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Improv class teaches students to think fast on their feet, and laugh

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Picture it.

Scene 1: An upstairs windowless room with wood floors, a wall of mirrors, a table and a couple of dozen padded office chairs.

The players: A baker's dozen of students including two lawyers; a teacher; an insurance exec; a couple of college students; some aspiring actors; and a journalist, all of whom have signed up for a six-week Improv 101 class taught by Gina Trimarco, founder of the Carolina Improv Company.

I can't speak for the others, but as I climbed the dark, narrow staircase to the second floor of the Theatre of the Republic for the first class, this journalist was having second thoughts.

Really, what was I thinking when I signed up for a class in improvisation despite having no previous theater or comedy experience? And then agreeing to write a first-person article about it. Talk about a situation ripe for public ridicule.

My enrollment was a knee-jerk reaction to an intriguing press release. "Be a kid again. ... Take an Improv class! Want to improve your ability to think quickly on your feet or just have some creative fun? Warning: This class will make you laugh!"

These days, who doesn't need a good laugh?

I didn't think twice. I just said yes. Turns out, that's the key to successful improv, and maybe even life.

But on the first night, that "yes" weighed heavier with each step up those stairs. Again, what was I thinking? This is someone who still twitches - almost 50 years later - at the memories of botched piano, dance and acrobat recitals.

Take the time, for example, clad in hot pink leotards decorated with big satin polka dots, that I just stood on my head in the middle of the stage while the rest of the lithe little showoffs did their backbends and cartwheels and handsprings around me, because staying upright, upside down, was the only skill I had mastered. We won't even talk about the frozen deer-in-the-headlights appearance in the canary-yellow tutu at the ballet recital.

My mother had such high hopes. I dashed them all.

That staircase might as well have been strewn with boulders and razorwire.

Scene 2:

I made it up the stairs without tripping on the boulders or eviscerating myself on the razorwire. Trimarco got right to work.

First we had to give ourselves nicknames. (We were warned for this and all other exercises to keep it clean.) Leader "Wacky Gina" went first. We went around the circle: "Captain Den" struck a Capt. Morgan stance; "Aqua Amy" clasped her hands together like fish fins planted atop her head and wiggled like flounder; "Crazy Carolyn" managed a shimmy and palsied bow. You get the idea.

The point was to remember each other. We went around the circle repeating the names and bouncing them back and forth. We weren't trying to be funny, just focused enough to remember who was who. But our frequent flubs were hilarious.

And therein lies improv's guiding philosophy: "Improv isn't about trying to be funny, but sometimes funny happens," Trimarco said.

It is also about saying "Yes, and," she said. That means saying yes to whatever situation you're presented with on

stage and going with the flow, wherever it takes you.

Scenes 3-7:

So every Monday for the next five weeks, we met in that mirrored classroom, playing games that grew progressively more complex.

"Get out of your head," Trimarco coached as we paired off for exercises like "slide show," in which two people strike a pose and the other two narrate the scene.

Capt. Den (Dennis DiSabato, a lawyer in real life), and Jazzy Jessica (Jessica Stokes, also a lawyer) acted out the slides of a brother and sister on vacation at an amusement park.

"Remember when you ate all that cotton candy?" one interpreter said, adding "click" to move the pair into their next pose.

"Yes, and remember you held back my hair while I threw up after the roller coaster?" became the next slide's voiceover.

"Alter ego" became another favorite. In that scene, two members were given a situation and relationship - a man and a woman on a blind date - and the other two played their alter egos, speaking aloud what the characters were really thinking.

"Would you like some more wine?" one player asked his date. His alter ego followed with: "I sure hope I get lucky."

"Sure," the female said. Her alter ego chimed in: "No way am I going home with him."

"Go with your first instinct," Trimarco said often. "Commit to your character. If you're a man playing a woman, be the best woman you can be."

As we played, we grew progressively more comfortable with each other, less self-conscious and inhibited, and began to function more as a team.

All of which explains why improv has become a hot training tool for businesses in recent years, a service Trimarco's company also provides, along with programs for schools.

"I have combined the things I love to do: training and mentoring and providing experiential entertainment," Trimarco said. "I've learned through the years that saying 'yes' and 'why not' is far more interesting and rewarding than saying 'no' and 'it'll never work.'"

Scene 8:

And that is why, despite all past performing experience to the contrary, I said yes to participating in the recital before an audience of family and friends to show what our troupe had learned.

Still, hours before we were to hit the stage, I was trying not to envision myself as a wide-eyed 5-foot statue frozen in the lights of the Theatre of the Republic's stage. I was cramming from a tips and tricks hand-out we'd gotten in our first class and hoping to remember lessons like this one:

"Don't worry too much about you. The best improv students aren't the ones that say 'Look at me, I'm funny.' They're the ones who commit themselves fully to trying every exercise we're working on. The comedy will happen."

At 7 p.m. sharp, the lights went down, the spotlights came on, and nine of us took the stage, hoping the comedy would happen.

Trimarco, who directed the performance, welcomed the 20-or-so people in the audience and explained the rules of improv and their roles in the performance. We'd be at their mercy as they came up with our personalities and situations in each of the scenes.

We started easy, with something called a "directed story," in which the audience gave us a starting situation: "Josh eats pickles" and Trimarco pointed at each of us to provide the rest of the tale a few words at a time. I wish I could tell you how the story went, but I seem to have blocked it from my memory.

The alter-ego game was set in a job interview, in which an aging, uptight recording exec (me) grilled a rapper (Greg Watson) about whether her label should take him on as a client. The audience rewarded us with laughter and applause. I'm just thankful I didn't have to play the rapper. Fo' shizzle.

Promptly at 8 p.m., we took our bows. No one froze, no one threw up, and, despite a handful of language slips, no one did anything that would make career-ending YouTube fodder.

Kay Van Hoesen, a real estate appraiser in real life, at first wasn't going to be in the recital.

"I was deathly afraid of performing for an audience, especially because I find improv such a struggle," she said. "In real life, I'm typically deliberate in what I say and do. That's part of the reason I took improv, to learn to think quicker on my feet.

"At first I thought I'd go to the recital as an audience member. But then I feared I'd watch all of you on stage and regret my choice," she said. "After all, part of the reason I took the Improv class was to push myself into trying something new, something outside my comfort zone, and to challenge myself. So I took the plunge."

She's not sure if there's more improv in her future, but she was a star in her scenes.

Barbara Belyski not only wants more improv, her husband is signing up for 101. She sells Tastefully Simple Inc. products at home parties when she's not taking care of her three daughters.

"I originally signed up ... to feel more comfortable in front of my hostesses and their guests when doing a party," she said. "... I feel I failed at so many other ventures in my life because I didn't have the confidence in myself to make them work. Now, I feel with the tools I have acquired through improv classes, I can be more successful when I speak to potential clients."

Will more performances follow? Several members may graduate to Improv 201, and Trimarco even has long-term hopes of creating a troupe. Stay tuned.

Who | Instructor and founder of the 6-month-old Carolina Improv Company

What | This is how Trimarco explains it: "In the entertainment world, improvisation is the process of creating something out of nothing quickly for the purpose of entertaining others, such as creating a story spontaneously without a script, similar to what they do on the TV show 'Whose Line Is It Anyway?'"

Why | Raised in Chicago, Trimarco went to DePaul University, aiming for a degree in accounting to satisfy her "blue-collar, old-fashioned, Great Depression-born father." But accounting didn't satisfy her creative yearnings, so she signed up for an improv class at The Second City theater, where such stars as Bill Murray, Stephen Colbert, Mike Myers and Tina Fey got their starts. That accounting degree morphed into a communications degree, and Trimarco embarked on a career that involved marketing, public relations and communications. Her choice eventually led her to a post as general manager of the Navy Pier Imax Theatre in Chicago and that in turn led her to Myrtle Beach, where in 2007 she accepted a similar gig at the IMAX Theater at Broadway at the Beach. Last year, she became her own boss, opening the area's first improv company, which offers classes for adults, business workshops and school programs.

More information | Carolina Improv Company will kick off a new six-session Improv 101 class Monday at the Theatre of the Republic in Conway. Cost is \$150. For registration or information about the class or other programs, call 597-6393 or go to www.carolinaimprov.com.

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