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Last but not least, thanks to all of the i.O. performers who love and support our theater and help to pass down the torch to our new talent.

Foreword



Adam McKay

Writing the foreword to a book on improv is a bit of a contradiction. Improv is fast and current and defies categorization while the very mention of a foreword evokes dusty subterranean libraries and books on the Crimean War. So in an attempt to infuse some of the magic of improv into this foreword, I'm going to let myself free-form on the keyboard of my computer for the next thirty seconds. Whatever comes out is what goes in. I swear it. I've just gotten up and gotten a stop watch. So I'm ready. Here we go:

ghdfklsdl;ippo ... dog ... a dog and a hat ... uhhhh ... Oh my God I regret this ... This is awful ... And it'll be in print ... gotta think ... Uhhhh ... Jamaican Bobsled team!! ... That is so weak ... so weak ... uhhhh ... and time!

Okay. So that was something I tried. Hopefully in reading this book you can quickly do better improv than that. Now on with the foreword ...

As a former student of Del and Charna's, I owe them and this work much. It, and they, literally re-taught me how to be creative. The basic lessons and ideas that Close developed through his lifetime and that Halpern continues to teach not only produce dynamic and electric improvised group performance pieces but also give students the basic fundamentals necessary to approach being a writer, actor, director, senator, optometrist, police sniper, etc. These are the essential and age-old tools of agreement and navigation that allow a person to treat obstacles, mistakes, difficult personalities, and insecurities as gifts and truths rather than reasons to fall back into clichés or fail. Del's entire mission was to generate relevant and honest work. The only failure was someone not participating in this goal.

In 1990 when I first took a class with Del on long-form improvisation, I remember being shell-shocked. Myself and five

or six other improvisers were lucky enough to have Del treat us as his experimental ensemble. We developed new scenic improv forms, did the first all long-form show featuring one group and started another sketch group on the side called The Upright Citizen's Brigade.

But when I moved on to writing for television and film and then to directing, I was amazed at how well all of the tenets of Del's teaching held up. Agreement, focus, and finding your third and most original thought are ideas that translate to all disciplines. I don't always nail them, but they keep me in the ballpark.

In fact, after writing about the work they do and how great it is I'm starting to feel kind of cocky. I think I can do the thirty second improv writing thing. Screw it ... Here goes:

bah, dee, dah ... uhhh ... this is immediately not going well ... damn ... why am I sweating so much? ... Ahhhh ... Stop!

Okay. Once again that was a mistake.

Just read the book. It's that simple. But more importantly, use it. Perform and rehearse this work. Fail a lot and be proud of it. Read other books and take classes. And then if you're by chance in Chicago, go take a class at the i.O. Theater. And even if you're in Denver or Costa Rica, still take classes and start theater groups. Del's whole idea was to create a theater that can exist on its own, independent of corporate-owned TV and movies. This was supposed to be so special that when you filmed it, it was lost. Del wanted people playing up to their audiences, not down. He wanted entertainment that pushed us forward, not backwards or into a stasis.

He also used to say that by even showing up for class we were stepping away from the pack and becoming just a little bit special. It was a great thing to tell a class. It made us feel like we had a responsibility. Well, I think to a degree that's true of you opening up this book (Unless you're reading it while crouched in the aisle of the bookstore; either make a purchase or move on, you dirtbag). It's a choice that immediately separates you from the pack. So go and do amazing things. And if all else fails, just be honest.

— Adam McKay, 2005

Preface

At the end of my level one class, I love to hold a brief discussion with the students to see what questions they have about what they have learned so far. One of the things I am most often asked is, “What is the most important thing we should take with us on to level two?” It’s then I must stress that the most important elements that they have learned in my class are not just the basics for level one but are the most important elements for doing the work, period. “The beginning is in the end,” to quote Mike Myers from his introduction to my previous book, means just that. What we learn to do in the beginning is what we need to do in the end.

The basic concepts I teach are agreement and the ability to listen, remember, and recycle each other’s ideas. I discuss these basics in depth in my seminal book, *Truth in Comedy*, which truly has become the bible for improvisation. I don’t feel that it would be fair to readers to repeat myself from the past book, but I do need to refer to it from time to time, as all the work stems from the elements I wrote about before.

This new book is divided into three parts. Part One shows how some of our techniques have led to the creation of new forms. Part Two deals with helpful hints to further the advanced improviser. Part Three provides a bit of history on how the creators of long-form improvisation came together, along with some funny stories about Del Close which have so often been requested of me.

To get the most out of *Art by Committee*, I suggest having a copy of *Truth in Comedy* at your fingertips to refer to as well as a DVD player. This can be an incredible learning experience for you.

In the next few chapters, we will look at some of the best improvisers in the world. You will see the very skills that I teach in Part One being used by performers who, like neurosurgeons, wire brains together. You will see the power of connections and callbacks — the basics of all our work.