

Just once, with feeling



The musical improv company Jazz Hands Across America

The curtain rises on musical improv

BY KAY DALY

THE BIG MAN ON CAMPUS slips his arm around the freshman girl seated beside him. “You gotta be careful of malicious intent,” he croons seductively. “You gotta be careful... of that teacher who looks like George Wendt.”

The moment is a scene from a new musical entitled *Doritos*, a bouncy, lesson-laden, high-school fable reminiscent of *Grease*, *Carrie*, and a million after-school specials. The tunes are catchy and the lyrics sparkle with the wit of a thousand pop-culture references.

But don't look for *Doritos* at the Tony Awards or plan a production for

the spring show. A fully improvised creation, this musical will get only one performance; in this case, as a rehearsal exercise for the Chicago-based musical improv troupe, Jazz Hands Across America. Then the troupe will move on to create its next “one-time-only” Broadway-style show. It's just the latest example of one of the hottest trends in theatre: musical improv.

Musical improv coast to coast

While Jazz Hands' onstage feats seem innovative to audiences, the troupe readily admits they didn't invent this hybrid form. Long-form musical improv has graced stages from coast to coast

since the early nineties. The concept is, on its surface, simple. But in practice, it's a near-miracle. Taking a suggestion from the audience, the performers spin out a full-scale musical, complete with ballads, complex harmonies, subplots, group numbers, and even dance breaks.

There are as many ways to present an improvised musical as there are troupes to perform them. At ImprovBoston, ensemble members first began experimenting with the form nearly fifteen years ago with a game-oriented exercise. Soliciting story suggestions and song styles from the audience, the performers created

completely original thirty-minute improvised musicals. Throughout each show, the accompanist stopped the action to call out a song style from the list. Cast members then were required to create the assigned songs on the spot. This format later developed into *MUSICAL! the Musical*, a two-act show based on story suggestions from the audience which has enjoyed successful runs in Boston, Chicago, and Nashville. *Opening Night: The Improvised Musical*, in Los Angeles, and Freestyle Repertory Theatre's *Spontaneous Broadway*, in New York, take a similar approach, creating two-act musicals based on title suggestions from the audience.

Other groups have a more complex strategy. New York's *The Next Big Broadway Musical* presents an award ceremony with an improvised scene from each "nominee" as the first act. The audience votes to determine the winning show, which is created in its entirety in the second act. The Musical Improv Company, an offshoot of ImprovBoston, has experimented with a variety of innovative show formats, including *Improvadeus*, which melds a Ken Burns-style documentary with a child prodigy story akin to *Amadeus*, and *Odd Jobs*, which stages improvised musicals about the work place.

The rules of musical improv

No matter how a company chooses to approach musical improv, the appeal of the form is the same. Good musical improv amazes audiences because the songs sound like *real* songs, the shows seem written and rehearsed, and the ensemble members come together to create dance numbers and intricate harmonies that suggest an eerie sense there's something telepathic going on.

To create these effects, performers use techniques based in the conven-

tions of musical theatre and theories of songwriting. "Musical improv relies in part upon 'convention' to be delightful for the audience, who love hearing improvised songs from musicals," explains Michael Pollock, music director of Second City Los Angeles and author of *Musical Improv Comedy: Creating Songs in the Moment*. "It has a framework, and within that framework, anything goes, improvisationally."

On the most basic level, this framework is provided by theories of songwriting. "There are certain structures that songwriters use when creating a well written song," according to Steve Gilbane, artistic director and founding member of Boston's Musical Improv Company. "We're not inventing anything when we use these structures. We're just adapting what's already there in music theory."

Most musical improvisers rely on two basic song structures: the "tagline" song and the "verse-chorus" song. In the tagline song, also called the "AABA" format, the song starts with a section of lines (designated the "A" section) that is marked by a particular rhyme scheme and melody. The "A" section also includes the tagline (often the song's title), usually as the first or last line. For the second part of the song, the "A" section is repeated with new lyrics. Next follows the "B" section—sometimes called the bridge—which introduces a new tune and rhyme scheme. The song ends with a return to the original "A" section pattern. An example of the tagline song is "Wouldn't It Be Lovely" from *My Fair Lady*. In the verse-chorus song, verses are alternated with a chorus, a repeated section of lines that contains the title or tagline. The verses follow a single rhyme scheme and melody, and the lyrics vary from verse to verse. A familiar example of the "verse-chorus" song structure is "Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin'" from *Oklahoma!*

These formats are fundamental for musical improvisers. "We practice these structures to give the songs actual melodies and hooks," says Nancy Howland Walker, a former member of ImprovBoston and creator of Chicago's *Musical the Musical*. Gilbane elaborates: "Without these traditional structures, improvisers will just do rhymed couplets that are funny."

When improvisers follow these structures, they also simplify the composition process by making use of a basic tool of songwriters: repetition. "The best songwriting is all about repetition," explains Adam Felber, music director of Freestyle Rep's *Spontaneous Broadway* and a seasoned musical improviser in his own right. "You have to learn to repeat yourself," he says, citing the chorus of The Beatles' "Yellow Submarine" as an example of how repetition creates a satisfying chorus.

But using accepted song structures does more than help the singer create more complete and hummable melodies. They also help the performers connect with the audience. "The structures are what make the song sound like a 'real' song," says Gilban. "Even if the audience isn't consciously aware of the structure, they recognize it. It's what makes the song sound like it's been written in advance." These structures also help the ensemble build complex group numbers out of a simple solo. Once the first singer has established the tagline or the chorus, other cast members know what material will be repeated and can join in the chorus or add a verse of their own.

Performers rely on a similar set of conventions to guide the development the show as a whole. For example, many musicals start with an opening number that introduces the main character or set the scene (such as "Attend the Tale" from *Sweeney Todd* or "Oh What a Circus" from *Evita*). Similarly, many musicals introduce an "I wish"

song early in the first act. In the “I wish” song, the protagonist expresses a motivating desire which will create momentum for the rest of the plot (examples include “Somewhere that’s Green” from *Little Shop of Horrors* or “Much More” from *The Fantasticks*). Other conventional elements include the “revolution song” (which contains a turning point in the plot) and the “closing number,” in which final conflicts are resolved.

How these conventions are employed varies from company to company. In coaching her cast for *Musical! the Musical*, Walker relies on a set list of these elements to create a framework for her performers. While the accompanist plays the overture, her cast meets to make decisions about the main characters and the nature of the various elements, which are then inserted into a larger, pre-set format. Other groups, including Jazz Hands, play more fast and loose with the forms, relying on cast members’ awareness of the forms to create structure, but not predetermining which pieces will appear when.

While musical conventions provide the framework, improvisational skills and technique fuel the mayhem. “Just as in traditional improv, in musical improv the focus is on heightening the emotion,” explains Mike Descoteaux, music director at Second City Chicago and founder of Jazz Hands Across America. “You’re constantly looking for ways to raise the stakes for the character.” In his classes at Second City, Descoteaux leads his students in the standard games and exercises developed by improv guru Viola Spolin. “We do object work, movement games to develop an awareness of the space, and relational exercises to learn how to offer and take ideas.”

The difference, he explains, is that in musical improv, you need to use those principles to build to an even higher emotional pitch. “In a musical, a song only comes because the character can no longer contain the feeling in words,” Descoteaux explains. “You need to make all the emotions more intense so that each scene builds to a



The cast of MUSICAL! the musical.

song.” In fact, he insists, building the preparation of the song is as important as the construction of the song itself. “To make the song successful, you need a scene that *must* have a song.”

The rehearsal process

It’s in rehearsal that performers master the skills they need to “build to the song.” But how does a cast rehearse for a show that changes every night?

“Preparing for a musical improv show is quite like preparing for any improv show,” explains Pollock. “It’s a matter of practicing the ‘games’ you intend to play, providing your own audience suggestions as you go.”

Gilbane starts his rehearsals with warm-ups adapted from traditional improv. To reinforce the song structures and build communication, he has his ensemble create a “song circle.” The group improvises a song line by line, with each member adding a new

line in turn. In “musical hotspot,” Gilbane’s cast practices a sort of musical free association, taking turns singing parts of song that are triggered or suggested by the song just sung.

After the warm-up, much of rehearsal is taken up with reviewing and practicing the show format. In rehearsing for *Opening Night: The Improvised Musical*, Pollock doesn’t run his cast through entire shows. “We just do scenes with songs in them, featuring everything from solos to ensemble numbers. If we’re having trouble with a particular aspect of the show, we work on that.”

Rehearsals are also a time to hone in on specific skills that are key to improv, songwriting, and playwriting. Pollock explains: “We do exercises with specific goals in mind, to improve skill in creating lyric stories, rhyming, improvising harmony and back-up vocals, and creating good endings.”

In addition, Descoteaux treats rehearsal as an opportunity to analyze the various styles and components of musical theatre to make sure everyone has the same knowledge base. "In rehearsal, we may tackle an 'I wish' song in the style of Stephen Schwartz, and then we'll discuss what makes it work," Descoteaux explains. "In performance, we'll throw that out the window; it's not something we'll consciously rely on, but we've got it in our collective memory." Through rehearsal and discussion, Descoteaux's group identifies the techniques they can use and develops new terminology to help them share and record their discoveries. "We come up with new terms at each rehearsal," says Descoteaux.

Skills and challenges

So what does it take to be a successful musical improv actor? A great voice helps, but that's only one of a variety of strengths musical improv directors prize.

When screening auditioners, Descoteaux looks for other qualities: an ability to commit to what is happening on stage, a hunger to tear into the musical form and see how it works, and an ability to listen. "Cast members need to be able to carry a tune, but a great voice is pretty low on the list of priorities," he says.

Pollock agrees that a great voice isn't key, but suggests that performers have at least a good sense of rhythm. "This is the most basic component of music—where it all begins," he says. And if a performer has some formal music background, he suggests, that's even better. Joining choir, taking voice lessons, or learning to play an instrument are all ways to develop the musical skills that underpin musical improv.

In addition, nearly all musical improvisers agree that having an extensive knowledge of musical theatre, different styles of music, and pop culture in general is indispensable. "Musical improv is basically a form of parody," Descoteaux notes. "In order to parody a genre, you need to know about it, so you need to have a wide knowledge of pop genres, acting styles and types of

Resources for musical improv theatre

See a show
The Musical Improv Company
www.musicalimprovco.com
Boston

Musical! the Musical
www.musicalthemusical.com
Chicago

Jazz Hands Across America
www.jazzhandsamerica.com
Chicago

Spontaneous Broadway
Freestyle Repertory Theatre
www.echonyc.com/~freestyle
New York City

The Next Big Broadway Musical
www.felbers.net/bway.html
New York City

Opening Night: The Improvised Musical
<http://home.comcast.net/~OpeningNight>
Los Angeles

Take a class
Second City Training Centers
Courses are offered in musical improv at both the Chicago and Los Angeles training centers. The Chicago training center is planning a teen program in musical improv; for Chicago, call 312-664-3959; for Los Angeles, call 323-658-8190 or 888-873-9285.
www.secondcity.com

Learn more
Musical Comedy Improv: Creating Songs in the Moment, by Michael Pollock, SCB Distribution, book and CD edition, 2004; available on Amazon.com.

"Singing Above the Rim: The Road to Stronger Musical Improv," by Adam Felber, online at www.yesand.com/features/archives/felber.html

"Musical Improv, Part Deux and Part 2," By Steve Gilbane, online at www.yesand.com/features/archives/musicstructure.html

songs. You can't do a scene in the style of film noir if you don't know what film noir is."

Even when a performer brings all these talents to the stage, musical improv is a demanding form. "Musical improv is really hard to do well," Gilbane admits. "Performers have so many balls in the air. They are singing, staying in rhythm, staying in the song form, maintaining the rhyme scheme, staying in character, and advancing the story line. Plus," he adds, "they have to be funny and be physical."

And even when a performer has mastered all those skills, there's one more challenge to meet: staying fresh. Says Felber: "It's hard to stay improvisational, to really listen and not simply do the things you always do." Pollock agrees, and sees the challenge as fundamental to the discipline of musical improv. "For both directors and performers, it's challenging to keep creat-

ing something fresh and interesting that also works well *because* it's so conventional. Once you've got all these conventions in your repertoire of possibilities, it's easy to get bored with yourself as you do them over and over."

But even with the challenges, musical improv is the kind of discipline that seems worth the work for its practitioners. "The best moments happen when you have no idea where a song is going, and it goes in a direction you'd never expect," says Gilbane. "You end up with something great that you never would have imagined or scripted."

Kay Daly is a freelance writer and editor based in Chicago. She formerly served as the managing editor for America Online's Local City Guide, and currently writes for a variety of publications.