

SAYING "YES" AND OWNING IT

I remember playing an improv scene in which one of the actors on stage called for a doctor. I entered.

"Nurse," he said, "get the doctor."

Once again, I was pigeonholed into a woman's "role"—of a nurse, wife, mom, princess, bimbo. I remember being so angry that I wanted to quit improvising altogether. I spent years toiling over these issues: Why would he call me the nurse? Why wouldn't he let me be the doctor?

Then it dawned on me: Improv is imagined. I had the power to change it. It wasn't my partner's job to let me be anything; I could do whatever I wanted. Possible responses were infinite:

"Nurse, get the doctor."

"You don't need a doctor, sir. Calm down; it's a routine flu shot."

But improv mantra would suggest that by not accepting my partner's offer to "get the doctor," I would be *blocking*. I would be putting down his idea. And, as we all know, in a creative environment, negativity kills everything good. We should support our partners by saying "yes." Yes, yes, yes. We are told that the best improvisors say yes all the time.

But "Yes" does not have to equal submission.

Countless times in my early years of improv, I walked off stage feeling awful. I have seen this happen to many young female performers. An offer is made on stage—for example, to take off her shirt or get back to the kitchen. She says "yes," even though she's uncomfortable, because "those are the rules." She feels exposed, awkward, embarrassed. She thinks that improv will always be like this, and she decides to stop improvising. Many women performers fall away from our company this way.

One of my mentors, Mike Kennard (of the clown duo Mump & Smoot) says, "Whatever's happening on stage is happening in the audience." He's right. If I'm up on stage feeling awful, the audience feels awful. If I'm loving my ideas and owning my own body, the audience feels safe.

About seven years ago, I came to realize that the notion that improv was about pleasing my peers was taking me down a bland, narrow path—to the brink of leaving the art I loved. Improv was about expressing myself, and about being in scenes I would want to watch.

Regardless of "yes," anyone who would say something sexist on stage is, in my eyes, portraying a villain. My character is the protagonist, and the villain must come to justice.

"Nurse, go get the doctor".

"Yes, of course."

Exit, re-entering with the exact same physicality and voice.

"Hello, I'm the doctor".

This is me making a confident, empowered choice, and feeling good about it.

The reasons that women improvise are as varied and complex as the reasons men do. Some women want to use improv as a platform for stand up, some want to do genre work, some want to be punch-line queens. There is no single categorizing thing I will say about male or female improvisors—except that, from what I've seen as a director and teacher, men are more confident than women in their first five years of improv experience. But confidence is the foundation of attack and speed—which are attractive attributes in improvisation. If you don't believe in your ideas, then the audience definitely won't. That's why I think confidence building is a key part of the development of young female improvisors. I know it was for me.

People always talk about women's "style" in improv—their ability to support and emote rather than tell jokes. I don't think it's a style: it's societal conditioning. It comes back to the whole "boys will be boys" attitude. Men are rewarded for being funny and mischievous. They're the class clowns. As we all know, schlubby sitcom husbands get lovely caring sitcom wives just because they're funny. For girls, on the other hand, the focus growing up is on being helpful and beautiful. Many young female performers start their careers with their confidence less than sky-high. They don't want to look ugly on stage. They don't want to look mean. They're scared to fail.

The art form of improvisation is a vessel for our ideas. If we are stifled or scared and cannot express ourselves, then we are literally "yes men"—and no one likes "yes men." But once we own our ideas, then we own the stage. I spend a lot of time thinking about how to become a stronger improviser. It always comes back to trusting myself—to loving my ideas, to making the scene fun for myself. With ownership comes confidence, and mine grows by the day.

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DISPATCH