

A “Show Us Your Neighborhood” Tour Cure Workshop

By Margaret Hicks CTG

January 12, 2016 – 10:30am & 1:00 p.m.

Nine people signed up for the morning session and eight signed up for the afternoon workshop. Both were led by Margaret Hicks CTG.

Introduction

Margaret began by telling participants that Improv has long been a part of her repertoire as her mother sent her to teen classes at Second City at the tender age of 15! Since then, Margaret has participated in countless improv workshops, spanning at least 15 years. She assured that the class members that improv would help us “work with what we got” and that we would find (to quote her friend Rebecca) that, “Improv never doesn’t help.”



The very first agenda item was to pay homage to the originator of the “games” that we would play—Viola Spolin. The <http://www.spolin.com/> website says this:

Theater educator, director, and actress recognized internationally for her “Theater Games” system of actor training, was raised in a tradition of family theater amusements, operas, and charades. Viola Spolin trained initially (1924-26) to be a settlement worker, studying at Neva Boyd’s Group Work School in Chicago. Boyd’s innovative teaching in the areas of group leadership, recreation, and social group work strongly influenced Spolin, as did the use of traditional game structures to affect social behavior in inner-city and immigrant children.

While serving as drama supervisor for the Chicago branch of the Works Progress Administration’s Recreational Project (1939-1941), Spolin perceived a need for an easily grasped system of theater training that could cross the cultural and ethnic barriers within the WPA Project. Building upon the experience of Boyd’s work, she responded by developing new games that focused upon individual; creativity, adapting and focusing the concept of play to unlock the individual’s capacity for creative self-expression. These techniques were later to be formalized under the rubric “Theater Games.”

Never heard of Viola? Maybe you have heard of her son, Phil Sills? Paul Sills used his mother’s games and techniques at the University of Chicago theater troupe, the Compass Players. That company eventually morphed into Chicago’s Second City Comedy Club. Basically, every other improvisational comedy troupe came later and has used the same techniques! So Improv really is a Chicago thing! It is on our blood. (Take that Saturday Night Live!)

The Process

Participants were invited to turn off their planning brain and just “go with the flow” and participate fully in the games of the workshop. There were/are no right and wrong answers. If/when something unexpected (possibly bad) happens in class and with life, look at it as a gift and opportunity. Be positive and use “Yes...and” (a guiding tenet for improv and often part of storytelling) to accept whatever comes your way, embracing the ideas and concepts offered by tour participants. Whose tour is it afterall?



Margaret does not “teach” the games, rather she explains how they are played and participants discover for themselves how things work and draw their own conclusions. Some games made participants more aware of how they move and speak and demonstrated how body language, body position and

movements can express feelings or moods that can be interpreted (by tour participants).

There were eight different “play” exercises conducted in each class. Three of exercises were unique to each class—the afternoon class used three exercises that the morning class did not do.

Introductions, taking bows, using your power of observation, connecting the body (posture) to emotions, as well as team building and group exercises were done in both sessions. Variations of “Yes...and” were part of both workshops.

The morning group had an excellent exercise that helped to focus listening and repeating an ever shorter version of a story, until you get to the “headline” version then finally a one word version. This exercise is great way to add and subtract to when writing or giving tour commentary to whittle away at what you say and how you say it until you get to the very essence of the message!

The morning class also played a game involving doing one thing and saying something completely different. This seemed applicable to all those times a guide must direct a bus driver while giving interesting commentary! Of notice things like traffic up ahead while taking about what is outside the window.

In the afternoon session, questions were posed to a trio of (pretend) experts who responded to several questions about their specialty. Afterwards, the observers in the class noted how the “experts” spoke authoritatively, sat with good posture, and formed thoughtful expressions as they responded to the posed questions...all things a good guide should do!

In another effort to boil things down to the essential when speaking, the afternoon class used a memorized song or repetitive refrain (Row Row Your Boat, Twinkle Twinkle Little Star, Pledge of Allegiance) to demonstrate to themselves how one naturally adjusts aspects of any speech to convey varying emotions (anger, sadness, excited) or when in varying scenarios (in Soldier Field, a hospital room).

Summary

Each class was about 90 minutes long, with time at the end for questions and to give feedback to Margaret who would like to conduct many more sessions like this! In her favor, all participants overwhelming indicated that they would have liked the class to be longer and/or repeated! We may be hearing more about “Show Us Your Neighborhood” Tour Cure Workshops led by Margaret!

The consensus was that as an instructor, Margaret really tried to embody the philosophy of Viola Spolin: *“Do not teach. Expose students to the theatrical environment through playing, and they will find their own way.”*

Written by: Donna Primas CTG

Here is where people can sign up to be on a newsletter if they are curious about future workshops offered by Margaret: <http://www.chicagoelevated.com/training/>

Here is a write-up by Margaret and some fun photos:

<http://www.chicagoelevated.com/2016/01/15/tour-guide-training-or-what-ive-been-working-really-hard-on/>

Larissa Rolley said, "I had a lot of take-aways, great food for thought as I think about how I conduct my tours, and life! Right now the first one that comes to mind: Embrace the awkward moments, there will be many and they can be gold."

"I just wanted to tell you what a great learning experience I had at the workshop. I really learned a lot and had fun doing all the games, they will come in handy for giving my tours. I also really enjoyed connecting with other guides." – **Char Michel**