polite “I really don’t see what I did wrong” in a way that made the others giggle a bit and was very funny. It felt like honesty was a priority over blindly pushing a unusual thing, and it was a relief. It looked easy in the best way.

I remember thinking “Thank God I didn’t go before this group, I’d look like a strutting ass.” Then my group got up there, and there was a monologue from James Ferrarella which mentioned British music festivals. And I thought “i’m going to initiate with a character who is not an idiot, and I’ll let someone else find what’s funny.” Andrew Mendillo and I stepped out, and I tried to be a woman at a travel agency booking a ticket to the Reading England Music festival. I messed up the name but Charlie Todd walked on to straighten it out. Mendillo wanted to not just see the show but move his entire life there, and so my character helped him book what he needed to move into the music festival permanently. It felt pretty good. Certainly I felt pleasantly un-desperate.

And I felt like a real actor! I chilled out, even though the room was sleepy and warm. I still think of that show now and then –the set before mine– to remember not to panic or feel like I have to switch up where I’m at because of the mood in the room.

APRIL 5TH, 2010 at 8:03AM

PHYSICAL MATCHING AT THE TOP

Kevin Hines and I debated via email.

Subject: PHYSICAL MATCHING AT THE TOP OF A SCENE

Will: When two people step out at the top of a scene and start matching each other physically I think “THIS SCENE WILL BE BORING FOR AT LEAST 60 SECONDS.”

One person comes out and chops carrots. Then a second person, who probably stepped out just one fraction of a second later, starts chopping a separate pile of carrots right next to the first person. Then they both just

chop carrots for five seconds. I feel like they're starting with less than nothing. Now they have to invent something fun that involves this mundane action. People seem to put making choices on hold for ten seconds or more when they have physically matched each other—zombieprov.

Kevin: Yeah, that sounds bad. But I think the alternative is worse! Someone steps out, starts chopping carrots, and the other person steps out and watches them. Maybe they are trying to figure out what the other person is doing. Are they chopping vegetables? Are they a chef? Are they using drumsticks? Maybe they don't want to step on that person's idea, so they are waiting for that first person to speak.

Now when someone does speak it comes from a place of indecision. I didn't choose to match, or do anything so my character isn't doing anything. I'm not a chef, I'm not helping make dinner, I'm lazy. That's not a choice. That's the absence of choice. In either case you need to make choices, but if you matched you are going to start stronger than if you just stood and watched for a noticeable amount of time.

Will: It might just be at what point you see someone in their development. Maybe at first younger students, like one two or three courses into their training—someone tells them to physically match first and make the choice second and it makes a big difference from just standing there because they relax and start making choices.

But then they settle into that too much! They get comfortable making that physical match and then STILL don't make a choice. They see the person chopping carrots and they start chopping carrots for a WHILE—like ten or fifteen seconds before the next line. It's really no better than doing nothing at that point. Even worse, they think they're making a decision—or at least they act like they've made a decision. But there I sit, fuming unfairly.

Ideally, you'd physically match and as you're doing it make a decision about what's happening and either say something or have your energy be affected by it.

Kevin: Matching is definitely more important for newer improvisers. But I still see it with experienced folks a lot.

Truthfully (and possibly off-topic) I think the first guy out should speak immediately. If someone steps out and starts an action but doesn't speak,

I assume they have no idea. So I speak immediately. I label what they are doing, and I start doing something as well. That's my decision. I jump start the scene even though they stepped out first. Even more so if there is an opening. If you did a 3 minute opening and you're only idea is "cutting carrots" then we have a lot of work to do. We should have a game or something close. So I initiate something from the opening, ideally something inspired from the "cutting carrots" part of the opening.

The top of the show needs CHOICES. Keep making choices until we know what is going on. I am cutting carrots. I am also cutting carrots. We are in a restaurant. I am nervous about the amount of work we have. I am even more nervous. We are freaking out as the mountain of orders keeps increasing. Now we are getting somewhere. Until you reach that point, not adding (and more importantly ANDing) is boring. And you will sit in your seat angrily whether or not they matched.

So I like matching because it's a choice. An easy choice, sure. And not the final choice. But a choice. While watching and waiting is not a choice.

Will: We agree that you need choices. And I agree that compared to just standing and watching, that matching energy/physicality is much better. But I posit to you sir, that intermediate performers stay happy with that choice far far too long. They match and then wait upwards of 20 seconds.

I'm not so suspicious of silence at the top, but I don't see it so much so maybe I would. It IS cool when a wordless initiation gets things going. What if the opening had a big long thing about the repression of housewives in the 50s, and there's all these images suggested of sad angry housewives—and after THAT someone walked out and started chopping carrots? I bet the audience would laugh, because people would assume there's a simmering volcano behind that action. But that's because there's a lot more information associated with that simple action.

What I'm saying is: chopping carrots is hilarious! Always do it.

Kevin: Your example, of the repression of housewives leading to silently cutting carrots would be good. But I'd be surprised if for every 100 silent starting scenes any more than 5 were from anything other than not having an idea.

A WHOLLY UNNECESSARY BOOK

What you are looking at is a wholly unnecessary book.

This is a collection of six years (!) of entries from an online blog called “Improv Nonsense.” It’s about improv comedy, which is the practice of making up funny scenes without a script in a group while on a stage, which is a thing people do. The blog is written by Will Hines, a respected and talented teacher and performer from the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre who knows a lot about improv. Full disclosure: I am Will.

Here’s the thing: the blog still exists. It’s at <http://improvnonsense.tumblr.com>. Everything in this book is there. So who needs this book?

The main argument for this book is that blogs are tough to read, whereas this book is straight-up beautiful to look at. Clear headers, everything in order, beautiful typefaces: it’s great!

So if you are an insanely obsessive improv nerd, who wants to make sure they read all of a once-popular improv blog without having to click and scroll through hundreds of web pages, than this book could be for you.

Unless I make it obsolete by adding more entries to the blog, which I probably will.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Will Hines is a longtime teacher and performer at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre. He’s the author of *How to Be The Greatest Improviser on Earth*, which is a title that neither he nor anyone has any right to use.

