All the World Is a Stage: Improv and the Christian Worldview [1]

Submitted by Wessel on Tuesday, 23 October 2018 - 20:22



Read time: 9 minutes
About a year ago I did an introductory improv acting course. I had already been exposed to improv acting through local shows and a work-sponsored social by a local improv company [2], and it had struck me as something which can be fun to pursue. It certainly was outside of my comfort zone. I was not alone: most—if not all—of my fellow classmates, including professional actresses, had to get use to a very different kind of thinking and expressing ourselves. But our competent teachers eased us into this new experience. What I subsequently learned was that improv acting was both easier and more difficult than I had thought it would be. And at the heart of the difficulty also is a hallmark of the Christian worldview.

"Improv" is short for "improvisation". There are no scripts for the players to use; no director, and no plans to follow: everything that happens on stage is made up on the spot by the actors. Improv acting is structured in such a way that one cannot have a preconceived plan of what will happen, because ideas and suggestions from the audience, as well as the reactions of your fellow players, make it impossible to predict what will come next. Often what happens is hilarious in either its absurdity or wit.

Most people with whom I have spoken have said that they could never do improv acting: they are afraid of being on stage, freezing up and making a fool of themselves. But when doing a beginner's improv course under the auspices of veteran improv actors and teachers, one has a safe space and is given tools for dealing with those fears.

One of the fears is the expectation of having to funny and witty. However, this turns out to not be an issue when doing improv: the humour comes not from one's individual efforts, but from the combined efforts and wit of the group on stage. Being funny is not even a requirement: navigating a difficult scene or tapping into the energy of an engaging scene (even if without obvious humour) can win the respect and admiration of the audience.

The key to enjoyable and engaging improv acting is its few simple rules. They really are simple, and few, so there should not be a problem. But it turns out that these rules are remarkably difficult for people to keep, and even veteran actors struggle with them from time to time.

The first rule of improv is to always say "yes"1. The purpose of this rule is to affirm the ideas of your scene partner. Dismissing an idea creates negative tension, and breaks the flow of a scene. Affirming the ideas of one's scene partner allows for there to be energy and fluidity in a scene. It also builds up one's scene partner, as they are free to bring creativity to a scene, and made to feel like they have made a positive contribution2.

This is a simple rule and a nice sentiment. And it is incredibly difficult to keep.

The problem is that one can get carried away with a scene, and get caught up in the energy of it. One wants to steer it and even control it. At best it is an honest mistake, but at worse it can come from a belief that "I can do this better"[3]. In the process, one can go against the ethos of improv acting and block the ideas of another player that you think is silly or stupid. One can create negative energy on stage to the detriment of the confidence of one's scene partners, and the enjoyment of the audience[4].

And here is where the connection is with the Christian worldview: the same root cause that drives humanity's sinful behaviour is the same that creates negativity on stage: selfish pride[5]. When one thinks that you have a good idea to "spice up a scene" and breaking the rules of improv (often unwittingly and without intent), that is driven by pride. It is pride that says "I can do better than the other person; I am cleverer and funnier". It is pride that shows contempt for the ideas of another person and unwillingness to adapt. It is pride that focusses only on the well-being of oneself on stage, instead of the group. It is pride that drives our fears of looking stupid for struggling to respond to a difficult idea or suggestion.

I have previously written that pride lies at the root of all sin [3][6]). Essentially, pride underlies the human condition. This needs to be understood in order to make sense of the rest of the Christian worldview[7].

It always amazes me how *difficult* it is to keep these *simple* rules in improv (I break them often enough during classes to be well acquainted with the experience)! Sometimes they are honest mistakes, despite my best efforts to be a team player; other times there is a welling up of pride inside of me, that *I can do better than them*. This makes improv acting an apt metaphor for the Christian worldview:

> For I don't know what I am doing. I don't practice what I desire to do; but what I hate, that I do.
>
> Romans 7:15

In his letter to the Romans, the apostle Paul makes it clear that we as humans—all of us—are enslaved by our sinful nature (which is fuelled by our pride). We are without excuse for our behaviour, because we know "the rules"; whether by our nature and instincts to do good, or the revelations which the Israelites received directly from God. Yet still we act contrary to these "rules"; whether unintentionally or maliciously. But irrespective if we act unintentionally or maliciously, we are guilty: metaphorically speaking, the scene is ruined, and the audience is left with an experience they would rather want to forget. Our only hope is that in the next scene we'll do better; in our next scene we won't disappoint.

Of course, in the Christian worldview, messing up has dire consequences. Even more so than not being invited to perform with a group of improv actors again: one is banished from all that is and all that is good. The stakes are high, and we have all already failed; any pretence that we have that we can maintain an unblemished show is a sham.

Thankfully we are not left to flounder and fail. God set in motion a plan to restore and redeem: a plan accomplished in the person of Jesus the Messiah! It is a plan of forgiveness, as well as renewal. The punishment for our selfish pride was taken by the One who lived in reverent humility. His righteousness was, in turn, credited to us, so that we are considered righteous; as ridiculous as that seems. But we don't continue in our own strength, but in a newfound humility, and appreciation for the stage that all the world is!

- 1. Conversely, one should never say "no". This also applies to all the various forms of "no", like "yes, but", or doing one thing when your scene partner asked you to do something else.

- 2. Of course, just because one's scene partner has made a suggestion, that does not mean that they are in control of the scene. After making the suggestion, the control shifts to another person in the scene, who can make another suggestion and develop the scene in a different way.
- 3. Another reason could be the desire to add drama, without malicious intent. This is discouraged, particularly for beginner improv actors. While one might think that creating drama could be exciting, it often does put the scene partner in a difficult position to respond. Two actors need to understand each other really well and be comfortable and familiar with each other for something like this to work without misinterpretation.
- 4. The audience can certainly detect when there is unintended tension on stage!
- 5. For the remained of this article, "pride" will be used to refer to "selfish pride", but there are positive forms of pride.
- 6. See also what I mean when I use the word "sin [4]".
- 7. Which, in brief, is this: that our pride makes us unable to do the good which God expects of humanity—which is all of it, as He expects perfections. Humanity is therefore unable to pull itself out of this deplorable situation. That is why it was necessary for God to intervene Himself, through the Person of Jesus, to enter into the broken world, take the punishment which justly belonged to humankind, and allow for reconciliation with the good and perfect Father God.

Categories:

- Worldview [5]

Tags:

- improv [6]
- acting [7]
- worldview [8]
- sin [9]
- pride [10]
- gospel [11]

Source URL: https://siyach.org/node/1193

Links
[1] https://siyach.org/node/1193
[2] http://www.improguise.co.za/
[3] https://siyach.org/node/1117
[4] https://siyach.org/node/1115
[5] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/660
[6] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/869
[7] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/870
[8] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/431
[9] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/50
[10] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/455
[11] https://siyach.org/taxonomy/term/723