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## The Edge of Spontaneity: An oral history of New York long form improv

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## **Cover Page Footnote**

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An oral history of New York long form improv



By Colleen Goodhue

## Description and Acknowledgements

This is an oral history project, a collection of seven interviews conducted in October and November of 2017 of improv performers who live in New York City. These interviews have been edited for clarity and space.

I want to offer a sincere thank you to the interviewees for this project, for their time and for sharing their stories, thoughts, and opinions.

I would also like to thank Drs. Myrna and Harvey Frommer for their guidance throughout this process.

Lastly, I want to thank my partner Dave for his endless love and support and his gift for feedback.

## Introduction:

Improv is...

*A live theatrical performance without a script. Spontaneous. Created on the spot. Only happens once.* – Kevin Scott

It can happen anywhere; a proscenium staged theater, the basement of a bar, a fluorescent lit office space, in a car, on a cruise ship. And since at least the mid-1990's, it has been happening in New York.

Some theaters and training grounds have come and gone, some are facing the currents of change, and doubtless new ones will spring up. Students become performers who become coaches and teachers. Styles and formats will change, but through these interviews we see what lasts: passion, freedom, and creativity.

## CAST OF CHARACTERS (in order of appearance):

## Kevin Scott

Improviser and educator. Studied improv in Chicago before moving to New York in 1995. Member of improv groups Bang Bang, Burn Manhattan, and Centralia.

## Geoff Grimwood

Improviser and educator. Trained in Chicago and moved to New York with his girlfriend and young child in 2005.

## Frank Angellini

Improviser and educator. Native New Yorker. Founder of the Queen's Secret Improv Theater and performer at *Batsu!*

## Rachel Rosenthal

Improviser and educator. Boston-based improviser who moved to New York and joined the hip hip comedy team North Coast.

## John Timothy

Improviser and educator. Member of the UCB house team The Curfew.

## Philip Markle

Improviser and educator. Founder of The Annoyance New York.

## Marina Reydler

Actor and student of improv and musical improv. Member of the indie team Nigel's Many Lovers.

## KEVIN SCOTT

I was a kid in March of '78. My parents were watching *Saturday Night Live* and they woke me up. They said, "John Belushi just changed his name to Kevin Scott. You gotta come down here." John Belushi changed his name on *Saturday Night Live*, because the name "John Belushi" wasn't commercial enough. So as a kid with that name, something happened in my brain where I thought, *Oh, this is important*. I had wanted to be a scientist, but Belushi became an important person in my life just because he chose my name randomly, because it sounded like a movie star name and two episodes in a row his name was "Kevin Scott," even in the opening credits it said "Kevin Scott." It was crazy. When the book "Wired" [by Bob Woodward] came out a few years after and I read it mostly because it's like *That's me*. And it was great to see my name in print because they talk about that episode.

And then in that book they talk about Del Close and the Second City and taking classes and then I got to "Something Wonderful Right Away [: An Oral History of the Second City and the Compass Players" by Jeffrey Sweet] and the book, "The Compass" by Janet Coleman. I found those books and read them and they had all these wonderful stories about improvisers and improv and they all lead to Chicago.

In the summer I worked in the entertainment department at Sesame Place<sup>1</sup> and a bunch of us were like, "Let's go to Second City!" We actually went to visit Chicago just to check it out and to see the Second City Shows. I saw [Chris] Farley in one of his last shows and Tim Meadows was in that show. Jill Talley who went

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<sup>1</sup> A theme park outside of Philadelphia, PA

on to *Mr. Show*<sup>2</sup> and married SpongeBob SquarePants<sup>3</sup>. And David Pasquesi! It was an amazing cast and I saw them and was like, *This is my home. This is where I need to be.* So like went back home after that trip, packed up everything, we rented a van and moved to Chicago.

I was in Chicago for five years and had an improv group there. But then a whole bunch of people were moving to New York. It was a mass exodus. Some got jobs at *Saturday Night Live*. It was when Adam McKay was hired and Dana Carvey was starting his show around this time. Nancy Walls, who we went through the classes together around the same time, got hired by *Saturday Night Live*.

My friend Todd Stashwick and I basically having lunch and were like, "Why don't we go to New York? Everyone else was going." And he had just auditioned for *Saturday Night Live* and got as close as you can get without getting the job, like was on the stage, met Lorne, everything like that. I think it was my second day in New York, we were in the Writers' Room just hanging out with buddies we knew and I was like *Oh, this is the best*, same feeling I had in Chicago. Now I'm here going *Oh, this is where I need to be.* Have not been in that Writer's Room since (laughs) Total fluke but it really was an experience.

We lived on 50th between like 9th and 10th when Hell's Kitchen was still Hell's Kitchen, still a little dicey. You'd still see prostitutes and drug dealers. The internet hadn't quite killed the live porn industry and it was a little sketchy, but it also felt

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<sup>2</sup> An HBO sketch comedy show from the mid-to-late '90s and was revived in 2015

<sup>3</sup> Jill married Tom Kenny, the voice of the cartoon character SpongeBob SquarePants

incredibly exciting. It felt like New York. Coming from Chicago, New York was the big city.

When we moved there in late 1995, early 1996, the comedy scene was three drink minimum, two drink minimum places you know where they churn over the audience, hoping to get a lot of tourists. The stand-up boom was over and the alternative comedy thing was just starting. The alternative room was like "Do you guys have sketches? Some kind of crazy bit? Where one of you is in the audience pretending to be a heckler?" We were new in town. We were experimenting with long form<sup>4</sup>, like it was still kind of newish. We didn't even have the term 'long form,' it was just improvised plays. We were trying to do something that was different in terms of tone, like not "Joke joke joke joke joke," but let's try to be a little more serious and a little more dangerous.

There was this space on Ludlow Street, like a basement theater. We got to perform midnights there, but we were doing Friday and Saturday midnights on the Lower East Side in the basement and there'd be a line down the block and it was amazing, that feeling like you're a part of something exciting. Our group was called Burn Manhattan and there was just us and the Upright Citizens<sup>5</sup> who had just come to town. It was just really exciting to feel like we were part of something that people hadn't seen before. They hadn't seen long form improv in New York and we just happen to be bringing it. Right place, right time, kind of thing.

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<sup>4</sup> Long form improv tends to be more of an improvised play, while short form improv tends to be based on games.

<sup>5</sup> The Upright Citizens Brigade was an improv troupe that also emigrated to New York from Chicago. Among others, it included Matt Besser, Amy Poehler, Ian Roberts and Matt Walsh.

People loved it. We got this review that was in the New York Daily News that said it was “the purest form of theater” and we were like *that's the review we want*. They got it. You know? Because we were highly theatrical.

You know it's an art form and we have to be actively engaged in the art. We have to be exploring stuff. We have to be trying to say something or discover something. And if we're not doing that why are we doing it? Just go home and watch Netflix, right? It's gonna way more exciting than phoning it in. I mean *Stranger Things* Season Two is phenomenal right?

I don't know why I still do it. And that, that question comes up mostly because it's my occupation, as well as my vocation. And it's a very hard business. Show business in general. I can eke out a meager living, but I'm married with a child and I have responsibilities and the question is - why am I still doing this? Away from having to earn a living, it's a form of therapy. It's so much fun. It's my social life. And it's also something I am very good at. I can say that objectively. I'm a very good improviser, because I've been doing it so long. I have muscles that come into play that I don't even have to think about anymore. I don't think about what could make this scene interesting. I'm ten steps ahead of a beginning improviser. And that feels great to just be good at something.

I think improv is professional pretending without a script and long form is like improvising a one act play that is not necessarily a linear narrative. Or it can be more thematic exploration, you're exploring a theme and not necessarily a linear narrative, but something that's more abstract. It's a live performance, traditionally comedic, without a script. A live theatrical performance without a script. Spontaneous. Created on the spot. Only happens once.

It's funny, because around the time that I was discovering theater and the arts, while doing plays and musicals and improv, I wanted to be a filmmaker. I think at that time in the culture filmmaking was the Steven Spielberg's and maybe a little later the Quentin Tarantino's and I was really drawn to that and that's the opposite of what I do. In film, everything's recorded and it's in a time capsule and I feel reverence for those things that are permanent. Great works of literature and stuff like that. And yet I love doing stuff that vanishes and I haven't reconciled that for myself yet.

But improv for improv's sake is special. It's very, very special and it's very disposable and it took me awhile to be okay with it. To be okay with the fact it wasn't recorded and only these fifteen people saw it or, on a good night, a hundred people saw it and they'll talk about it forever and they'll remember it. I really get excited by when people come up to me and say "Remember that show where you were Kyle the Llama?" and I have no idea what they're talking about. And I love that. I love the fact that it vanished for me, but for them it's permanent. That's pretty cool. Yes, a big part of me, the ego part of me wants everyone to have seen that scene. That set should have been a movie that the whole world got to see, but I know that's me wanting to be special and to get past my own mortality. It still bothers me that it vanishes, but I've made peace with some part of it that like if it's special to somebody it's not gone. It's not erased.

It does not translate to video and it's infuriating. It's a way of recording it for the performers to be able to remember what moves they did or what worked and what didn't work, but it does not translate. We've tried. We've tried many times. We've brought in three cameras. We've tried to shoot it like a rock concert. Tried to have

cameras on the stage. We've even done it 360 where we had a 360 camera on the middle of the stage. Just doesn't translate.

It's something about being in the room. There's just that nervousness and anticipation in the room especially with improv where it's like you know the audience is thinking to themselves, *This could go terribly wrong. This might not end well for anyone*, and so it's thrilling when it is a success. It's thrilling when it does work. And you have to be in the room.

You can fast forward or rewind a video and it's already done so there's no risk. Why do people love sports? I know people watch old games but it's not the same as like "Are the Yankees gonna win tonight?" It's that thing and the tribal community thing about it. It's why we need to be together in a room with that sense of risk, right? So we can survive? It's maybe like watching a horror of like *phewph* we almost bit it that time. I think improv has an element of that, like driving a race car that might crash.

## GEOFF GRIMWOOD

In high school, I had done like a few plays and really loved it. It made me very happy. And then I left high school and didn't really do any more theater or anything of any kind. Not much of a self-starter. So I kind of just sat around and thought about it a lot and I just missed it the whole time. And then several years later people started encouraging me to stop talking about it and do something. But I had dropped out of college and I didn't really feel qualified to like show up at like a

theater full of what I presume were actors with degrees and audition. It seemed like like just the most disrespectful and laughable thing to do to show up.

And then right around that same time there was a big article in the *Chicago Reader* about improv and about Improv Olympic<sup>6</sup> specifically. And in it Charna made a very big point in multiple places to say that improv is not for like professional performers. They want regular people to come and do it and enjoy it. I think, *Cool. That seems like permission.* So I went and signed up for a class. I went through classes at IO for a year, was put on a house team after that and then basically did improv very intensively. I'd usually had at least one improv thing six nights a week for about three years from 2002 to to 2005. It was great.

Then me and my girlfriend Jenny got pregnant and I followed her to New York so she could finish her undergrad at Columbia. I took classes at the PIT<sup>7</sup>, then was on house teams and then got into teaching and coaching. On the first day of class I ask my class, “When you hear the word ‘improv’ what do you think? What comes to mind?” and they usually say *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*<sup>8</sup> Comedy. Spontaneous. Making it up. Scary.

Great. All those things apply. It generally ends up being funny. Improv is always listed in the comedy section of the newspaper and *Time Out* magazine. But really,

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<sup>6</sup> Improv Olympic is a renowned and influential improv theater and training center in Chicago, opened in 1981 by Charna Halpern and Del Close.

<sup>7</sup> The People’s Improv Theater a New York improv theater and training center founded in 2002 by Ali Farahnakian.

<sup>8</sup> An improv comedy television show that ran from 1998 to 2007 and was revived in 2013. It features short form improv games and is the point of reference for improv for many people.

strictly speaking, it's a form of theater. The only real the real distinguishing difference between improv and regular theater is that we don't have the script. And so that changes everything about how we approach it, because in a regular theater you have a script so you know what needs to happen, in what order, and you can get all the things you need to help you make those things happen. If you know there's going to be a scene in the jungle and there's a swordfight in the castle and then a shuttle trip to the moon then you can build a jungle set and you can build castle sets and get some swords and train a sword fight and then build a space shuttle set and program some lights to make it look like you're going into space. You can learn all your lines and you can learn the dialogue and you can learn the set moves in the blocking. Then on the day of the show you have all these things you were able to prepare to help you because you knew what was going to happen.

With improv, we don't have any of that because we don't know what's going to happen. We don't know if we'll be in a jungle or a castle or a space shuttle or a mountaintop or a classroom or anything. We don't know it's going to be. And so rather than bring all of the props in the world and all of the sets in the world and just switch between them really quick, we don't bother with props and we don't bother with sets. We don't bother with any of that.

**It's a lot like dunking  
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universe**

Instead, everything in improv becomes about learning to use the only two things that you do have when you step on that stage. And those things are yourself and your teammate. Everything we're going to do here in improv is about learning to make the best and the funnest possible use of those two things. That's what I tell them first.

We've all shown up in this room which is an empty room you know in some rental space to play pretend with a bunch of grownups we haven't met until right now. That inherently is like a little weird and super awesome, but we all showed up here to do that.

When you step into the improv space like on the stage or even in the classroom were you like get up and you're going to do a thing. It's a lot like dunking your whole self into the raw stream of creative energy of the universe. Really, there's nothing really like it. And like thrills per minute ratio is way higher in improv than in a lot of other kinds of performance or theater.

Whether you're doing your very first class show or you know like the seventh week of your house team that nobody really pays any attention to, that is one hundred percent as much of 'doing a show' as it is to do it in front of a huge audience at some beautiful theater. You're still stepping out there. No idea what you're going to do and just trust that something going to happen.

## FRANK ANGELLINI

I do this show called *Bastu!* which is a Japanese punishment improv game show. It's essentially a short form game in the context of a *batsu* game show<sup>9</sup>. So we play short form games and if we aren't funny, we get punishments like getting shot with paintball guns at close range or they take a six-foot rubber band and put it around

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<sup>9</sup> *Batsu* refers to the punishments received in competitions on certain Japanese comedy variety television shows.

your waist and snap it. It's also like a show with a fair amount of drinking going on so I cannot stomach food in the morning. Some of the punishments are worse than others. But the worst one by far is at the end of the show we do impressions and if the audience doesn't like them we get zapped. If we tie in impressions at the end, to heighten the electricity element, they bring out an actual stun gun like the kind that's like *zzzt! zzzt!* It looks like a cattle prod almost. And that thing is levels above. You feel it like an hour after you get hit. So we almost never tie because it's like usually not worth it. It's like, "This audience isn't that into. Somebody throw this."

I was majoring in criminal justice and journalism. After 9/11 happened, I just reappraised my life. I dropped out of college and it was like you know I always wanted to do comedy. I grew up in New York so I just kind of took it for granted that it wasn't a realistic possibility. And I was like *You know, fuck it. I'm going to move back home and take a stab at it.* So I started doing stand-up which I always thought I was going to love and I hated, hated, hated it. I was telling a friend the reasons why I hated doing the same thing over and over again. It feels false. And he was like, "Well it sounds like you should maybe try taking improv class." And I don't even really know what it was at the time. I knew *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* That was what improv was to me. I ended up taking a class at Magnet<sup>10</sup> and I just fell in love with it like instantly. I went through the levels at Magnet pretty quickly within two years. I was on a house team there. Got cut from that team and ended up taking classes at UCB<sup>11</sup> to continue on with it.

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<sup>10</sup> The Magnet Theater is a New York improv theater and training center founded by Armando Diaz in 2005.

<sup>11</sup> UCB Theater is a New York improv theater and training center founded by the troupe The Upright Citizens Brigade in 2005.

I remember my first laugh. I was in Magnet Level 1. It was our first week and we were playing the game “Conducted Story” where the teacher points at somebody and they start telling a story and then he points to someone else and you pick up exactly where they left off. It's kind of telling the story together. We're telling a story about like summer camp and at some point they were talking about hobbies. “And then he learned how to tie a rope and tie knots.” “And then he learned how to swim.” “Only he didn't learn macramé.” And then the point went to me and I don't know why, but I just said, “Because macramé, it was very shameful.” And it got a huge laugh and I was like I didn't even try. Like I just said whatever popped into my brain like I was told to do. And I realized I don't even really have to actively try to be funny like you do in stand-up, which was part of what I hated about it. I really like enjoy this. And you know there are obviously ups and downs, but I got that first laugh.

I auditioned for this short form show that I saw an ad for and it was staged here at the Secret Theater. It was a production company called the eGarage and their model was like they were going to be a production company and they were trying to produce web content and one of the shows they wanted to do was the short form show. So I got cast in that and was doing a show here like once a week and we were filming it *yadda yadda yadda*. But the business model for this production company was really atrocious. They were just hemorrhaging money. So they end up starting a long form night. They existed for about a year and then all of a sudden it was just like we're going out of business. It's all over. And the owner of the production company basically was like, “Hey, if you want to do the improv night, it is actually successful, you know go right ahead. But we're out of here.”

So I was like OK sure. I rebranded it The Queen's Secret Improv Club and started out with one night a week of shows and by the time we closed we were doing six nights a week of shows, so it was like a full boat, you know.

My original model was pretty ambitious. My idealistic version of it was going to be a place where people could have a membership and it would have more like a social club vibe. So anybody who had a membership could come see shows for free. All performers would be members and those dues would also kind of sustain us because as we all like it's hard to sell tickets for improv shows. What it ended up becoming was more of like a collective where people were paying dues that were pretty reasonable to sustain the night. And yet each kind of night had a different kind of arrangement.

So I had a partner named Athos who was like my Assistant A.D.<sup>12</sup> and we took control over different nights. Our main night was Friday which was like our house rosters. Those were teams that I was curating. Then we started our Thursday night show which was all indie<sup>13</sup> teams. That got filled up and I was like, "Hey maybe we could do a Wednesday night?" so we did a Wednesday night. Then it was like *what can we do Saturday?* and Saturday night became a whole musical night which, again like was the only musical night in the city. We had open mics and a variety of shows. We had teams hosting their own shows. Some nights it was like three people were in the audience and sometimes it was like 40 people.

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<sup>12</sup> Artistic Director

<sup>13</sup> "Indie teams" are short for independent teams. These are opposed to "house teams", which are a resident teams at a theater, something that is usually auditioned for.

We ran for three years. And we closed. When we closed we were doing as well as we ever did. In the first year, the hurdle was getting people to come here to Queens, but then people started to realize it's super easy to get here. Then it started to build steam. Then people started to see, *oh like they're bringing in good work bringing good teams* and I think we we sold the idea to the performers and they believed in it. So when we closed we were doing great. We had to close was because there was a leasing issue with the building and the theater lost the lease to the spot. So we basically just kind of got like legal-ed out.

When I had started at the Magnet, I quickly became aware that in New York, there was kind of this very political view of all the different theaters. I would often hear people like talk smack about UCB like it's all they care about is “game”<sup>14</sup>. Then I actually believe that for a long time, because you believe what you hear. When I finally got out and took a class and UCB was like, *Oh wait, you know I think there's definitely some truth to what people are saying, but it's certainly not like all that they built it up to be*. So I couldn't understand why different theaters had so much animosity towards each other. Then when I started running an improv theater that was bringing in performers from all over, I noticed that even more it was like nobody from the PIT knew anybody from the Magnet and nobody from the Magnet knew UCB people. And I think that is a detriment to the improv scene here because it starts to become homogenized. It's like if you only see this UCB style of improv how do you know what else is possible? And how do you start to come up

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<sup>14</sup> In another interview John Timothy describes this concept, “I can give you the textbook definition where ‘game’ is a repeatable pattern of unusual behavior that exists in contrast to the expected every day normal pattern of life.”

with your own voice and style? And I think that's a real hurdle for people's growth in improv.

Because of the way QSIC nights were structured it would be like two UCB teams and a PIT team and a Magnet team. So they started to see like, *I've never met these people. I've never seen these people.* People made friends here that transcended whatever school they went to and now they're really good friends working on projects together. And I think it was really good like for the scene as a whole.

I can remember mortifying moments. One of the worst for me personally for me was in a *Batsu!* show. We do this one game called Household Olympics and what it is is you have two guys who are going to be playing athletes and you get a suggestion of a household activity and two guys are going to commentate on what's going on.

So the event starts and the athletes are moving in slow motion and like let's say the activity is mopping. You do this activity in slow motion and then at some point one of the performers is going to like attack the other guy in some way with whatever household equipment they have and you announce it.

So I was playing the role of an announcer. And you have to name the competitors, give them a country of origin, and a nickname. One of them was American so I named the one guy, let's say it's mopping, you know it's like Mike "Swiffer" Jones and his competitor from Japan. And then I'm like, *Oh...I know so many Japanese names...*, but I went blank. So I said, "The competitor from Japan is Morimoto Naga-". And then like I said Naga.... I was thinking like Naginan or something like that but my brain just said "Nagasaki." And the audience was like (*groaning*).

And I was like, *Oh my God, what did I just say?* and the host who is half-Japanese just looks at me like *what?!* you know I'm like I've never felt my whole face turn red. And then after the show the host comes up to me and he's like, "Dude!" I was like, "I know man like I just said the sound and the other sound came out. As I was saying it my brain is like *No!*" And he goes like, "Just to break that down though, that's, like, the name Morimoto is a last name and then Nagasaki is a district so that's like naming somebody 'Smith 9/11'."

And that screwed me up for months in that game. Any time it came time to name somebody I would like freeze, because I would remember that moment of like just complete shame and embarrassment.

And that was one of the biggest failures I've ever had, but it's just like, *Hey, that sucked for anybody who saw me do that.* But there was only 50 people there. It's an improv show like there's so much else going on in the show that it's like a blip on the radar. We always magnify our own failures onto ourselves a million times more. There are learning moments and I think that is my worst one for sure.

So many shows are kind of *meh*. I think like most improv shows are like they're serviceable you know and then you've got your real bad ones and you got real good ones. And it's also rare that one was amazing. But that's I think that's what we're always chasing. And like the way I look at it is if you're not chasing the really, really great shows, you're never going to get there. But by chasing the really great, the risk for like real big failures is just greater because you're taking bigger risks. So yeah that's kind of key is like you need to be willing to fail big if you want to succeed big.

One of the best shows ever was as a QSIC show. I ended up playing with an indie team called Jacob's Parting Gift, which was me and three wonderful women. And we had a show where we did kind of an organic style. Our opening was like a bunch of just random stuff that we would do.

We'll live on the edge of spontaneity.

It's so hard to describe improv things, but basically the premise was like, in the scene somebody was like, "Oh man, this is like in Happy Days when Fonzie jumped the shark." And that got a big laugh, so I was like, *Oh this is a good moment to edit*<sup>15</sup>. So I was like, "We see a shark going jump out water. Flying through the cosmos into infinity. All of a sudden Vishnu is there with six arms." Then like my teammate came out and we were like kind of scene painting actively this transition of like this shark jumping out from one scene into another and all the things that we were kind of hitting with the cosmos and all that was like stuff that we had laid down before in the show.

And it was one of those moments where it was just like you could feel like everybody was like *What the fuck?! This is blowing my mind!* Even while we were doing it, we realized it was just like one of those moments where it was like both artful and cinched all these extra details around and to me like that's the style of improv I like. What I like is being so free that like you can do things that are like crazy because your teammates are prepared to roll with it and you know we're all going into this unknown cosmos together. Like we'll live on the edge of spontaneity. That's where the most exciting work comes.

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<sup>15</sup> "Edit" means to do something physical, auditory or visual that indicates a change in scene.

## RACHEL ROSENTHAL

After college I moved to Boston and when I got there I was like working my first ever job, totally miserable and needing a creative outlet. I googled “Boston” and “improv” and I found this theater Improv Boston, which I literally went in and I was there for nine years. I was on their first ever sketch team. I directed their first ever sketch team. I was on various improv teams there and then I moved up into the main stage group which performed twice every Saturday night and it was just like a really amazing experience and while I was there, I always had a day job.

I was speaking to a woman who I worked with at the time. She was Polish and she was saying how people in the United States always ask "What do you do?" and she's like "My job isn't who I am." And I asked "Well, what do you talk about in Poland?" She's said, "I don't know, how many siblings do you have? What are your passions?" I just started thinking about that. I had this moment of realization that after many years I was like, *Oh I'm actually very good at this and this doesn't have to just be a hobby. This is more of who I am then my day job is.* And I made this decision to stop saying, “I'm a web developer, but I do comedy on the side” and I started to say, “I'm a comedian, but I do web development on the side” and that was a nice switch of mind for me.

So I moved to New York to continue doing comedy, do it on a different level and have a change in my life. In Boston, I felt like I got as high as I could go in the improv community there, but it was really hard to leave because I had an amazing theater that did very high quality stuff. I had a show whenever I wanted. I was very

comfortable and I was single and I asked myself, "Is this it? Is this where I am forever?"

North Coast kind of found me in like first month here. My artistic director from Improv Boston Will Luera reached out to this musical improv team Veal and was like "you should have Rachel sit in with you." So I went to a rehearsal and James Robilotta, who started North Coast, was also sitting in and he was like "Hey, you're good. Do you rap?" and I was like "When I'm drinking!" and then we went across the street to a bar and I was drinking and sort of rapping in the bar and then he invited me to a rehearsal (*laughs*).

So North Coast is New York City's premiere long form hip hop improv comedy team, but we take long form improv comedy, live beatboxing, and live freestyling and then we mix it all together into a show. We work with literally the world's greatest beatboxers, our beatboxers are nationally ranked, internationally ranked, the best, best, best, best. They're amazing. We're kind of the first group of it's kind doing that. We started having weekly shows and then got a monthly show at the PIT and over the years it just has gone from indie improv team to professional improv team. We have a manager. We tour. We do gigs. We get paid for our work. We teach classes and we just last week did an Off-Broadway run of one of our special shows that we're workshopping right now so it's just like been really amazing to see us grow from this indie team into this real thing.

The show is called *Anybody* and it's kind of a *Hamilton*-esque style show. We take the sort of tenets of what we do in our regular hip-hop improv show, but we tell a narrative story based on a historical figure that the audience provides. So like we'll

do - we did like Amelia Earhart. We've done Thomas Jefferson. We've done Gandhi. Whatever we get.

We interview the audience. [The audience shouts out a suggestion of a name]. So we're like, "Okay great, I heard Amelia Earhart. Now all of us here at North Coast, we're Amelia Earhart experts, but just for people in the audience who aren't as familiar, what was she famous for?" And people just add in from the audience. People just know a lot of stuff and if there is a figure that people don't know a lot about we just encourage the audience to take out their phones and look it up. They kind of fill in the bullet points for us and we fill in the blanks based on that.

When we did Amelia Earhart, it was like a life changing show. It was in October or so of 2016, maybe the month before the election. We were doing this show that's both funny and poignant and smart. The whole thing with that show is it's like humor and heart. We were doing this show about a feminist and it was just so powerful and incredible. There was a moment on stage where - I'm getting teary just thinking about it - it was like this amazing moment where my friend Katie, who's a huge feminist, is playing Amelia Earhart, and Doug and I were playing the women of the future trying to tell Amelia that she's gotta push through. I was Hillary Clinton and he was Maya Angelou and we were like "You have to do this for us!" We were singing this song, "You could set the precedent/and you could run for President/Anything could happen/And it's all because of you!" Katie and I were both crying on stage. It was just this amazing magical moment and it was such a cool show. And that was last year and that was a show that I think about all the time.

We did Gloria Steinem recently and we also did Lincoln recently and they were just amazing because we were taking topics that are like not easy to talk about or even make funny like slavery and we did it in a way that was smart and great. So those shows are great.

You have to have more than just white men on stage. You have to have a diverse cast of like colors, genders, backgrounds and it's really hard to get. We're working on it all the time. But you can't have four white guys on stage telling the story of Frederick Douglass.

## JOHN TIMOTHY

When I was in high school, I would log onto the Amherst College improv team website to figure out what it was. The website was poorly maintained and like had some parody Gap ads from some dumb thing they did years ago. I remember being like, “Yeah *this* is comedy. How adult to take it to Gap! Really sticking it to 'em.”

[When I got to college], improv was clearly a thing I was gonna do there and I think the single mindedness of *well this is obviously what I'm gonna do* made it very easy for me to audition and get on the team. There wasn't any question that I wouldn't be doing it. I was on the improv team at Amherst for four years and then I moved here to pursue it forever in 2008. Almost a decade ago now, hoo-boy!

Before I moved here, my stepdad was like, “Hey, you really gotta appreciate this, because you're never gonna have fewer responsibilities than you are about to

have.” So I moved in, sight unseen, to an apartment in Williamsburg with a buddy from my college and his buddies. I spent a month or two looking for a job then got one at Columbia University and that was a great job because that afforded me to pay for improv classes. I started right away and it was great.

“Well, no one ever got great at this that wasn’t kind of obsessed with it for a while.”

Very soon I was doing improv or something like it almost every night of the week. Either seeing shows or doing shows or being in class. My 201<sup>16</sup> teacher Casey, he was fond of larger statements about improv and one of his things he said was, “Well no one ever got great at this that wasn’t kind of obsessed with it for a while.” There’s some invisible hump that everyone has to get over and you just kind of have to do it. Live it. breathe it. You don’t have to do it forever. It’s not healthy to do it forever.

If you took a boat from like 53rd and the East Side of Manhattan straight to Queens, you’d run into Long Island City. Everyone keeps saying it’s about to be the next neighborhood but it never seems to happen. There was this one random bar, the Creek and the Cave. It was a Mexican restaurant and then it had like an attached theater to it, like a real straight up, proscenium style theater. It was kind of staked out by Derrick<sup>17</sup> which was some very funny guys who now are all pros. It became the real nexus of my generation’s scene and indie improv experience.

My first indie team was Futuro. I remember our first show there and we did well. We got that kind of compliment we desperately were looking for which was like

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<sup>16</sup> The second level of improv classes at UCB

<sup>17</sup> Derrick Comedy is largely known for their viral sketch videos and breakout star Donald Glover

"Oh that was your first show? Never coulda told!" And we could have melted into the floor after that point and been fine.

It was still early in the night that we did the show and then we all hung out afterwards. The stage was still open so we were like, *You know what? We're gonna do a jam! Alright, you know what? Mash-up. Cool.* and we were riding high on the show. *Yeah. Of course! Obviously. Oh man, New York!* And so we start doing this improv jam and it was probably terrible. So a couple people from the street or from the bar come in and sit down. They're watching it and we're just kind of fucking around. And then I'm like "Okay, thank you! Jam's over." And then they tried to *pay* us like "Well, cool, thank you for the show." It was a long time in between that moment and then the next time someone tried to pay me for doing improv. There was a big gap there.

I picked UCB because I really liked the TV show<sup>18</sup>. Shortly after my parents divorced, I got my own room. I got my own TV. I remember seeing the UCB television show and the sketch "Ass Pennies" while channel surfing late at night and being shocked. I didn't know you could do this. Like I didn't know you could make things that looked like this or sounded like this. And I remember the show, loving how it all connected and like all they have all these things but they come together at the end - *What?!* Which I learned later is a 'Harold,'<sup>19</sup> like the sketch show is the format of a Harold basically and they put it on TV.

By that time, it wasn't quite the big like powerhouse it currently is, but there was enough - like Bobby Moynihan had just gotten on *SNL* that summer. The Derrick

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<sup>18</sup> *Upright Citizens Brigade* was also a sketch comedy show that aired from 1998-2000.

<sup>19</sup> The Harold is a famous improv structure where players escalate the beats of three scenes

guys had that sketch, “Bro Rape,” which was like one of the first viral comedy videos and Amy Poehler had been on *SNL* so it was enough of a place that's like *Oh, this seems to be like a cool exciting place where people I'm hearing about it are and interesting things are happening.* Plus, I liked that they had a curriculum that was *about something.* I think whether you like it or not, UCB has a thing they believe in. I think that's valuable whether you buy into it or not, because at least it's not like "Do whatever you think!" I really appreciated that their improv is like, “No there's a right way and there's a wrong way. And we're gonna teach you how to do it this way.”

The Curfew<sup>20</sup> is a team that I'm very lucky to be on. It is a team of very veteran improvisers who still love it. We are one of the longest running shows at the theater. We perform every Saturday at 7:30. We still do very real grounded, game-based improv stuff and it's not surprising given that a lot of us are teachers.

I don't get nervous before shows anymore. Like, the exceptional ones I do. When I was on a cruise ship, at the beginning of a week you were performing for two groups of like 500 people and you are the sandwiched in between a musical revue by these beautiful British dancers and then the naturalist. It was like a “Welcome to the Cruise” thing and you had three minutes to go out introduce yourself and then do an improv scene. It had to be funny enough to convince these people to watch your show as opposed to go whale watching, go gambling, drinking. You were competing for time. And so that was nerve wracking I'll say because like I said why I liked UCB is that it can be like very naturalistic and real and grounded. And when you've got one minute you do not have the time to like spend thirty seconds

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<sup>20</sup> The Curfew is a house team at the UCB Chelsea in Manhattan

it's like *yes and*<sup>21</sup>-ing your way to a natural real thing. You just got to come out with haymakers. And so that was that was the last time I probably got legitimately like a little bit nervous before doing improv show.

Even 10 years ago when we joined UCB, we thought we had missed the boat. We thought we were too late almost. Oh man, if I'd just been here two years earlier than I really would have been here when it was like *happening*. And you know I guess history has proven us a bit wrong in that regard. It still is relevant. And it keeps going and I think it's every student's job to think they got here a little too late. But I did really appreciate that at an all theater meeting I think Besser and Walsh<sup>22</sup> basically said, "Make them forget about us. Don't spend time venerating us. This isn't like some place for hero worship. Do such good work that they talk about *you* when they talk about this place. Where we're just the old fogies that started this place."

## PHILIP MARKLE

I went through the programs in Chicago after I graduated from acting school and realized that doing the same play every night forever, if it wasn't a good play, was kind of a nightmare. So improv afforded to me opportunity to be both the creator, writer and performer at the same time. I loved it and I went to the three major schools in Chicago worked with them all and sort of found my groove mostly at

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<sup>21</sup> "Yes, And" is a basic tenet of improv. Where you agree with your scene partner - "Yes" - and add something to the scene - "And".

<sup>22</sup> Matt Besser and Matt Walsh, founding members of the UCB Theater

the Annoyance<sup>23</sup> where I felt like there's a place where I could really let my freak flag fly.

*Wow this is that once in a lifetime thing that you get around momentum*

Mick Napier almost jokingly texted me, “Hey, do you want to open up a school for the Annoyance in New York?” And I said, “Yeah, I would love to do that.” And so then we got to talking and we made it happen in Fall 2013 just starting out with some workshops to see what the market wanted and they all sold out. It was great. And then we started full length eight week classes in January of 2014.

That first round of workshops was so exciting. There were all these people of different experience levels and everything. And again we had no idea what the interest level was going to be like. I remember we went out to Barcade<sup>24</sup> after the first series of workshops and there was just so much positivity and excitement about something new. And then you fast forward to the first show we did which was like a graduating class show where we had our veteran performers also performing with the graduating class. They were like a hundred people packed into a room to really great energy atmosphere and from my point of view it's like, *Wow this is that once in a lifetime thing that you get around momentum*, which is the hardest thing to capitalize on. Opening a new thing, you need a ton of momentum and buy in and it seemed that we had it. Then we began to search and find space for a theater.

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<sup>23</sup> The Annoyance is a Chicago improv theater and training center founded by Mick Napier in the late '80s.

<sup>24</sup> An amazing Brooklyn bar with 1980's style arcade games

We were searching for months. New York real estate ain't pretty. And you know we were mostly looking for a space where we could continue housing classes with occasional shows. A lot of stuff we were seeing either required a huge build out to make it viable and the Annoyance just done a build out in Chicago with a massive new theater space. They were not interested in another project like that. Mick and Jen were the artistic director and executive producer of the Annoyance and they came to New York to look at spaces. The whole thing was a bust. None of the space were either affordable or doable.

And then I was walking down Bedford Avenue towards the bridge when I happened to see a For Rent sign that wasn't online. The owner had not put it anywhere on the internet. The owner is a musician, one of those old school guys. He used to tour with the Isley Brothers. He's only looking for an artist and the rent is affordable. He's been hanging out on the market forever. I just check it out and it's *perfect*. Really this underground basement with a lot of character. Rock walls that are acid washed. It looks cool. It's fully built out. And so I tell Mick and Jen about it and they missed their flight to come see this space. It was exactly what we need.

Within a month we did a very minor build out adding a stage, just something very simple. It had the right look, like it it had this edginess of literally being in an underground basement in Brooklyn and it felt really right. We opened and the first show was December of 2014. The first show was called 'Hunks R Us,' shortly followed by the 'Holy Fuck Comedy Hour' which became the most popular show of the Annoyance.

‘Holy Fuck Comedy Hour’ was really radically different. It was sketch comedy that had a lot of improv and was very slapdash. It kind of blew everyone's minds because it was not what people thought of when they thought of sketch comedy. It was very loose and very free and very exciting that way. That was the show *The New York Times* came and saw us in our third week that we were open in January. They wrote a mixed review of us which was very interesting. The very last day the reviewer came the toilet overflowed because, you know, it was a basement in Brooklyn and he started his article about it by talking about that! Thank you. We’re like trying to create art in the underground comedy space here and you talk about our shitty toilets.

The first four months were like some of the most fun months of my life. There was no drama. Everything was dance parties till 4am. We had a lot of industry attention. We did an *SNL* showcase. That was one of the first *SNL* showcases that happened for the Annoyance in a long time and I think the industry really paid attention. They really thought we were doing something different and exciting and new and that was so cool. I was doing interviews all the time about it. And yet like I said the dance parties, where having an underground basement available to you on any night of the week is just too much fun.

I personally left the Annoyance in fall of 2016. I reached the point where, after a lot of consideration, I was kind of tired of being comedy secretary and wanted to focus on being a performer and an artist and a teacher first and foremost. Then there were some financial issues which are very normal for a three-year old company that trying to make it compounded by the fact that there was an issue with the liquor license and the Annoyance New York closed in January of 2017.

It's been a year now there hasn't been a new space. But there was a lot of interest in the community in finding one.

I've been teaching acting improv even in terms of just short form stuff since I was 15. I always made money as a teacher or an arts admin. My whole life I've never worked any other job besides being a performer, creator, artist or teacher. I can say I'm a professional because I travel all around the world and teach my Burn Your Fear class which is sort of an amalgamation of stuff that was inspired by the Annoyance but also my own curriculum.

And the biggest thing to me is that I love being really tough on the students in terms of getting them to play more aggressively to face their fears. Improv is truly one of the hardest things in the world. But you're not going to get better at it by feeling like you suck at it.

The end goal of the class is to make fear fun so that you like improvising dangerously. I have them list their fears at the top of the class and it's amazing to hear like how many overlap. Am I good at this? Am I being funny? Am I doing it correctly?

Improv is the most exciting dangerous art form out there. It's really hard. It truly keeps me on my toes. And as a performer, the reason I love it is that every show has different meaning. I'm constantly challenged. I never rest of my laurels.

The reason that improv can blow my mind is that I think of the audience. An audience comes to an improv show and for the most part they're terrified. Why are they terrified? They're terrified, because they don't know what's going to happen.

But what's amazing is when people can come out as improvisers and competently own the stage and they're doing this thing that is the *number one* reported fear of the human race, public speaking. They're doing it without the safety net of knowing what they're going to say. They're just making it up. And then they do it confidently and they create believable characters and they fuck with the characters and they surprise the audience and they're not afraid to look like idiots. It's transformational for the audience not only in the way of seeing good art or a good play but experiencing live risk taking. Like watching people bungee jump. And so I think it can change people's lives and there's a reason that it gets like a cult mentality is that people really get obsessed with it. It's the biggest high that you can experience as an audience member seeing a great show for the first time or as a person taking their first or a thousand improv class. So it's just really important to remember how whimsical and wonderful it is, but also to know that the more stressed out you get about it the worse you'll do is you need to relax and not give a fuck. That's the headspace I teach in *Burn Your Fear* is getting people into this duality of things: Fuck it. Improv doesn't matter. And I love it.

## MARINA REYDLER

I'm originally born in Moldova which is the original Soviet Union. Russia, I feel like, has a theater culture where no matter what the weather is, no matter what day it is, they go out to the theater and I was raised in that manner. Where here it's like tickets are so expensive that locals can't afford going to the theater. I usually go to see Broadway musicals only once a year for my mom's birthday. I don't know why there's a huge gap in that here in New York. I don't think theater should be that

way. I think theater should be available and in the culture. And like kids should be raised... I actually, speaking of kids...

I had my nephew visiting from Florida who was ten years old. I had to be at the PIT at that time and I had taken him with me. He saw a show briefly and loved it. The next day he's like, "Are you going back? Are you going back? Can I go with you?"

So, of course I took him and he ended up staying up until midnight with me watching shows and participating in the jams. And I remember one of the improvisers saying, "Let's be aware there's a child in the house and let's not be too wild in our suggestions," but at the same time he also approached me later and said "Well, obviously if you're gonna bring a child into an improv theater then you know what you're getting them into" and I completely agree with that. Because I want him to be exposed through me rather than out on the street or through other teens. And he loved it.

He didn't want to leave. He was like "When I come back, can we come back here again?" Because he's just... I don't blame him. It's okay that they were cursing, because it wasn't that they were just throwing out those words just to throw them it, it was - it made sense within the context of the scene so, like, I wish more kids were exposed to theater and improv and stage and film and things like that.

I am an actor and have taught short form improv, but had not done long form before. In December, I had a friend visiting me from Israel, and she wanted to try her hand at the improv thing while she's here just to broaden her knowledge of her personality and she was like "Hey there's a jam happening at the PIT for three

bucks, what have we got to lose?" And she knew that I'm an actor so this would be nothing for me, so I would help her through it. It was a Friday night in the basement of the PIT. You put your name in a jar, you don't know when you're gonna be called so it's even more suspense. I got a call. I don't remember what my scene was about but I just remember having this amazing time on stage where I don't know what I'm supposed to be doing. I just know that I am just making this up on my own. I just had a blast which is probably why in January I decided to sign up for classes as my New Year's Resolution.

January 4th was our first class. I remember it very clearly. Our Level 1 class had a variety of people - out of seventeen people maybe three or four of us were actors. The rest were attorneys, graphic designers, software engineers, educators, and that really surprised me because coming from an acting background you'd think all these people would be involved in acting, but really just three or four of us were actors, everyone else was ordinary folk.

I'm now in Level 2 musical improv. As they say when they first announce themselves, musical improv is a musical that you will never see ever again because it's literally made up on the spot. I remember the first time I ever watched the musical team Vern, I was blown away because I don't remember what their suggestion was, but from their suggestion they took you to 1945 Germany of this father and two daughters having an underwear factory but one of the daughters wanted to leave and go create bras and you were taken on that journey with them with songs and it was just hilarious and brilliant.

The first day of Level 2 musical improv we had to sing solos about someone else's personal life. They answered a question about themselves and it was brilliant

because it made you sit there and listen for details and you had to put those details into song. It helps you as an artist because even when you go out there and want to perform improv, that exercise helps you listen for those details that were said by someone else on stage that when you come on you remember those details or a name that was used or anything like that, it makes your brain focus more.

I don't have much of a voice. I sing in the shower but it's a no judgment zone. So it's like even if you screw up a key, the accompanist will follow along so it'll look like you're doing a wonderful job on stage.

My parents had never seen an improv show and they were always wondering why I keep coming home late because I'm in this wonderful community and there's a bar and you know so like which is very smart in that sense because not only do we have an improv theater, we have a bar where people can communicate. My mom came to see my Level 1 musical improv show which she loved and also was sort of blown away because it was made on the spot and my friends came to see it and they're like "We don't know how you do that. We really don't know." and I'm like don't either know how we do that but somehow it just happens.

It's literally the People's Improv Theater but they're branching out and they're doing sketches. They're doing stand-up. They're doing straight theater sometimes. But when I say community it's like people, a lot of these improvisers are from everywhere, not just New York and I think they feel what it's like to be an outsider or a newcomer and that's why I feel like they are so welcoming and so open and it really helps you as a newbie to like warm up and feel okay about being in that community and they work with you and they guide you and it's nice. It really is

nice. Even people that don't belong to the PIT love it and there's some sort of, there's something in the air, it's indescribable.