1 of 100 DOCUMENTS

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HEADLINE: **Toss** Them A Line;
Pros Make Improv Look Easy, but Novices Are Ad-Libbing Dangerously

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BODY:

Let's say you're someone who has seen improv comedy onstage or on TV where people make up absurd scenes and dialogue that are side-splittingly hilarious.

Okay, and let's say you're envious sometimes and resentful at other times. And you've always wondered if you could do that and if you're actually fast and funny on your feet. So you sign up for a crash course at the DC Improv, meeting for two hours every Saturday afternoon for six weeks.

Now. Using the tricks you've learned, tell us about it.

All right, go!

Um, um. Improvisational comedy is making up weird stories with other people on the spur of the moment.

New choice!

It's a way of getting through a strange, unwieldy real-life situation.

New choice!

It's selling mouthwash to aardvarks.

Improv comedy is a leap. Of logic and of faith.

Yes, and . . . improvisational comedy is ridiculous, profound and humbling all at the same time.

And writing about it is like snatching up mercury with your fingertips. Painting the wind. Drinking a

Sex-on-the-Beach from your baby's sippy cup.

There's only one way to do it: improvise.

Class 1: Before you leave the house you improvise a hoedown song, like the ones they sing on "Whose Line Is It Anyway?," an improv TV show to which you and your 14-year-old son are addicted:

I went down to the theater

To see if I was funny

First I said goodbye

To my son and my honey

But when I got there

And made my curtain call

The teacher told me

That I was not funny at all.

Wasn't funny at all.

Outside, the day is bright and cold; inside the comedy club it is dark and cold. You are in the subterranean DC Improv on Connecticut Avenue NW, south of Dupont Circle. The stage at the front of the black-all-over room is cramped and illuminated by a track of bright spotlights. Two metal chairs are pushed together to make a step up to the stage.

There are 16 of you in the room, including Ruby Holden, 51, in bluejeans; Jonas Monast, 32, an attorney with Foley Hoag; and Tom Blemaster, a cherub-faced sophomore at St. Albans high school.

First realization: You're not, as it turns out, funny. At least not as funny as you imagine yourself to be. And you are reminded that you don't sing well. And that your hair is wild.

Other stark truths: Improv is humbling on the best days, humiliating on the rest. And always exhilarating.

People introduce themselves. Some are here because they have been inspired by "Whose Line."

Others such as office receptionist Gian Ladaga, 30, and Washington Capitals assistant general manager Frank Provenzano, 36, say friends signed them up.

Marketing consultant Bryan Otte, 39, figures that while he is between jobs, he'll give comedy class a whack.

Kelly Roe, 23, a Web developer for AT&T, says, "I think I'm funny." And she turns out to be really funny.

Brian Kerns, baseball cap on backward, stands and says: "I'm Brian. I'm an alcoholic."

"Hi, Brian," says the improv teacher, Shawn Westfall, as if the scene were an Alcoholics Anonymous meeting.

Brian, a 22-year-old office manager, says: "I've been doing some stand-up and I'm trying to learn something."

"Well, you're in the wrong place," Shawn says, still on cue.

Ruby, an African American student, says, "I've been accused of being too serious."

Family members told her, she says, "if I was going to do comedy, do it for white people. They're the only ones who think you're funny."

To dark-haired Shawn, in black sweater and bluejeans, doing improv is just like living: "Life is ad hoc; you make it up as you go along."

You learn how to do improv by playing games onstage.

In "Emotional Party," for instance, a host welcomes guests to the party one at a time. Each guest exhibits a particular emotion, such as anger, giddiness or lustfulness.

With the arrival of each guest, everyone onstage assumes that guest's emotion. So when the giddy person arrives, the party becomes a swirl of giddiness. And so on.

In "New Choice," two people create a scene only to have someone cry out "New choice!" every once in a while, forcing them to take the story in a different direction.

Playing games like these over and over, you learn lessons: "Yes and" are the two most important words in improv.

You say "yes and" to let another actor know that you accept the invitation offered and that you are going to add something to the story you are creating together.

You must listen to everything. You must pay rapt attention to what other improvvers are saying to you and to each other. Things happen out of order.

There are no mistakes in improv. There are no wrong answers in improv. Everything is cool, accepted, copacetic, believable.

The best improv is personal and true.

At least that's what Shawn says.

Improv is "analogous to literature," says Shawn, 38, who has been teaching improv in Washington for the past year and a half. He cribs shamelessly from "Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation" by Del Close and others.

Yes, and he also cribs from Emily Dickinson: "Tell the truth," he says, "but tell it slant."

Improv is like life, you realize as the course progresses, and life is like improv. In fact, what you learn in improv spills over into the rest of your day-to-day.

Using the chairs to get onstage, you and Ruby Holden are the first to actually perform in the class. Shawn tells you to play "the ABC game."

You two, the other members of the class decide, are on a first date and every sentence each of you says must begin with the next letter of the alphabet. For example:

"And what is your name?"

"Barbara."

The scene unfolds quickly. You say one funny thing, telling Ruby to call you Czechoslovakia, Jim Czechoslovakia. You get a laugh from the group and the cavelike room is suddenly warmer.

Ruby is funnier than you are. The crowd knows it; you know it.

"What may be a mistake in the initial part of a scene can become the most integral part later in the scene," Shawn says. Just as in life. "You should have no expectations about what's going to happen next."

You are reminded of time-traveler Billy Pilgrim in Kurt Vonnegut's "Slaughterhouse-Five," who says he is in a constant state of stage fright "because he never knows what part of his life he is going to have to act in next."

Oh yes, Shawn says, there is one bad word in improv. It's "no."

Denials, according to "Truth in Comedy," are taboo in improv. In an infamous improv skit at Chicago's Second City theater, Joan Rivers announced to Del Close that she wanted a divorce. Close, acting emotionally torn, pleaded: "But honey, what about the children?"

Rivers said, "We don't have any children."

Though the line received guffaws from the audience, it is an illustration among improvvers of a scene-killer.

Shawn says, "Improv is collaborative."

And: "It's like sex," he says. "It's more fun to do than to watch."

Class 2: "You're going to fail," Shawn says. "It's a process."

Yes, and improv "by nature is contextual," he says. It's virtually impossible to re-create an improv skit for people who didn't see it. "They won't understand it," he says. "They weren't there."

Thanks, Shawn, you say, remembering that you are a reporter assigned to write a story about the course.

In beginning classes of improv, Shawn says, every scene pretty much defaults "to sex and poo."

You get in a circle and the whole class pretends to be an advertising agency. "Today," Shawn says, "we're going to discover the power of Yes And."

"What is our product?" Shawn asks.

"Mouthwash," somebody says.

"Who are we selling it to?" Shawn asks.

"Aardvarks," somebody else suggests.

With every outlandish suggestion, the group cries out, "Yes!"

And the next person adds to the campaign. Before you know it, your agency has created a mouthwash that, when gargled, soothes the ant-scraped throat of the aardvark. It's marketed by a celebrity aardvark and a den-to-den salesman.

The next campaign: Selling tennis balls to giraffes.

You play another game. Kelly, Gian, Bryan and Maureen O'Sullivan -- a Federal Emergency Management Agency employee who doesn't want to discuss her age -- take the stage as one person: Dr. Know It All, an astrologer.

The four-headed doctor fields questions from the audience and gives a group-answer, each person saying one word at a time.

The first query from the audience: "What is the circumference of Uranus?"

Dr. Know It All points out that he is an astrologer, not an astronomer. Or proctologist.

The next four folks onstage make up a Dr. Know It All who is an expert in politics.

Speaking one at a time, Gian, Tom, Ruby and software developer Andy Hush, 34, give this reply to one question about the Democratic presidential field: "General . . . Clark . . . is . . . experienced . . . in . . . nothing."

Class 3: "Character is plot," Shawn says.

He's a bright, high-energy guy, who by day works in the marketing department of the Washington Speakers Bureau. He traveled the world with the military and he's got a master's degree in literature, so he's always tossing around literary references like a giraffe **tosses** around tennis balls.

Think of all the great novels named for their characters, he says: "Huckleberry Finn," "Tom Jones," "Madame Bovary." And what you remember about novels is usually the characters -- Holden Caulfield in "The Catcher in the Rye," and Celie in "The Color Purple."

Shakespeare understood, Shawn says. "All the world's a stage, and all the men and women merely players."

Shawn suggests that if you switched the main characters in "Othello" and "Hamlet," there would be no plot. Hamlet, a great judge of character, would see right through the motiveless malevolence of Iago. And as soon as Othello, a man of action, heard that his uncle Claudius had moved in on his mother, Othello would run a shiv through old Claude.

"That shows you how integral character is to plot," Shawn says.

You create characters in a game called Hitchhiker. You set up four chairs to look like the seats of a car, and you take turns being the new rider. When you get in the car, you assume a distinctive character trait -- speaking Japanese or whining -- and everyone in the car must take on the same demeanor.

At the end of class, of every class, Shawn says: "Are you having fun? Because life is short. If you're not having fun, you should be taking an archery class."

Later at Mackey's bar, just around the corner from the DC Improv, you sit with a few fellow improvvers and rehash the day's class. You begin to understand how improv is seeping into the lives of your colleagues.

Bryan says it reminds him of playing soccer as a kid, passing the ball to others so they can score.

You remember reading in "Truth in Comedy" that "the best way for an improviser to look good is by making his fellow players look good."

Frank, the hockey executive, says: "Improv is like playing hockey. It is like passing. You get your head up, make the play." The games are fast and they develop unexpectedly. And he adds, success is largely dependent on the folks around you.

Like life.

Class 4: "Life is short," Shawn reminds you. "So is your time onstage."

To make scenes work, he says, be a giver. "People who give information are givers; people who ask questions are takers."

What is he talking about? you wonder.

Ruby and Jennifer Hoar, a 23-year-old staff writer at the political digest the Hotline, play a mother and daughter in Hell.

Jennifer suggests that she can succeed using only her good looks.

"I want to see you in school," Ruby says to her "daughter."

"New choice!" Shawn yells to Ruby, who must come up with something new altogether.

"I want to see you get a job," Ruby says.

"New choice!" Shawn yells.

"I want to see you in the White House!"

The room erupts in laughter, picturing Ruby and Jennifer plotting a road to the White House that begins in Hell. They wouldn't be the first.

Ruby settled in Washington in 1987 after being in the military. One of her brothers died in a drowning accident when he was 12. She has raised two daughters on her own. She lives in a condo in Southwest, which she chose because it has a swimming pool where her grandchildren can learn to swim. One of her grandsons, Collin Sims, a third-grader at Fort Dupont Park Elementary, wants to grow up to be an Olympic swimmer.

After class, Ruby tells you that she has been diagnosed as a schizophrenic. She says she's allergic to most medications. "I have bad days, dark days," she says.

The improv class is helping her. "It gives me natural laughter," she says. It has also helped in her condominium community. Rather than argue with people over prickly issues such as trash removal, she says, she finds that the "yes and" construction helps build consensus.

She has enjoyed the class so much and has received such a positive response, she's looking to go further in comedy. So are Brian and Maureen, who both do stand-up.

Frank, on the other hand, says: "The class has actually hurt me professionally. Whenever an agent calls asking for more money, I've been saying 'Yes, and . . .' which is very bad in contract negotiations."

He's joking.

Class 5: "Watch your questions!" Shawn tells us at the DC Improv. "There's a natural tendency to say no."

Gian is playing a wimpy-voiced carny operating the Tunnel of Love, and Jennifer, a paying customer, has just broken up with her boyfriend. Gian surprises Jennifer by hopping into the empty seat beside her.

He looks at her lasciviously as they pretend to enter the dark tunnel. "My family always celebrates Valentine's Day on February 15th," he says. "Because candy is half price."

Jennifer plays the scene smoothly by adding information. She says she would love some candy and suggests all kinds of possibilities -- white, milk, dark chocolate, truffles.

Gian in his whine says, "Young lady, I have two words for you: assortment."

Improv as you know it is pretty much a modern creation. There are two main strains: The short form, which you

know from watching "Whose Line," in which players onstage make up sketches based on suggestions from the audience. And the long form -- the most popular variation is the Harold -- in which players expand on the short form and roll through a predetermined construct of personal rants, two-person exchanges and group skits. The hope is that the whole melange crescendos into one many-headed comedy sketch.

In the way that jazz musicians conjure imaginative riffs from an eight-note scale and painters perform thrilling experiments with just three colors, improv comedians take the skimpiest of pretexts and weave whole, bordering-on-the-bizarre tales. Sometimes improv doesn't work. But when it does, it's magic. Improvvers put the hi and the lo in ex nihilo.

"As an improvising musician," writes Stephen Nachmanovitch in "Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art," "I am in the surrender business. Improvisation is acceptance, in a single breath, of both transience and eternity."

Believed to have come from the Italian theater's scriptless commedia dell'arte, improv comedy took hold in this country in the 1950s, according to "Something Wonderful Right Away: An Oral History of the Second City and Compass Players" by Jeffrey Sweet.

The guiding light for the pioneers of improvisational comedy was Viola Spolin, a drama teacher who thought that acting should be a game. To entice teenagers to touch one another naturally while onstage, for instance, Spolin developed a game called Contact in which each actor had to touch another when delivering a line.

Spolin's son, Paul Sills, and a group of young Chicago actors founded the Compass Theater in 1955. They took the stage and, working from only the roughest of outlines, made up characters and movement and dialogue on the spot. Consequently, they produced a different play every night. The Compass Players included future stars of stage and screen Alan Alda, Jane Alexander, Alan Arkin, Ed Asner, Elaine May, Mike Nichols and Ben Stiller's father, Jerry.

In 1959, Sills and some other improv addicts opened another theater, the Second City. Del Close, considered the granddaddy of American improv, plied his trade at Second City. Over the years at various branches so did (deep breath): Dan Aykroyd, Jim and John Belushi, John Candy, Chris Farley, Tina Fey, Robert Klein, Shelley Long, Tim Meadows, Bill Murray, Mike Myers, Amy Poehler, Gilda Radner, Joan Rivers, Horatio Sanz, David Steinberg, George Wendt, Fred Willard and many other comedians you have -- and haven't -- heard of.

In Los Angeles, another influential troupe, the Groundlings, got off the ground in 1972. If Chicago improv was based primarily on urbane situations and witty wordplay, West Coast improv was more character-based, Shawn says. Some of "Saturday Night Live's" most memorable characters were created on the Groundlings stage by improvvers such as Will Ferrell, Phil Hartman, Chris Kattan, Laraine Newman, Cheri Oteri, Chris Parnell, Maya Rudolph and Julia Sweeney.

Jon Lovitz was a Groundling. In fact, he was once crowned, um, prince of the Groundlings.

New choice!

He was once elected emperor of the Groundlings.

New choice!

Jon Lovitz was commanded by God to be the fairy princess of the Groundlings. Yeah. That's the ticket.

Today Washington is the home of several improv clubs and troupes, including Precipice Theater and Screaming Puppets. ComedySportz in Arlington is one of a chain of U.S. comedy clubs featuring improv competitions.

Now This! is a local group of mostly professional actors who, among other things, use improv for corporate team-building. The cast has worked with companies such as Marriott, Xerox and Air Canada.

Class 6: It's the last class and there is discussion of buying Shawn a present. Jennifer suggests getting him an archery lesson.

The games are tougher. In one, you must read every one of your lines from a page, selected randomly, from a book of movie scenes.

In another, you can speak only two lines: a famous one from the movies, "I'll be back," and a piece of advice your mother gave you, "Look both ways before you cross the street."

You get a laugh or two and the course is over. People who have been performing improv together for six weeks do not want to lose touch. E-mail addresses are exchanged.

Gian sends a note to everyone saying that he will be taking an advanced class from Shawn and invites others from your group to join him.

You think seriously about comedy and about how it has affected the ways you -- and others -- look at the world and at the challenges of life.

You think of how you can incorporate what you have learned into your life and how improvisational tricks and games may help you deal with the weird asynchronicity of life.

You realize that you are constantly being thrown into situations that you are not prepared for, or that are not prepared for you.

You call up an improv genius, Wayne Brady of "Whose Line."

"Improv comedy," he says from a cell phone in Los Angeles, "is a little bit of a misnomer. Improv is what an actor uses to create his own dialogue and scenes. The comedy is something that you bring to it innately."

You can learn to do improv tricks, he says. But when it comes to comedy, "you're either funny or you're not."

Yes, you say, and you ask him if he has found his improv skills helpful in everyday living.

Absolutely, he says. "Improv is a tool. It's like being able to sing."

Yes, you think. And you go to sleep dreaming of the various uses of improv techniques on this Earth.

Yes, and you realize that improv methods can be helpful in commerce, in romance, in child rearing.

Yes, and in sports, in social settings and in all sorts of sticky situations.

Yes, and while you're at it, you may even be able to improv your own life.

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