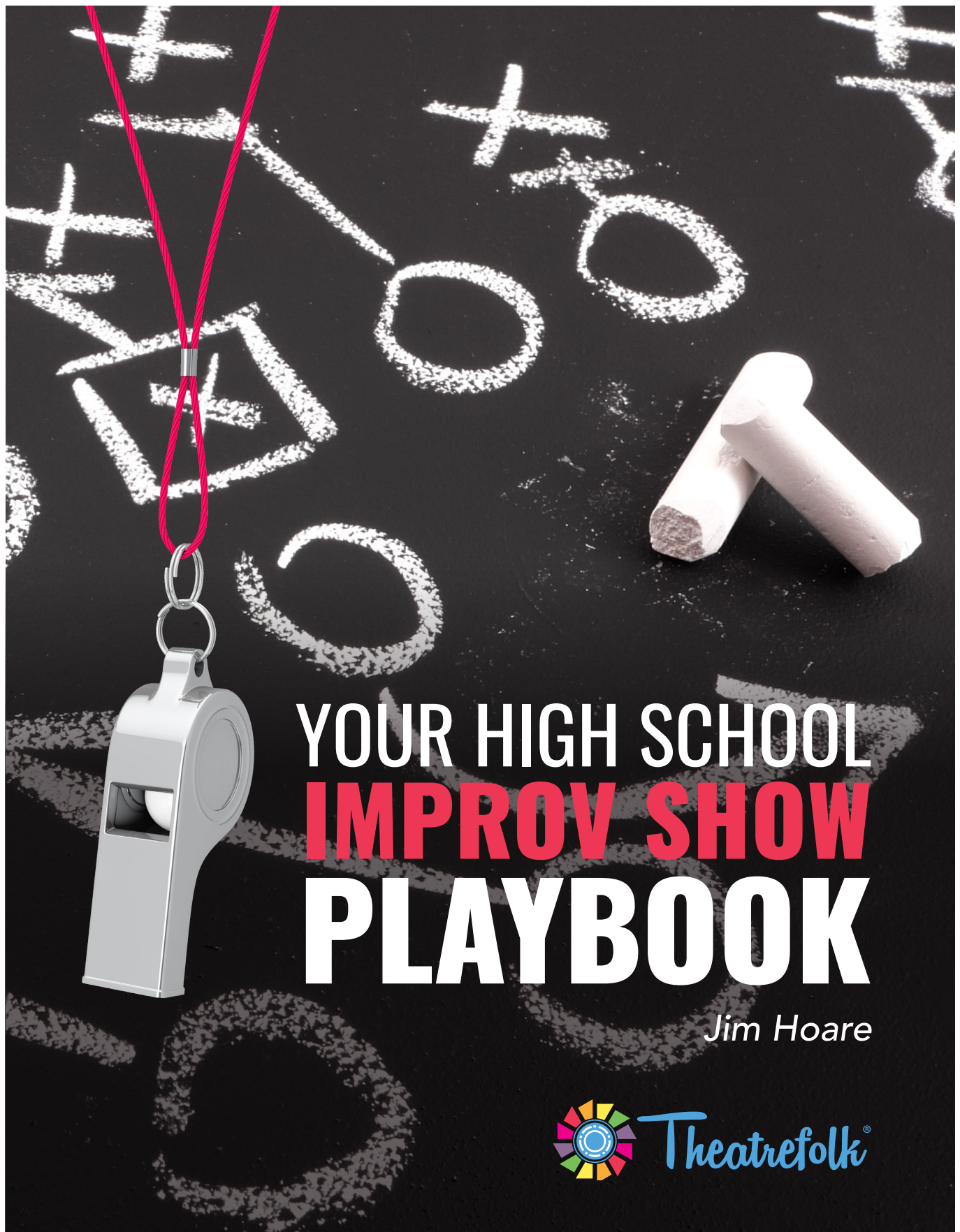


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**Your High School Improv Show Playbook**

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Your High School Improv Show Playbook

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# FOREWORD



I own many books about improvisation, theatre games, comedy writing, and acting. But I never found a simple, straightforward guide to help me prepare for an improv show with high school students. After improv shows, teachers have asked to borrow my “improv bag” to copy my lists and games. Others asked me to put everything that’s in that bag into a book. So, after 30 years and 100+ high school improv shows, this is that book. I hope that you find it helpful. – JH

Jim Hoare



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# ACKNOWLEDGEMENT



There are many companies/schools/troupes performing live improv shows. Some are established, professional companies (Second City, Chicago City Limits, Upright Citizens Brigade, Theatresports™, ComedySportz™, The Groundlings, Gotham City Improv...). Others are high school and college students or alumni, or colleagues who enjoy the challenge and fun of performing improvisation.

Most improv shows use similar games – or games that are born out of other games (or games that are identical but have different names regionally). If I know or can find the origin of any improv game/style, I will note it. But I want to begin by giving credit and thanks to the improv teachers, companies, and schools that have influenced my improv journey.

*Whose Line Is It Anyway?* (The game where everything is made up and the points don't matter) helped bring comic improvisation into the mainstream. (Though it's important to note that what was seen on television was the best 22 minutes of a 90- to 120-minute show.) But long before *Whose Line...* appeared in the UK or USA, professional actors had been performing comic improvisation for live audiences.

The origins of improv shows may well be found in *Commedia dell'arte* from 16th century Italy, where troupes of actors improvised comic dialogue according to a few basic plots and newsworthy topics. But improv shows, as we know them today, evolved and were nurtured in Chicago in the 1950s.

I was first introduced to improvisational theatre when I saw Paul Sills, son of improv guru Viola Spolin, with a talented group of actors, including Paul Dooley and Mina Kolb, perform at the Lambs Theatre in NYC in 1986. The show was *Sills & Company*. I loved what I saw and came back for more. At the 1987 International Thespian Festival at Ball State University in Muncie, Indiana, I met Mike Rock of ComedySportz™.

Jim Hoare





Inspired by the work of Keith Johnstone, and his wonderful book, *Impro*, Mike's group added a sports element to improv shows. As the show began, Mike, dressed as a football referee, led us in a rousing chorus of "Take me out to the Improv..." There was a yellow penalty flag, thrown by the ref if a scene was boring, (a delay of game foul), at which point the actors had to quickly pick up the pace. The "actletes" (Mike Rock's term) could also receive fouls for other infractions (more details in Section 3).

I returned from the 1987 Thespian Festival with the confidence that I will one day do an improv show with my students.

I read Viola Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theatre*, Keith Johnstone's *Impro*, and incorporated improvisation into my high school theatre curriculum. Soon after, I learned about a group called Freestyle Rep, of New York Theatresports™. Their director at the time was also named Mike Rock, (not related ComedySportz™ Mike Rock). As my students and I watched Freestyle Rep perform, we adapted. Then I discovered Gotham City Improv (they didn't have a Mike Rock). But we were fascinated to see more scene-driven improvisation. Again, we adapted.

The point is that there are hundreds of improv groups playing thousands of improv games. Most can be traced to Viola Spolin and Paul Sills or Keith Johnstone. Most games resemble or have grown from one or more existing games, to the point where those who are performing them have no idea from whence they came.

Like folklore or urban legends, the core of improvisation – taking an offer from your partner, playing it and moving the scene forward – is precisely why games continue to evolve. If I know the origin of a game, I will mention it in this book. But some games may be third or more generations of games that were created decades ago.

I sincerely thank the Mike Rocks and everyone who guided me. I hope that this book will help guide *your* improv journey.

# DEDICATION



I dedicate this Playbook to the risk-taking students who made our improv shows possible, and to the alumni who are now teaching theatre who urged me to put this information in one place.

I want to thank the improv alumni and friends who generously returned to teach and inspire the next generation (and me).

I especially thank Nancy Cassaro-Fracchiola, Jim O'Doherty, John Shorter, Milt Polsky, John Farrell, Sal Salerno, Lenny Motsinger, Brendan Connor, Brett Butler, Charlie Zegers, Tom Dunn, Steve Zegers, Denise Garvey-Antonicelli, Mike O'Gorman, J. Julian Christopher, Mike Smith, Nick Costa, Ted O'Gorman, and Caitlin Cassidy.



# WHAT IS AN IMPROV SHOW?

An improv show is an unscripted, live performance in front of an audience where teams compete (for no points) in various improv games led by a host/side coach. The whole show takes about 90 minutes.

# WHY DO IMPROV SHOWS?

The purpose of this playbook is to empower the reader to present an improv show with high-school-aged students in a way that will be fun and entertaining for all involved, while in a safe and controlled environment.

## EDUCATIONAL IMPORTANCE

There are many articles and books advocating the benefits of teaching improvisation to students from kindergarten through high school. It is easy to justify its inclusion in your theatre curriculum. Improv is an ideal way to motivate creative thinking, collaboration, and communication – all crucial skills for the 21st century.

## ARTISTIC IMPORTANCE

The entire first quarter of my *Theatre Arts 1* curriculum involved learning and performing improvisation and theatre games. It was the foundation of our theatre curriculum and was included in each year of theatre training. Improvisation helped to develop an ensemble, encouraged risk-taking, supported spontaneity, accepted mistakes as part of the creative process, and fostered a sense of humor.



Improv experience is also an asset when approaching shows that incorporate improvisation in the script, such as Monty Python's *SPAMALOT*, by Eric Idle and John Du Prez, *NEWSical the Musical*, by Rick Crom, *FORBIDDEN BROADWAY*, by Gerard Alessandrini, or *GAME SHOW* by Jeffrey Finn and Bob Walton. (Logos reprinted with permission from TRW.)

## PRACTICAL IMPORTANCE

After directing and/or performing scripted theatre pieces, your first improv show will be a fascinating experience. I will never forget the pre-show circle before our very first improv show. Before a scripted show, you are prepared for what's about to happen; but before an improv show, what lies ahead is a mystery. While were standing in our pre-show circle, one student said, "I'm a little scared. The people out there paid for a show, and we have no idea what's about to happen." Another student said, "Just make each other look good and have fun. It'll be great!" In the beginning, most high school improv teams are a mix of apprehension and confidence. With time and experience, confidence will outweigh apprehension.

After that first improv show, which was a successful learning experience for us all, the following year we did two shows. As students' confidence and experience grew along with audience attendance, that number eventually grew to 4 to 6 shows each year. In the first weeks of the new school year the "Theatre Seniors" would perform an improv show. Tickets were \$5 (or sometimes \$10 if we needed paint, lumber, or funds to get to a theatre conference or festival). Holiday time, would feature a holiday-themed show (see Section 8), and tickets were \$5 or \$1 and a new toy or food donation. Our holiday improv shows proceeds always supported a local charity. The point being, improv shows became a source of fun, ensemble building, and much-needed additional funds for our Thespian Troupe.

## SECTION 1

# THE HOST/SIDE COACH



## HOST /SIDE COACH JOB

A confident, attentive and cheerful host/side coach is the key to an improv show's success. The host keeps the pace moving and develops a connection with the audience, while remaining attentive to the players onstage. It's a challenge, and can only be learned by experience, discovering your own groove.

At a public performance, the host/side coach should be an experienced teacher or another adult who is seen as an authority (to keep the show safe – physically, verbally, and philosophically). If a student (even one with a great personality) is the host, problems can surface. You should remain in control of the show.

If you invite a guest veteran improv side coach (not a bad option for a beginner), I'd suggest that you still host the show to reinforce your relationship with the community.

## IMPROV CLASS VS. IMPROV SHOW

Side coaching in an improv *class* is not the same as side coaching at an improv *show*. In class, you make suggestions during a scene to help actors see something in a different way, or to help nudge a scene along. Improv in class is about making a quick decision, committing to the first choice, and playing it out.

At an improv *show*, it's about making an *entertaining* choice, which could be the second choice, coming a split second after the first choice. The ability to make an *entertaining* choice improves with experience and can be guided by an insightful side coach who realizes that the first choice was not a viable one and encourages a quick change of direction.

## MORE ABOUT COACHING

All coaches (of anything) should have their players' safety and wellbeing as their top priority. An improv show side coach (especially one who is also the theatre teacher) wants their students to succeed and, along with the audience, to have a great experience.

However, you should not allow those feelings cause you to direct the scenes from the side. Sometimes the best lessons are learned from scenes that fail. In those instances, you laugh it off and move on to the next game. You might make a note of the failed scenes so that they can be discussed in the next class (or before the next show).

## CAPTAINS

Finally, I strongly recommend that you assign team captains for each of your improv teams. The captains will be assigned the task of ensuring that everyone on their team has enough playing time. As the host, your attention must first be on your audience, and then on the playlist selected for the show and pacing the show. This will not be possible if you are also trying to make sure that everyone has enough playing time.

Captains can also be very helpful, keeping someone on the bench because they don't feel well or are having a "bad improv day" (it happens to the best), or realizing that someone is "in the zone," giving them more playing time because it almost always makes for a better show.

Jim Hoare



# HOST/SIDE COACH GUIDELINES FOR A HIGH SCHOOL IMPROV SHOW

1. **A Side Coach is not a "Side Director."** Keep the pace moving, recognize and call fouls when necessary (see Section 3), and have fun. Avoid the urge to direct the scene (not always easy).
2. **Know your actors.** Improv actors have strengths and weaknesses. Some are great at musical improvs but terrible at anything involving rhyming. Others thrive at physical comedy, but struggle with fast, word-based improvs – and so on. While you always want your students to strengthen their weaknesses during class and rehearsal, it is best to know their strengths and put those strengths on display during performances.
3. **Set the tone for the show.**
  - a. Introduce yourself and your role (and the title of the show if one exists).
    - i. Show titles can reference holidays, school events, and/or topical issues. One of our first titles, "Mental Floss," was used many times. ("Mental Floss XXV" was one of the last.) But we used many titles: "Improv Olympics," "Progress Reports Tomorrow - Comedy Tonight," and so on.
  - b. Announce the running time. My improv shows were almost always 90 minutes long. Even if we were in the middle of a good game/scene, at 90 minutes I would announce "That's 90 minutes. Good night everybody!"
    - i. **Confession:** Although I might set an alarm for 90 minutes to time the show, I never once timed an improv game or scene. When I announced "This game is 60 seconds (or 2 minutes or whatever)," I may have looked towards my watch, but never looked at it. If a scene was going well, I'd let it run longer. If not, I'd look towards my watch and announce "Time's up!" or "And scene!" and we'd move on. But I was never aware of the actual time of a game.
  - c. Have a clipboard, paper, and pen to poll the audience for the suggestions that will be needed for the show.
    - i. Explain to the audience that their suggestions can help to make the show better. Encourage playful, creative suggestions. Boring, bland suggestions make for a boring, bland show.
    - ii. The audience loves to hear their suggestions used during a show. When you hear a good suggestion, repeat it while you add it to your list and thank the person who offered it. Seeing their suggestions used makes people feel that they are a part of the show.
    - iii. Learn how to "selectively hear" suggestions – discreetly ignoring inappropriate suggestions. But sometimes a loud inappropriate suggestion can be an opportunity to state what will and will not be acceptable for the show.

- iv. Never insult a suggestion. Instead, “side coach” the audience to rework their suggestion into something more playable. The improv actor’s responsibility is to make their partner look good; your responsibility is to make the audience look good.
- v. **Insurance:** All the improv game lists on your clipboard should be pre-loaded with suggestions that you know will work. Add the audience suggestions to that list. If you’re lucky, you may not have to use any of the pre-loaded items. But that rarely happens.
- vi. Gather audience suggestions as quickly as possible (5 to 7 minutes if possible). Everyone will be eager for the show to begin. But gathering suggestions connects you to the audience and establishes your role as the authority figure for the evening. It is important.



**Note:** Some hosts ask for audience suggestions before each game, while others create a master list before the show. Do what works best for you. But after 100+ improv shows, I have found that creating my master lists before the show sets a good tone and keeps the pace moving. You can always ask for additional suggestions at any time during a show as needed.

d. How to ask for suggestions:

i. Locations:

- Can I have a location that would fit on a stage?
- Can I have a non-geographical location?
- Can I have a fictional or imagined location?
- Can I have a location where you would not find people?
- Where is a bad place to take a date?
- Can I have an important location in history?

ii. Styles:

- Can I have any style of entertainment?
- Can I have the name of a popular TV show?
- Can I have the name of a popular children’s show?
- Can I have the name of a popular reality show?
- Can I have the name of a popular/iconic film?

iii. Emotions/States of Being:

- Can I have an emotion (happy, angry, delighted...)?
- Can I have a state of being (cold, hot, bored...)?
- Can I have the name of a character that is also an emotion or state of being (Ludicrous, Grumpy, Bashful...)?

- iv. The Dating Game:
  - Can I have a famous, heroic male character (real or fictional)?
  - Can I have a famous, heroic female character (real or fictional)?
  - Can I have an infamous, male villain (real or fictional)?
  - Can I have an infamous, female villain (real or fictional)?
  - Can I have a famous character from history (male or female)?
- v. Random Scene Starters:
  - Can I have a relationship between two people?
  - Can I have a holiday?
  - Can I have a made-up holiday?
  - Can I have an event that takes a lot of preparation?
  - Can I have an important moment in history?
  - Can I have an occupation that involves no risk of physical injury?
  - Can I have an occupation that involves great risk of physical injury?
  - What is the name of an unlikely superhero?
  - What is the worst excuse you have heard for being late?
  - May I get a popular hobby?
  - Can I have an unusual hobby?
- e. Introduce the players (by team names or individually, your call)
  - i. After dividing the players into teams, I gave them the option to select team names (often based on the time of the year, current events or school colors/ mascots). The team captains would hand me the team names as soon as I finished collecting suggestions from the audience.
- f. Begin the show with one or two whole-team games (see Section 5 – The Games).
  - i. To get all of the players quickly involved, I always began with a version of Tag (locations, styles, or emotions/states of being)

## SECTION I RECAP

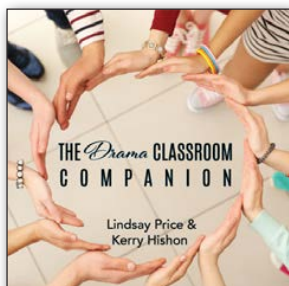
- The focus of the host/side coach – the audience, the playlist, and the pacing.
- The focus of the team captains – the players.
- The focus of the players – the entertaining choice (not always the first choice).





# Teaching Resources

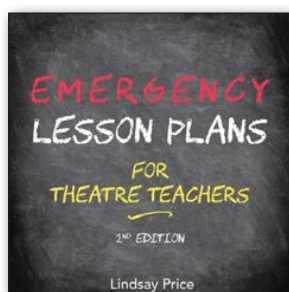
Quality resources to use in your drama classroom



## The Drama Classroom Companion

*The Drama Classroom Companion* is filled with articles and exercises to build the skills needed for theatrical performance as well as real world skills like creative thinking, critical thinking, collaboration, and communication.

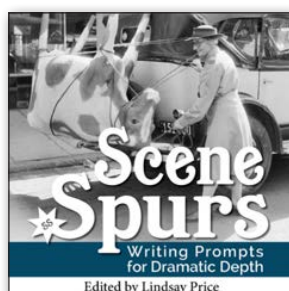
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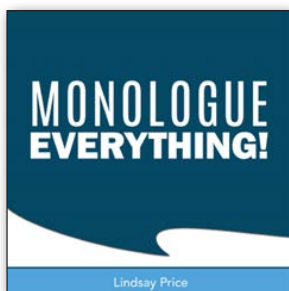
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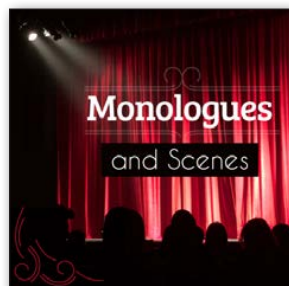
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