

# **Opening Up Through Vocal Warmup and Improvisation**

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My docent origin story is a little out of left field. I am an actor/improviser — I've been doing it for over 25 years. I teach it as well. One of my favorite theater directors was a docent at the Dallas Museum of Art and I would see her there when I was chaperoning field trips to the museum with my kids. A few years ago, we were doing a show together and she told me they were starting a new docent class and asked if she could recommend me for it. I was a little stunned at first — I have no formal art training. She said she had faith that I could do it so I followed my instincts (which we will talk about later) and took the plunge. It turned out to be one of the most rewarding decisions of my life.

I've learned so much from my fellow docents. I also realized how much of my acting and improv training I use when giving tours, and I wanted to be able to give back to the docent community by imparting some of the things I see as important foundations for a successful tour.

This workshop begins with physical and vocal warmups, then leads into the wonderful world of improvisation.

I won't be able to get through all of this in 50 minutes, so I've created this handout to cover it in more detail. If you have any questions or would like more information on what's covered and the longer workshops I offer, please send me an email.

## QUICK PHYSICAL WARMUP

Deep breaths – close your eyes and have a moment of mindfulness

Reach up as high as you can

Bend over and reach for your toes to your comfort level – slowly roll up

Head Rolls – *be very gentle*

Shoulder Rolls

Shake it out — 5,4,3,2,1 — *Start with your right hand, shake it five times while counting down the shakes out loud – 5, 4, 3, 2, 1. Then do the left hand, then the right foot, then the left foot. Repeat the whole thing counting down from 4, then 3, then 2 and ending at 1. This is also something you can do with your younger tour groups at the beginning if they need an energy boost and you're in a big enough safe space.*

Whatever else feels good! You know your body best and what needs extra love.

## VOCAL WARMUPS

First and foremost, HYDRATE. Make sure you drink plenty of water before your tour and be mindful of drinks that have dairy as they can coat the back of your throat.

### Mouth Exercises

Blow out your lips — *you can do this with or without noise*

Click your clock

Call your horses

Spit out seeds

Pop your P's

Big Face Little Face

Stretch out your tongue

Make big chewing faces

### Alphabetical Consonants Vocal Warm Up

*To get things moving. Vary your inflections and emphasis on different words with each letter.*

Bee Bay Bah Boh Bee Bay Bah Boh Bee Bay Bah Boh Bee

Cee Cay Cah Coh Cee Cay Cah Coh Cee Cay Cah Coh Cee *(said with the S sound)*

Dee Day Dah Doh Dee Day Dah Doh Dee Day Dah Doh Dee

Fee Fay Fah Foh Fee Fay Fah Foh Fee Fay Fah Foh Fee

Gee Gay Gah Goh Gee Gay Gah Goh Gee Gay Gah Goh Gee *(said with a hard G)*

Hee Hay Hah Hoh Hee Hay Hah Hoh Hee Hay Hah Hoh Hee *(feel this sound in the diaphragm)*

Jee Jay Jah Joh Jee Jay Jah Joh Jee Jay Jah Joh Jee

Kee Kay Kah Koh Kee Kay Kah Koh Kee Kay Kah Koh Kee

Lee Lay Lah Loh Lee Lay Lah Loh Lee Lay Lah Loh Lee

Mee May Mah Moh Mee May Mah Moh Mee May Mah Moh Mee *(through the nose)*

Nee Nay Nah Noh Nee Nay Nah Noh Nee Nay Nah Noh Nee *(also through the nose)*

Pee Pay Pah Poh Pee Pay Pah Poh Pee Pay Pah Poh Pee  
Quee Quay Quah Quoh Quee Quay Quah Quoh Quee Quay Quah Quoh Quee  
Ree Ray Rah Roh Ree Ray Rah Roh Ree Ray Rah Roh Ree  
See Say Sah Soh See Say Sah Soh See Say Sah Soh See  
Tee Tay Tah Toh Tee Tay Tah Toh Tee Tay Tah Toh Tee  
Vee Vay Vah Voh Vee Vay Vah Voh Vee Vay Vah Voh Vee  
Wee Way Wah Woh Wee Way Wah Woh Wee Way Wah Woh Wee  
Xee Xay Xah Xoh Xee Xay Xah Xoh Xee Xay Xah Xoh Xee (*said as "ksee"*)  
Yee Yay Yah Yoh Yee Yay Yah Yoh Yee Yay Yah Yoh Yee  
Zee Zay Zah Zoh Zee Zay Zah Zoh Zee Zay Zah Zoh Zee

Plosive work

*Plosives are the hard sounds your mouth makes; P and B come from the front of the mouth, T and D come from the middle and K and G come from the back. Say each one out loud and feel how with each pair the physical placement and sound of the consonants move from the front to the back.*

Puh, puh, puh, puh, puh-puh-puh-puh-puh-puh-puh-puh-puh-puh.  
Pipple pee pee, pipple pee pee, pipple pee pipple pee pipple pee pee

Buh, buh, buh, buh, buh-buh-buh-buh-buh-buh-buh-buh-buh-buh.  
Bibble bee bee, bibble bee bee, bibble bee bibble bee bibble bee bee

Tuh, tuh, tuh, tuh, tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh-tuh.  
Tittle tee tee, tittle tee tee, tittle tee tittle tee tittle tee tee

Duh, duh, duh, duh, duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh-duh.  
Diddle dee dee, diddle dee dee, diddle dee diddle dee diddle dee dee

Kuh, kuh, kuh, kuh, kuh-kuh-kuh-kuh-kuh-kuh-kuh-kuh-kuh-kuh.  
Kikkle kee kee, kikkle kee kee, kikkle kee kikkle kee kikkle kee kee

Guh, guh, guh, guh, guh-guh-guh-guh-guh-guh-guh-guh-guh-guh.  
Giggle gee gee, giggle gee gee, giggle gee giggle gee giggle gee gee

*Now put them all together and repeat 3x – feel the sound moving from front to back*

Puh puh puh buh buh buh tuh tuh tuh duh duh duh kuh kuh kuh guh guh guh guh guh guh

Trinidad

*This is the quintessential vocal warm up. Overenunciate as you recite it. Take your time and have fun with it! Remember to breathe. By the end your vocal instrument should be ready to perform!*

Trinidad! And the big Mississippi and the town Honolulu and the Lake Titicaca  
The Popocatepetl is not in Canada rather in Mexico Mexico Mexico  
Canada Malaga Remini Brindisi  
Canada Malaga Remini Brindisi  
Canada Malaga Remini Brindisi  
YES! Tibet Tibet Tibet

Nagasaki, Yokohama  
Nagasaki, Yokohama

What a to-do to die today at a minute or two to two. A thing distinctly hard to say but harder still to do. For they'll beat a tattoo at twenty to two with a ra-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-ta-too and the dragon will come when he hears the drum at a minute or two to two today at a minute or two to two.

Bee-bah, bee-bah tee tee tee  
Bee-bah, bee-bah tee tee tee  
Bee-bah, bee-bah tee tee tee  
Ssssssss-aaaaaaaaah

Bee-bah, bee-bah tee tee tee  
Bee-bah, bee-bah tee tee tee  
Bee-bah, bee-bah tee tee tee  
Ssssssss-aaaaaaaaah

Aluminum linoleum aluminum linoleum aluminum linoleum aluminum linoleum  
Toy boat, toy boat, toy boat, toy boat  
Red leather yellow leather red leather yellow leather red leather yellow leather red leather  
yellow leather  
Cinnamon synonym cinnamon synonym cinnamon synonym cinnamon synonym  
Unique New York Unique New York Unique New York Unique New York  
Woo woah war wow, woo woah war wow, woo woah war wow, woo woah war wow

## IMPROVISATION

You've probably seen an improv show either in person or on TV. It's the creation of something totally new from either thin air or a suggestion. You may think someone has to be born with the ability in order to be good at it — that's not the case. There are rules and a mindset that make improv easy for everyone if they stay within the parameters. This handout provides a glimpse into the improv world and can be helpful when giving tours, not by making the information up but by creating an open, safe environment where you and your group can collaboratively thrive. I also highly recommend applying this to everyday life.

## EYE CONTACT

You might have thought I would get this party started with the poster child of the improv world: "Yes, And." Don't worry; we will get to that later. For now, let's keep it simple. Eye contact. It's easy to take it for granted and, in this new contact-free world, avoid altogether. Making eye contact can be one of the most difficult parts of beginning improv work. Looking into someone else's eyes for longer than a second creates a powerful connection that can be scary and awkward. But if we want to authentically interact and relate to other people, it's a necessity.

**When we are looking at someone else, focusing our attention on the other, we free up aspects of ourselves that may unknowingly be holding us back.**

We've all experienced moments like this in our lives. If you raised kids, remember back to when you were helping them learn how to walk. When they were attempting to walk towards you, they would look directly in your eyes — completely focused on you. It was instinctual to them. If you've been in a time of crisis or helped someone through theirs, one of the very first things that's called upon is eye contact. It happens onstage as well. When an improviser or actor puts all their focus on the other person or people onstage, they stop thinking about things that could hold them back from being in the moment: the audience, what they're doing with their bodies, what they want for dinner...it all just vanishes.

This is crucial in a tour setting, creating a connection between guide and goer. It will keep you in the moment with your group, gauging their understanding and interest. It also works the other way, when they are participating, letting them know you value their insight.

One of the first exercises I do with an improv class that illustrates the importance of eye contact is called the Name Game. It's super simple: we all sit in a circle, and I begin by turning to the person to my right, looking straight into their eyes and saying my first name loudly and clearly to them. They then turn to the person to their right, look them in their eyes and say their name. It goes like this around the circle until it comes back to me. I then repeat the exercise a few more times, starting with my name and having it go around with everyone else's names in the circle. When I feel like we've done it enough, I'll stop and then go around the circle, saying

everyone's name from memory. I'll then ask for a volunteer to do the same — then another and another until everyone has gone around the circle saying everyone else's name.

It works as an icebreaker and is a good way to introduce ourselves and be able to pronounce everyone's names correctly — but there's so much more to it.

Imagine yourself in this class setting — how you would be on both the receiving and giving ends of the name? Would you stare straight into the person's eyes as they gave you their name, then turn to your right, stare into that person's eyes and say your name with confidence and clarity? I've seen it done so many different ways that I think are totally relatable but ultimately unsuccessful — here are some examples:

1. The apologist — this person usually looks at the person giving their name, then turns to the person on the other side, maybe makes eye contact, and says their name as if they've made a mistake.
2. The class clown — this one cannot WAIT for it to be their turn. They may or may not (most likely not) make eye contact with the person giving their name, then quickly turn to the person on the other side, make eye contact and say their name in a way meant to make the rest of the class laugh. It normally does, mainly because everyone is nervous.
3. The pessimist — this one does not understand the point of the game and therefore cannot wait for it to be over. Their eye contact is maybe 50-50; they take the name given with not a lot of support then quickly throw their name at the person on the other side. The longer I have the game go on, the more impatient the pessimist gets. It can get pretty comical if you find other people's impatience funny, which I do.

There are many others, but these show up the most.

One other thing that usually happens in the game? Most people can't remember the name of the person sitting to their left — the person that tells them their name. Even when eye contact is made. I think it's because they're so busy thinking and worrying about their turn.

It's fascinating to me that it can be so hard for people to look at each other and say their names with confidence. I will say, however, that if I were to repeat this game at the end of the first class, there would be a much more uniform delivery of strong eye contact and happy confidence. It's part of the magic of teaching improv, something that never gets old and keeps me coming back.

*Note: There will be some people who aren't comfortable with eye contact for a variety of reasons. It doesn't mean you shouldn't engage with them; just be mindful and okay with them not engaging back in the same way. They're still most likely listening and processing it all in their own way.*

## VOLUME

In the world of improv, volume is a scene maker or breaker. If your partner onstage can't hear or understand you, the scene will go nowhere. If your tour audience can't hear or understand you, they'll stop trying and their brains will float off into space. Physical and vocal warmup exercises will help with the creation and sustainment of volume. If you can spend 10 minutes doing this before a tour, you will see a difference.

Another thing we often forget about is breathing. I know what you're thinking – we can't forget to breathe!! But we can forget to breathe *well*, especially during a tour. Be mindful of your breathing – you can reset it when your group is doing an exercise or answering a question; you can also take some deep breaths when you're walking from one work to another.

**The key to good breathing is 4-4-8.**

Breathe in for four seconds, hold for four, then breathe out for eight. This can also help in life; if you're ever feeling stressed, panicky or think you're about to say something you might regret later, remember this combination and give it a try.

## LISTENING

This is obvious, I know. But there's something deeper to it.

A lot of times when we think we are listening, we're actually thinking — thinking about what we can say next, what the person speaking looks like, if there's something in their teeth or a stray hair, who just walked in, if we left the oven on...there are a ton of things our brain can do while we are "listening" that actually stop us from genuinely doing just that.

**If our minds are cluttered with random thoughts and fears or focused solely on what is ahead, we have a harder time perceiving what's directly in front of us in the moment.**

You can feel it, too – I know I can when I'm talking to someone and I know deep down they're not really paying attention. And I get it — sometimes we're tired or have a lot on our plate. Sometimes whatever the other person is saying just isn't grabbing us. It's important to be mindful, however. Something is compelling the other person to talk to us, just as something compels us to speak to other people.

Eye contact, as we've already discussed, can help with this. In cases like these when I feel like the other person isn't listening, I also try to remember what we've already talked about –



putting the focus on the other – and ask them if they're okay. Most of the time they have something going on that has nothing to do with me or what I'm saying and are grateful I've noticed.

Another thing that can help us listen with intention, believe it or not, is our body position. And here we've arrived at one of my all-time favorite lessons from improv...

## THE NEUTRAL POSITION

Sounds a little vague and yoga-ish but hear me out.

Picture yourself standing in front of someone. Maybe your arms are crossed, shifting your weight from side to side. What impression is this giving the person you're in front of? Closed off, maybe? Impatient?

Now imagine you're standing in front of the same person with your legs shoulder width apart, soft knees, arms at your side, fully relaxed and facing them. What impression are you giving now? More open, right? Ready to receive. (I love this phrase. *Ready to receive*. When I feel myself drifting off in a conversation or am preparing myself for a tough talk with someone, I use this phrase as a kind of mantra – saying it over and over a few times to keep myself open and in the moment.)

Now that we've considered the impression your body position gives the other person, take it inward and think of what it's doing to you personally. When your arms are crossed, or behind your back, or floundering around because you're not sure what to do with them, you lose your ability to be fully present for whatever the other person is offering. Your body position has left you closed off, maybe lost in self-consciousness, not fully able to listen. The neutral position, however, is “open for business.”

### **Freeing up your body will free up your mind.**

It's also a position of power. Someone seeing you stand this way will have no preconceived idea of what you might be thinking or feeling. This can be helpful in everyday life situations. When I'm in the middle of a tough talk with someone, I try to stay in the neutral position, no matter how much my brain is screaming at my body to protect itself. If I can pair that with my 4-4-8 breathing, I stay calmer and more receptive.

It can be also very useful in public speaking. Think back to times you've been in a meeting or at a talk where the person in the spotlight is unsure about what to do with their hands or pacing incessantly (a friend of mine calls pacing “nonverbal mumbling.”) You eventually lose focus on what they're saying because of all the distractions they're creating with their bodies. But someone standing in the neutral position invites listening and attention. I'm not suggesting

that you stand perfectly still the entire time, just be mindful of movement and hands. Less is more.

## TRUST

You might read this word and immediately think of the team building exercise where people close their eyes and fall back into the waiting arms of their classmates. In improv, we play a game that's a bit different and, I think, has a stronger message.

I have the class form a large circle (the larger the better) around the room facing inward. One person joins me in the middle of the circle and closes their eyes. I then gently and slowly spin them around three times in place. At the end of the third turn, I place my hands on the back of their shoulders and gently send them on their way, having them walk alone around the room at a normal pace with their eyes still closed. When they reach the human boundary forming the circle, whoever is closest gently and firmly places their hands on the walker's shoulders to stop them, turns them around and sends them gently in another direction within the circle. I've repeatedly used the word *gently* on purpose. This exercise can be very scary for some and requires an incredibly gentle hand and perspective. I, as the instructor, always go first to set an example of how it should be done – and to show it's safe.

There are so many lessons to be learned with this exercise – and not just for the person in the middle. But let's start with them.

Walking around the room with our eyes closed can be daunting, and not just because we fear running into something. It's also scary being unable to see what people are doing as they watch you. Are they looking at each other and laughing? Are they making faces? Trying to be funny?

Imagining what others might be thinking about the way you walk or how you're dressed — all these things act as barriers to being fully present in the moment and exercise. This, to me, is a heightened example of the fears we carry in our everyday lives and the barriers we erect before ever even engaging with someone.

**How do you walk around in your world? Are you fully present or are self-conscious thoughts bogging you down and closing you off?**

Being a part of the circle is an exercise as well. Having nonverbal communication lines open with the others forming the circle is key. If the person with their eyes closed is walking in your direction but is heading straight towards the gap between you and the person to your right, what do you do? Who fills the gap? Someone must. This is where eye contact and teamwork come into play.

The people forming the circle are also aware that they will eventually be in the middle. This, hopefully, encourages them to take good care of the person in the middle in the hopes that they will receive similar care. It's the "do unto others" rule that I think is easy to forget in this world of online comments and anonymity. Fighting the urge to pull focus can be a tough lesson for some — but it's an important one. It's tempting for someone forming the circle to make it about themselves during the game, making gestures as the person in the middle walks towards them or pretending not to see them coming in order to get laughs. The environment is very quiet and still, which some people have a tough time with.

Most people I have observed who do try and pull focus (which, as the teacher I immediately nonverbally stop) are the ones who are most tentative when it's their turn to walk around in darkness, their eyes fluttering while closed as if desperately trying to peek and make sure they're safe. They are also some of the last to volunteer to be in the middle. It's a telling moment for them once I gently (again with that word!) put my hands on their shoulders and tell them they're done and they can open their eyes.

So — what does all this mean for the "real" world?

Trusting people can be difficult. I think it's important to think of ourselves as the people making the circle. What can we do to make sure the person in the middle feels safe and protected? Extending your focus outward — making it about the other person — will subconsciously make it easier for you to trust that person as well.

**How are you helping others around you navigate through their world? Are you "filling the gap" and making sure they're safe?**

In a tour environment, trust is integral for the successful collaboration between guide and participants. No one wants to be made fun of for their ideas or opinions. Eye contact, listening with intention and maintaining the neutral position can facilitate this, as will the rest of the topics discussed here. Keep trust in mind while reading further.

## 100% COMMITMENT

In the improv world, we have total commitment — to our partners, the scene, our choices and characters. If we're not 100% committed, the audience will feel it. If you're ever watching a live show (improv, theater, etc...) and you start to mentally drift off or make a grocery list in your head, it usually means the people onstage aren't 100% committed to what they're doing or to each other. The same thing can happen giving tours; I'm sure we have all had times where our minds have drifted and, after a minute, we come back to reality and can't remember how we got to where we are now. It's wild, right??

Surprisingly, what we've already discussed can help. If you're vocally and physically warm, you've already removed some subconscious causes of distraction. Maintaining eye contact will also keep you committed and connected. And again, breathing is magical and will help you focus.

If you realize you've drifted, don't stress or mentally kick yourself. It's okay. We all do it. Let it go, take a breath (always 4-4-8!) and move forward.

If you feel your group drifting, have them take a breath and stretch (if you have enough space around you). Even looking up and down then side to side can be enough to refocus that mental lens and commit to the moment.

One of the key elements of improv is known as the "emotional adjustment," which is a fancy way of saying having a feeling. Everyone has feelings, right? There are so many to choose from!! The key in improv, however, is to commit to these emotions 100%. In the real world, we're raised to keep the negative emotions in check. Chill out, suck it up, don't cry... This, surprisingly, applies to positive emotions as well. When we feel super happy, we get worried that something bad will happen — it's too good to be true — someone will try to take it away from us.

In improv, however, the bigger the emotion the better — which can feel REALLY good. Something remarkable happens when you commit your whole self to an emotion: you stop thinking about yourself. When you're in this moment, you aren't thinking at all. You're just committing. Being. Doing. Possibilities open that weren't there before. If you're working with a partner, having a huge emotional adjustment opens them up as well. It pumps a tremendous amount of energy and spontaneity into them and the scene.

An improv game that helps demonstrate this concept is called Emotional Alphabet. It's like the Name Game; we're all in a circle. This time, however, I turn to the person on my right, make eye contact and say the first letter of the alphabet, "A," loudly and clearly. They receive this, turn to the person on their right, make eye contact and say "B" and so on. Once we've got the gist of this, I then assign an emotion that each person must portray while saying the letter and commit to 100%. I normally start with a powerful emotion like anger to show them just how big you can go; I turn to the person on my right, make eye contact, and in full rage mode say the next letter in the alphabet. They continue around the circle. If I feel like they could commit even more to the emotion, I'll have them say the letter again. It's an incredible experience once they're all committing and coming out of their shells.

Often, people will be so committed to the emotion they will say the "wrong" letter. We may jump from L to S. That's okay in improv, because everything you say in this world is correct, just as everything your partner says is correct, as long as no one denies anything already said or set up. It's a beautiful place to be. We'll talk about this more in upcoming sections.

If we take the commitment idea a step further and think about it as committing to life — committing to events and people and places 100% while we're with them or in them — again, the possibilities are endless. This, of course, requires a lot of the trust we were talking about before, but if you're coming at it from this frame of mind, it's easy.

This is also a good place to talk about impulses. "Follow your instinct" — it's a phrase that's used a lot because it works. In most cases, your first instinct is usually your best. I have led tours where my gut has told me to take them off script and show them something not on the list for that day. Something unexpected and wonderful usually occurs. My energy is also lifted thanks to the sense of adventure and the unknown.

I once had a group of 4<sup>th</sup> graders whose attention was waning, but I noticed that every time they saw an animal, they got excited. So, I pivoted and let them know we would be stopping at works with animals for the rest of the tour. This rejuvenated them and made them more interested in each piece we saw. It also took me on a different route and had me looking for and at pieces in a different way. If I didn't know much about a piece, I would let them know and we would learn about it together.

We all have moments in life that we look back on and wonder why we didn't go with our gut or follow our first impulse on something. Like committing fully to a moment, following your impulse can be scary. What if you're wrong? What if you fail? Which leads me to our next section.

## FAILURE

We have such a hard time with failure. We can be so afraid of failing that we don't even try, or if we do it's tentative to the point of having no chance of even partial success.

Granted, there are some things in life we simply can't afford to fail at — but so many things we can. Let's talk about why we're afraid and why it's necessary to tear down those barriers of fear connected with failing.

Remember back to the trust exercise — all eyes were on the person in the middle. It's a harsh spotlight. I think our fear of failure stems from the feeling we have when we're in the middle with our eyes closed. What will people think if we fail? How will we look? When we're in this position there's a type of tunnel vision that occurs and we think the rewards aren't worth the risk.

But they are.

I'm sure we've all heard it before — we learn from failure. It's a concept that's easy to understand but difficult to embrace. This is especially true in improv.

## **We aren't taught how to fail. I think we should be.**

In a world of filters and ring lights (both literal and metaphorical), perfection is promoted — but how boring is that?? If we all walked around being “perfect,” never making any mistakes...what would be the point?

Life is messy. Instead of pretending it isn't, give that big pile of disarray a huge hug. Jump right in. Try stuff. If it doesn't work or isn't what you expected, so what?? Chances are you had fun trying and learned something about yourself or the world. Maybe it was as simple as gaining a new level of admiration for the people who are good at whatever it is you were attempting.

I love art. At museums I am amazed and inspired by what I see. I also paint. Am I good? My children, when they were little, thought I was. In their teen years not so much. As adults they are kinder, mostly. But I will probably never be exhibited anywhere. Does this mean I'll stop? Nope. I'm going to take a pottery class next year. Do I expect to be great? Definitely not. Am I excited to try? One hundred percent.

We all know that “failure feeling” — the empty pit in the stomach that reaches out like tentacles all over the body. It's the worst. It's also something that can be diminished with a different outlook. If we can flip the script — imagine we are a child who messed up and focus on what we would do and say to help ourselves through the situation, it can dim that spotlight a bit. And if we can remove the imaginary stigma of failing — give it the props it deserves as a productive learning tool, the rebound time will be shortened dramatically. It sounds odd but the next time you fail at something — try to immediately think “yay, I did that!!” and see what happens. Then process it — what did you learn? What would you do next time? And move on.

This applies to tours as well. Everyone has made mistakes on tours; we aren't robots, thankfully. If we've said something incorrect, for example misnaming an artist or work, owning up to the mistake with a positive attitude will increase the level of trust we've already talked about between guide and group.

Especially in these changing times, how we respond to mistakes is important. I have a son who is transgender. He's amazing. The journey hasn't been easy for him and, as his mom, I strove to be the perfect ally. I still make mistakes, however. I use the wrong pronouns for him or his friends, I confuse terms — and he corrects me. Initially I reacted to these corrections with a lot of different emotions — embarrassment, sadness, anger, defensiveness — none of them beneficial to my edification or growth. Realizing this, I began working on my reactions to these mistakes, seeing them as the learning experiences they are and being grateful for my son's patience with me. I would thank him for the correction and ask, if needed, for any clarification.

I believe a similar approach can be taken on our tours. I went on a tour recently in San Francisco. Our guide introduced themselves and said, "if you hear me use a word or phrase that might be outdated and know of a new or better way to say it, please let me know." I thought this was a beautiful way to establish that mistakes might occur and that they were open to learning from them.

## YES, AND

We made it! We're finally here!! Welcome to Yes, And-land!

There's a reason this is the thing most associated with improv – it's the most fundamental rule to remember. It's the oxygen of the improv world; without it, everything dies. It fights against denial. Saying "no" or negating someone's idea may seem like the best or funniest choice to make. Once it occurs, however, the scene has nowhere to go. It also diminishes trust onstage.

Going back to our improv class, the Yes, And game is straightforward – I have two people face each other, maintaining EYE CONTACT and staying in the NEUTRAL POSITION. These two things will quickly be abandoned but we'll go into that in a bit.

I then have one person start with a simple statement. It can be anything – "I have curly hair." "The bus was late today." "My foot hurts." I prefer they start with statements about themselves to keep it simple, but honestly anything works. The person facing them responds with "yes, and..." and adds a piece of information to their opening sentence that will forward the conversation along. Here's an example:

Person One: I have curly hair.

Person Two: Yes, and your curly hair is also red.

*Person two took what person one said, agreed with it, and added to it. Person one now takes person two's sentence and adds onto it.*

Person One: Yes, and the red hair comes from my Irish heritage.

*And on we go with person two building on this.*

Person Two: Yes, and your grandparents emigrated from Ireland after the war.

Pause.

How did person two know this? Does person two know person one?? Are they PSYCHIC???

Probably not if it's a new class. We've reached another wonderful aspect of the world of improv:

## THE EXPERT ADJUSTMENT

When you're in the world of improv, you know EVERYTHING. You have all the answers and information because you know it all. Your fellow improvisers know everything as well. It's a world of omnipotent geniuses.

So, even though person two doesn't know person one, they do. And vice versa. Person one's grandparents in the real world may not have emigrated from Ireland after the war but in the improv world, they did because person two said it. Anything is possible.

The game can go on like this forever and will become organically funny as the story they create unfolds, but it's harder than it looks. Let's go over the places where people stumble – that's where learning occurs (yay, FAILURE!) and where we can apply it to real life.

- Abandoning eye contact

When we're thinking about something, a lot of times we look off into space for the answer. I'm not sure where it comes from, for some reason we think it'll help us. People playing this game do it as well, even when they're being mindful about eye contact. They'll receive the sentence from the person in front of them, making eye contact the whole time, then immediately break it off and look up, down, to the side, anywhere but in the person's eyes to find what to say next. And it never works.

### **The answer can always be found in the other person's eyes.**

That sounds so hokey – like we've veered into romance novel territory. But it's real. If you can keep that connection the whole time, there won't be a need to search. The answer will be there. There is a huge amount of TRUST formed with this connection. You're not alone; your focus is on your partner, in their eyes. You're not thinking about yourself or who is watching – hopefully you're not really thinking at all. Just playing the game in the moment. Fully COMMITTED.

- Dropping the neutral position

This can go away before the game even starts. Facing someone in the neutral position can feel odd at first – almost like you're naked in front of them. We feel like we must protect ourselves somehow and boom – arms cross, arms go on hips, arms go behind us. Anything but down at our sides. Throw in having to play the game and the subconscious brain sends the body into overdrive. The neutral position is lost.



## Open body open mind.

This too goes back to TRUST. As helpful as it seems your body is trying to be, you don't need it and it won't work. Crossed arms or hands on hips may feel comfortable but they're a roadblock to being fully open to your partner and the moment.

Picture it as an invisible energy loop that goes from your eyeballs into their eyeballs then down through their body, across the floor, into your feet and up your body to your eyeballs and so on. The neutral position allows this energy to flow freely.

Let's think about this from a touring point of view. It can be so scary, standing in front of people. If you can focus on this loop – having a neutral position and making eye contact with people in your group, it will take your mind off yourself and onto them.

- Yes, But

This usually occurs when one of the people playing wants to take the story in a different direction. I get it – sometimes we get great ideas and think they'll be better than what's happening. In this game, however, and in improv in general, "yes, but" is a scene killer. A friend of mine says to think of "but" as "behold the underlying truth," meaning whatever you said was wrong and I'm about to tell you what's right.

When touring, this happens as well. There are times when people ask questions or have comments that can veer us off course. It's tempting to "yes, but" to get back to what we usually say or do. I highly recommend not doing this. If we can play "yes, and," remembering our 100% COMMITMENT to the moment and our embracement of FAILURE as being ok, who knows where this unexplored path could lead and what you could learn from it to add to future tours?

So – there you have it. There's much more in the world of improv, and I encourage you to seek it out. These are the basics I use to keep myself open and hopefully make my tours a fully collaborative adventure. I'm including some improv-based games I've played with people on my tours on the following pages. I also, as I've said, highly recommend incorporating this into your everyday life as well. Thanks for participating!!

## GAMES TO PLAY ON TOURS

### Releasing Energy/Centering

5, 4, 3, 2, 1 which we've already gone over – just make sure there's a lot of space

Any type of stretching – reaching up to the sky and releasing down to your toes, gentle neck and shoulder rolls, having them stretch their arms forward as far as they can (this will also help reinforce how much distance they should keep between themselves and the pieces).

### Who am I

This is to help explain/expand on portraits – we look at the work and I have them see what's beyond the person that's helping tell the story; what else is in the piece? Then I have them draw a picture of themselves with 3-5 things that help tell who they are. I get a range of things from footballs to video games to pets to food – the possibilities are endless!

### Character Creation

This works well for cityscapes or landscapes. Once the group has looked at the work, invite one or more people up. Have them face the group. Let the group know these people live in the place portrayed in the work. Ask the group to give each person a name and a job, then interview each person. Here's an example from a piece at the DMA:



*Murnau, Burggrabenstrasse 1, 1908, Wassily Kandinsky*

The group has given one of the people the name Henry with the occupation baker. I would say something like “Hello, Henry! Thank you for letting us come to your bakery! Do you like your job? Why or why not? What's your favorite thing to bake? Which one of these buildings is your shop in?” and so on. If the group seems into it, you can have them ask some questions as well.

### How are you feeling



*The Icebergs, Frederic Edwin Church, 1861*

I have one person up and facing the group. They're the explorer. I ask the group to give suggestions of how the explorer is feeling – the explorer acts them out as they're suggested. Some examples I've gotten – cold, scared, hungry, excited and proud.