CHAPTER FOUR

Agreement

Conflict is about as necessary as the Mad Scientist's daughter in a science fiction film. It's an arbitrary convention that need not be respected.

In the early days of improvisation, the molders and shapers of the art discovered very quickly that arguing on stage accomplished little, except to delay the action that would have naturally arisen in the first place.

"While improvising scenario plays at the Compass Theater, we discovered that when actors would go on stage, given the choice of agreeing or arguing, they would inevitably argue," observes Del. "Consequently, a scenario would last six or seven hours!

"'Hand me the wrench.'

"'I don't have it.'

"'Go get it.'

"'I don't know where it is.'

"'It's in the car.'

"'I don't want to go to the car.'

"'But I need the wrench.'

"Then go get it.'

... And on and on. What would happen if we agreed instead of disagreed? Problems would be solved, and there would be more action — 'Here's the wrench, and I'll hold the light for you.'

"Business is taken care of in a lot less time! Freud, in his essay 'Psychopathic Characters on Stage,' called Hamlet the first truly modern play, because the conflict is not so much between the characters as within the characters.

"It's too easy to find ways to disagree. It strikes me that a more interesting thing for the art form — and for the planet —
is to look for ways to agree, rather than disagree. At the Improv-Olympic, the principle of agreement is taken even further by the ‘Yes, & . . .’ approach.”

This is, in fact, a major difference between improv and scripted material. Much of drama is based on conflict, but when a playwright is devising the script, the arguments do more than delay action. Performers like Laurel and Hardy could probably perform the exchange about the wrench as written and have audiences rolling in the aisles because of the familiar interactions of their characters, but during an improv, such bickering only delays the furtherance of action.

In the hands of a writer, a disagreement can reveal hidden aspects of characters, aim the scene in a new direction, or convey other valuable information. When two improvisers are on stage arguing, they are only preventing something more interesting from happening.

Fortunately, there is a very simple way for even a first-time player to promote agreement.

**YES, & . . .**

“Yes, & . . .” is the most important rule in improvisation (the corporate name for the ImprovOlympic is “Yes & . . . Productions”). By following this simple rule, two players can build a scene before they know it.

The “Yes, & . . .” rule simply means that whenever two actors are on stage, they agree with each other to the Nth degree. If one asks the other a question, the other must respond positively, and then provide additional information, no matter how small: “Yes, you’re right, and I also think we should . . .” Answering “No” leads nowhere in a scene:

A: Do you want to go to the movies?
B: No.

Even a positive answer is insufficient:
A: Do you want to go to the movies?
B: Yes.

The “Yes, & . . .” rule will lead players to their scene:

A: Do you want to go to the movies?
B: Yes, and let’s go off our diets and eat a lot of greasy popcorn.

OR

B: Yes, let’s sneak out of the house through the basement.

OR

B: Yes — is anybody picketing anything? I feel like counter-protesting.

With “Yes, & . . .” there are an unlimited number of scenic possibilities, and each player continues to supply information.

In this way, one step at a time, each player provides a building block, until they have easily, painlessly, constructed a scene. Answering “Yes, but . . .” stops any continued growth, while a flat “No” erases the block that has just been established.

Construction metaphors aside, this is a very relaxing way in which to work. A player knows that anything he says on stage will be immediately accepted by his fellow player, and treated as if it were the most scintillating idea ever offered to mankind. His partner then adds on to his idea, and moment by moment, the two of them have created a scene that neither of them had planned.

**Agreement is the one rule that can never be broken:** the players must be in agreement to forward the action of the scene.

When improvisers meet on stage, they agree to accept each other’s initiations; they must completely commit to the reality they create for each other without a moment’s hesitation. No matter how much of an improv cliché the line has become, if the first player says, “Well, here we are in Spain,” then everyone on stage accepts that they are indeed in Spain. The next player might say, “Look out for that bull,” and everyone is in the path of a charging bull. And so the scene is built.
Each new initiation furthers the last one, and the scene progresses. The acceptance of each other’s ideas brings the players together, and engenders a “group mind.” Denying the reality that is created on stage ends the progression of the scene, and destroys any chance of achieving a group consciousness.

Denials are taboo in improvisation. Being a good team player means having ethics. One of the best examples of denial in improv occurred during the early days of Second City, when Del and Joan Rivers were in the same company, and it rankled him to this day.

One night during an improvised scene, Joan told Del that she wanted a divorce. Del responded as an emotionally distraught husband might, in the hope of getting her to reconsider. “But honey, what about the children?” She replied, “We don’t have any children!”

Naturally, she got a huge laugh. Naturally, she had completely destroyed the scene.

Rivers’ laugh was at the expense of the scene, and she lost the trust of a fellow player. Her reply was a blatant denial of Del’s initiation that they had children.

(In fairness, it must be noted that Miss Rivers was capable of brilliant scenic improvisation — Joan Rivers is certainly a talented, successful stand-up comic, but stand-up comedy is worlds apart from ensemble work.)

What kind of an improviser goes for the quick joke at the expense of his partner and the scene? Usually someone who is weak, insecure, or egotistical. It is an act of desperation, done to control the scene or to try and look better. A player who chooses this road finds few players will work with him on stage, because they know they will be sacrificed for an easy joke.

When an audience watches improvisers setting each other up with information, supporting each other’s ideas, and furthering the scenes, they see true art in action.

So far, this chapter has devoted itself to the importance of agreement and avoiding conflict. At the risk of confusion, there are ways in which an argument can be presented during an improvised scene.

While disagreement is not interesting, the tension that conflict causes may be. The players can agree to disagree (thus turning it into a game), as long as there is agreement between the players to further the scene. For example, a boxing match is not conflict. It is a fight, but it’s actually a game played under an agreed-upon set of rules. Conflict in a scene between the characters may be used, but the conflict between the players must be avoided.

One of the finest examples of agreeing to disagree is the Monty Python “Argument Sketch,” in which a man enters a room and finds another man at a desk:

“Is this the right room for an argument?”
“I’ve told you once.”
“No you haven’t.”
“Yes I have.”
“When?”
“Just now.”
“No you didn’t.”
“Yes I did.”
“Didn’t.”
“Did.”
“Didn’t.”
“I’m telling you I did.”
“You did not!”
“I’m sorry, is this a five-minute argument, or the full half-hour?”

... And it continues on into a hilarious argument. Obviously the scene is tightly scripted, rather than improvised on stage, but there is a clear-cut game at its core. It uses what
appears to be conflict, but is actually total agreement, to forward the scene through a disagreement game.

GAMES TO TEACH AGREEMENT

Conflict Scenes

One of the first principles taught to students at the Improv-Olympia is that agreement is much more interesting than conflict.

This is done by placing the actors in situations which normally cause conflict on stage. However, they are instructed to make unusual choices, so that the expected conflict will not arise. These unlikely choices lead the scenes in interesting directions that could not have been planned.

However, this exercise is not about conflict. It is actually about agreement, and what develops after agreement is reached.

Conflict is merely the starting point, which leads the players to discover what the scene is about. It is the relationship between the players that makes the scene.

Possible conflict scenes might include “The Arrest,” “The Robbery,” or even “The Last Seat on the Bus.” One example of a conflict scene leading into an interesting relationship was “The Robbery.”

(A woman enters and finds a man in her home.)

WOMAN: Excuse me, what are you doing in my house?

MAN: I'm robbing you.

WOMAN: I don't know that I would have anything that you would want.

MAN: Well, these paintings are exquisite! I can tell they're not originals, but they are worth something.

WOMAN: Thank you. I painted those.

MAN: What? I am impressed! This is incredible work!

WOMAN: I am so flattered — I insist you have it.

As the relationship grows, they continue to share their expertise in the field of art, while she assists him in taking her prized possessions.

Another example of a conflict scene was done by Adam and Rick, portraying a cop chasing a robber. Both actors were running in place, giving the illusion of an officer chasing a thief:

COP: (Panting) Hey — I'm 50 years old and a little overweight. Can we stop and rest for a minute?

ROBBER: (Panting) You're not gonna grab me if we rest?

COP: Promise. Just for a few seconds — on the count of three. One, Two. Three.

(Both stop, heavily panting.)

COP: Boy, this part of my job is murder.

ROBBER: It's my least favorite part, too. But, it comes with the territory. Speaking of territory — this is a pretty tough beat for a 50-year-old.

COP: Yes. Well, experience counts for something. I'm ready — how about you?


(Both start running.)

This scene continued on with the officer and the robber agreeing to stop every few beats, which allowed them to build an interesting relationship — proving once again that agreement in a potentially conflictive situation leads to an unusual choice!

The actors quickly discover that the audience laughs at agreement — a secret of comedy that very few people realize. Audiences aren't used to seeing actors agreeing very often, and
they rarely see people agree to the things improv forces them to agree with!

Audiences at the ImprovOlympic have become quite sophisticated through the years. They respond poorly when they see denials on stage — and a few players are even booed!

**The Ad Game**

This game is a Del Close Special. It teaches several lessons, but it's particularly useful for actors to learn the "Yes, & ..." approach to creating.

Usually played with approximately six or eight actors, the group has five minutes to create an ad campaign for an ordinary product with an unusual quality. For example: cereal that plays music when milk is poured on it.

The group must come up with a name for the product, a package design, a slogan, a spokesperson, and a jingle to create an entire marketing strategy and finished commercial.

Naturally, the only way to do this in five minutes is through complete and total agreement — no negative thinking is allowed. Every idea is accepted enthusiastically and remembered, each step is built off the previous idea. In order to properly brainwash the actors with this theory of acceptance, the director may want to force them to over-accept, screaming "Yes!" "Terrific idea!" "Great!" and other praises of brilliance after each idea is stated. This over-acceptance — particularly of stupid ideas — only makes the game funnier.

Most of the time, the players dramatize the game with lots of pacing, thinking, and enthusiastic shouts of agreement.

The Ad Game also familiarizes actors with important techniques for successfully creating a scene. The first, and most important, is the "Yes, & ..." principle.

Everything is accepted, treated respectfully and, most importantly, used. The other players treat all ideas as if they were their own, and take turns building on them. There is an unspoken agreement between improvisers on stage: "You bring a brick, and I bring a brick. Then together, we build a house. You wouldn't bring in your own entire house and slap it on top of mine. Together, moment by moment, we create a scene."

Since every idea is remembered and used, players shouldn't give more than one suggestion for each topic. One is enough; the first one is always accepted and used — once the product is named, suggesting a second name takes the game sideways. The Ad Game teaches players to go forward. There's no need for a second suggestion, since the group will make the first suggestion work splendidly. In the Ad Game, the word "or" should never be used.

Since all of the workshop exercises are techniques for performance, they inevitably end up on stage in some form or another in Harolds (Of course, sometimes games are slightly amended in a performance situation for a particular Harold theme).

The following game was created by workshop students, based on the suggestion of a dog food that makes dogs talk (These students were clearly trying to test the theory that any idea will succeed).

**AD EXECUTIVE:** We have dog food that makes dogs talk. Now, who are we going to market this to?

**RESPONSE:** Lonely singles.

(*All agree emphatically.*)

**AD EXEC:** Okay, we need a name.

**RESPONSE:** Dinner Companion Dog Food.

(*Shouts of approval*)

**AD EXEC:** Great! We need a slogan.

**RESPONSE:** How about "When you're lonely, feed your dog?"

(*Group praise*)

**AD EXEC:** (Repeating all suggestions so far, so that all is remembered) Okay! Dinner Companion
Dog Food. “When you’re lonely, feed your dog.”
Hmm... how are we going to market this?

RESPONSE: TV!
AD EXEC: Yes! Now, who should we get as spokesperson for this type of product?
RESPONSE: How about the perfect conversationalist — Barbara Walters?

(Screams of delight)
AD EXEC: Perfect! What’s this commercial going to look like?
RESPONSE: I see a candlelight dinner for two. A beautiful table exquisitely set.

OTHERS JOIN IN: And between the two candelabras is a gleaming silver can opener!
— Yes! Seated at the table are Barbara Walters and her dog!
— She is, of course, asking the dog a lot of very personal questions...
— Which he answers with charm and wit!

AD EXEC: Wonderful! Is there music playing?
RESPONSE: Yes! Violin playing “Talk to Me, Like Lovers Do.”

ANOTHER PLAYER: The label of the can will have a picture of a dog dressed in a suit and tie, with a boutonniere in his lapel and bouquet of roses tucked under his paw.

AD EXEC: And above that, the words “Dinner Companion. When you’re lonely, feed your dog.”

Another example was an Ad Game played during a Harold with the theme of “advertising.” The Ad Game was used to show the important role advertising has played throughout history.

The scene takes place between Jesus and his disciples in a brainstorming session for ideas to enhance the number of Jesus’ followers. They immediately agree that rumors of a couple of miracles would be helpful, and agree to say that his mother was a virgin (although some resist this idea, thinking it too unbelievable).

Judas has an idea for a jingle. He sings “Silent Night, Holy Night/We’re gonna rock around the clock tonight.”

All the other disciples laugh and chide him for his musical ideas, especially his earlier suggestion for a musical play called “Godspell.” He becomes angry and storms out. Trying in vain to get Judas to return, Jesus calls out to him, “Come on, Judas, turn the other cheek!”

Peter seizes this opportunity to use Jesus’ statement as their new slogan. “After all,” he says, “It’s so much easier to understand than ‘It is easier for a camel to get through the eye of a needle than for a rich man to get to heaven.’”

All the disciples agree.

Now a spokesperson is needed. Simon shouts, “John the Baptist!”

“Yes,” all agree. “There’s a man with a head on his shoulders.” (The audience groans here set off the Joke Alarm, warning the players not to get too “jokey.”)

In heavy thought, Jesus paces back and forth across the room. He says, “We still need something else. Something big that will sell the crowd.”

Meanwhile, the waitress begins removing the dinner dishes from the table. Noticing that Jesus’ plate is still full, she asks, “Is he finished, or is he coming back?”

In unison, the disciples scream with delight, “HE’S COMING BACK!”

Using the basic idea of the Ad Game, the players rewrote biblical history.