

About improv

Wade Jackson, founder of the Covert Theatre shares some thoughts on the art of improvisation.

What is improv?

Improv (also known as impro) is short for improvisation. It's spontaneous ensemble theatre. It is an art form where the performers make up the theatre, usually comedy on the spot.

History of improv

Improvisation is a centuries old art form that has been used mainly in the performing arts; the acting and music traditions. It's developed through the ages and today most drama training institutes incorporate improvisation in their curriculum.

The three main pioneers of modern improvisation for the theatre in the 20th century are Viola Spolin, Keith Johnstone and Del Close. From their work, improvisation has developed into a professional performed art form in its own right. Spolin and Johnstone are largely responsible for the modern short form improvised performances, which has influenced television shows such as *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* and Close is recognised as the creator of the Harold, a style of long form improvisation.

Types of improv – short, long & narrative forms

There are different types of improv from improv games (often called short form), to improv scenes (often called long form) to full length improvised plays, usually with a genre (often called narrative improv).

Improv games like you'd see on TV's *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* is considered short form. Long form shows are usually a collage of scenes that end with a punchline and then a new scene starts unrelated to the last scene. Narrative form is more of a storytelling art form, where you have more time to develop richer characters and relationships and tell a story.

Covert Theatre's style of improv

We do all three styles at the Covert Theatre. The styles offer different things and people; both performer and audience alike, have their preferences. The principles of

storytelling underpins all that we do so even if we're doing a short improv game we aim to have strong characters telling a story.

Improv came from the theatre stage, not the stand up comedy stage and so we want our audience to have theatrical experience, not just a comedic one.

When people join the Covert to learn improv, we teach them the principles of improvised storytelling using improv games. Once a member of the theatre, they then learn how to take those principles into long form formats before they learn to take the principles into an improvised play format.

Benefits of learning improv

Improvisation that focuses on narrative is an art form that provides the opportunity for a person to develop themselves on many different levels. It's far more than just having the ability to jump up on stage with friends and make some entertaining stuff up.

It sets up a safe and fun environment for a person to undergo experiential self-directed learning. Through the interactive exercises and activities, a person is able to experience learning on an intellectual, physical and emotional level. With regular practise a person is able to self-reflect on their learnings and make better choices. This personal growth results in not only being a better improviser but a person is able to transfer this learning to every area of their life, whether it's personal relationships, or professional work or school.

Improvisation is the wonderful vehicle for leadership development, whether it's self-leadership or leadership of others, as it imparts crucial life skills that every person needs.

But is it art?

Because improv is usually not dramatic, it can wrongly be thought of as not being theatre or a legitimate art form by itself. In some quarters improv is seen as a poor cousin to both comedy and theatre as it sits in between, or improv is only a tool to be used in rehearsals or training. This is to misunderstand improv.

Improv is a legitimate art form by itself. And because improvisation is an art form, it is a life-long journey of exploration and discovery. Although it is not something you ever master, its riches are constantly being unfolded as a reward for committing and persevering to the art form.

What is improv really?

While improvisation develops your self-creation, self-discovery and self-expression, ultimately improv is about connection. Every person has a basic human need to be connected to something bigger than themselves. Improvisation meets this need as people are able to work together to achieve something they could never create by themselves.

A stand up comedy audience is voyeuristic – they're watching a comedian do their practised routine. Whereas an improv audience is more participatory – they're a part of the moment when the magic happens, so it feels more inclusive. (And yes, most audience members are silently praying they don't end up as part of the show).

Improvisation forces you to be in the present moment so it frees you from the chains of the past. But unlike a meditation where you become present with yourself, in improv you become present in the moment with another person. So it's an active form of mindfulness. You are fully connected in the moment with another human being and it feels liberating.

Connection lies at the heart of spirituality – whether it's a connection to a higher being, nature, the universe or in improv, to your scene partner. This is why for some people, studying the art of improvisation is their spiritual practice.

And most importantly, improv is a fun way of traveling on the journey to self-actualisation. Laughter and friendship are just two of the natural by-products of studying the art of improvisation.