



# Tempo

Arts & Entertainment Magazine of The Taos News

Feb. 26-Mar. 3, 2004

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## THE ART OF BEING

A deliciously dangerous dance  
on the edge of the unknown  
with Daena Giardella

# The art *of* being

**A deliciously dangerous dance on the edge of the unknown with Daena Giardella**

By R. Scott Gerdes



Rick Romancito

**Daena Giardella said** she was “very inspired by Lucille Ball, Jonathan Winters and Red Skelton — I would watch their TV shows and feel like I understood exactly what they were doing.”

**E**ven if a person is not an actor by trade, the confidence, risk-taking and physical-vocal freedom that acting teaches can be a valuable asset. Improvisational acting is about making choices and daring to give those choices your fullest commitment, even before you know why or where the decision will take you.

Local professional actor, director and coach Daena Giardella is holding the one-

day workshop “Improvisation Acting Laboratory” Sunday (Feb. 29) from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. at the Taos Community Studio with the purpose of giving people from all walks of life a deeper understanding of themselves and possibly of others.

For more than 20 years, Giardella has been developing innovative improvisation teaching techniques. She has taught and performed numerous one-woman shows in the United States and abroad.

Like cutting up a Robin Williams routine, editing Giardella’s responses would be blasphemous. So without further adieu, meet the highly touted, energetic, amiable performer and coach Daena Giardella....



**Daena Giardella:** I think improvisation is a combination of quick reaction, acute listening, passionate generosity to contribute something to the next moment, a willingness to accept the invitations of others, and a facility to respond fully with a specific and committed choice even when we have no idea where it will lead. We are reacting to everything on stage — to ourselves and our own ideas, impulses and imaginations. There is an ongoing editing process that is essential. I call this skill the improviser's art of selectivity. Which impulses to follow? How long? Which impulses to let go? When? It is split-second decisions about timing and shaping and extemporaneous writing. It is crucial for the improviser to learn to distinguish the inner critic from the inner editor. Improvisation as a performance form does not mean "anything goes." This would not be art. The striving is to continually sharpen the dramatic elements. We trust and act from the moment while simultaneously paying attention to our vision of the whole.

The improvisational actor also responds to the other performers on stage as well as the audience members whose laughter, sighs, tears, facial expressions, breathing, energy and thoughts become part of the performance.

However, improvisation is much more than simply various forms of reaction. Improvisation is about initiating, offering, inviting, inventing, collaborating, imagining and adding something that was not there before you came. The skillful impro-

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Rick Romancito

**In one of her more serious roles,** Giardella helped organize a performance remembering the Sept. 11, 2001 terror attacks which took place one year later at the Taos Community Auditorium.



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viser has a deep center or core from which she or he can be equally facile in both initiating and responding.

**Tempo:** *Do you ever fall back on defined story structures when doing improvisation?*



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## Improv workshop

■ **When:** Sunday  
(Feb. 29), 11 a.m.  
to 4 p.m.

■ **Where:** Taos  
Community Studio,  
1219 Gusdorf Road

■ **Information:** (505)  
776-9636

**DG:** Over the years, I have created and developed a very specific form of improvisation that has been described as “theatrical jazz” or structured improvisation. For each show, I invent a loose “spine” or structure that may revolve around plot or characters or some other thematic element. These pieces of structure are like islands that I know I will visit during the course of the

performance. How and when I will get there, as well as who I will be on the way, make up the fabric of the improvisation. These islands of structure become my framework that can support endless possibilities for jamming on that theme. No two performances are ever the same. In music, a virtuoso improviser needs to be well trained in the language of music as well as respectful of the thematic structure of the particular tune. Similarly, I like to give myself certain structures that I will agree to accept and return to as I develop the improvisations each night. The limits of a few structured elements provide the potential for great freedom. I try to be loyal to the basic building blocks of dramatic development and characterization.

**Tempo:** *Is improvisation the most social form of acting?*

**DG:** All styles of acting are “social.” Acting is the art of making active, dynamic events on stage that grow out of a relationship. The most important building blocks of relationships are honesty, good listening, generosity and the ability to support each other. These are the very same qualities that actors must rely on when they are creating roles whether on stage or in film. Improvisational acting takes this a step further because solid teamwork is one of the most important elements in successful improvisations. The other social dimension to improvisation is the potential interplay with the audience. Theater began thousands of years ago as an improvisation. The earliest human beings had an irrepressible need to grapple with the meaning of life, birth, illness, relationships, death, power and the mysteries of the universe. They improvised. And it was a very social endeavor. They created community rituals, enactments, cave paint-



Courtesy of the artist

**According to Giardella,** “Predictable patterns of behavior are the enemy of improvisation.”

ings, dances, songs and plays to tell their stories and communicate their feelings, confusion and beliefs. This original spirit of improvisation was obviously a highly social community expression. The same is true today. Improvisation offers a sense of transformational immediacy and collective creativity. The audience’s responses, ideas and imagination (whether overtly expressed or privately felt) complete the circle of co-creation that gives each performance its distinctive life.

**Tempo:** *Is the stage your playground?*

**DG:** Yes, definitely! The stage is my playground, and I am an explorer on an adventure to discover the next impulse, image or character. It’s fun, it’s exciting — it is a deliciously dangerous dance on the edge of the unknown.

A playground is a place where you can play, experience freely, invent your own games, make up the rules, and be in charge of what happens next. It’s a release from everything that feels limiting. When I am on stage during one of my one-woman improvisational theater performances the props, costumes, musicians, audience members are my other “playmates” as I create the moment-to-moment arc of the story line.

**Tempo:** *What or who drew you to improvisation?*

**DG:** As a child, I was always improvising, playing lots of characters, entertaining my brother with mini plays. At an early age, I remember being enthralled by the people on TV

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Courtesy of the artist

Giardella's theatrical characters can range from the smoldering ...

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and saying to myself: "I can do that!" I would make up characters, monologues, stories, dances and dialogue. Later, I realized that there was a name for this — improvisation!

I am certain I was very inspired by Lucille Ball, Jonathan Winters and Red Skelton — I would watch their TV shows and feel like I understood exactly what they were doing. Maybe my biggest influence was cartoons. I loved their fast paced, clever twists and turns where anything can happen. The cartoon protagonists and antagonists are really ace improvisers who relentlessly look for ways to surmount unexpected obstacles as they try to outwit each other. To this day, I often still think and imagine in cartoons.

**Tempo:** *I read that the focus in your workshop is to transform the "inner critic" into a source of positive energy and creativity. Do you find improvisation to be a release from one's definition of oneself?*

**DG:** Yes, particularly any negative definitions of self that may get in the way of expressing who we really are. Improvisation cultivates the same skills that are most needed for freedom and success in everyday life and work. Improvisation develops our ability to take risks, express our creativity and trust our spontaneity. It helps us to overcome our fears, shame and limiting self-images as we learn to respond to the unexpected and enter the unknown



Courtesy of the artist

...to the seriously nerdy.

with a spirit of "yes" instead of "no". Everybody has a very industrious "inner critic" who perpetually monitors and reviews our every move. Who has not heard the familiar grumblings inside our heads that sound like: "Why did you say that at the meeting? Why didn't you say this? You will look like a real jerk if you do that! Don't get up and speak in front of all those people because you will make a fool of yourself." You're not creative. Blah, blah, blah....

Improvisation is a practice, like yoga or tai chi where we learn to stretch our confidence muscles and transform the "inner critic" into a source of positive energy and creativity. The various poses of yoga are parallel to the countless roles that we must become adept at playing both on stage but also in life. One minute you're an employee listen-

ing to your boss give you a job performance evaluation. The next minute you're on the phone with your best friend planning a camping trip. Then you're a mom with a sick child at home from school. A few hours later, you are a writer searching around for the next sentence. Improvisational practice helps us to gain greater flexibility as we navigate the unpredictable and often challenging circumstances of our lives. Improvisers develop inner and outer spaciousness that enable them to think and act with grace and gusto on their feet as they meet the day. The skills of improvisation are directly applicable to everyday life.

**Tempo:** *Could, then, improvisation be viewed more as a vehicle from which to put one's normal and expected daily routines aside?*

**DG:** Yes, indeed! Our normal daily activities and routines become prisons that inhibit our free think-

ing and our experimental nature. Most of these routines began as improvisations where we were trying to figure out how to do something or organize our day. In this early stage of problem solving there is a sense of experimentation — we are all a flutter with inventor's anxiety. Can we figure out how to make it work? Eventually it morphs into a predictable pattern of behavior. That's when the aliveness of experimentation gives way to the mindlessness of routine. Predictable patterns of behavior are the enemy of improvisation. When we enter the improvisational workshop space, we invite ourselves and others to put aside these patterns in order to make room for the magic of the unknown to emerge. Creativity thrives when we do not limit our imagination or "fall back" on past



“schticks” or solutions. Improvisation is the art of the unknown and the science of the unexpected. It is a vehicle for making new discoveries. This vehicle runs on the fuel of our eternal curiosity. Improvisation is also the art of the moment. We learn to wake up and make the most of each moment by finding the balance between listening and initiating. Because there is no predetermined script to depend upon, we are forced to dip into the well of our creative impulses and instincts. We develop a sense of trust in our creative process. We are children playing on that playground again as we practice believing in ourselves and our playmates enough to make believe!

**Tempo:** *Most of us lose touch with our spontaneous self. Why do you think that is?*

**DG:** There are many factors that contribute to this erosion of spontaneity. Webster defines the word spontaneous as “proceeding from a natural feeling or native tendency without external constraint; controlled and directed internally.” The word comes from the Latin “sponte” which means “voluntarily, of one’s free will.” In our fast-paced and very structured lives there seems to be little space for freedom from external constraint. First, most our everyday institutions of human interaction including our educational, family and work settings often do not necessarily reward spontaneity. A key method for surviving a dysfunctional family or classroom experience is to train oneself not to stand out, to carefully plan what we will say or do, to leave no room for the unexpected because this might invite attack. Secondly, our lives are over scheduled and saturated with externally generated imagery and information. Most of us are walking around saying we don’t have enough time in our lives. We’re over booked, over stimulated and over tired. We yearn to stop everything and cut the cables of 24/7 perpetual input so we can take a breath and listen to our internal “channels.” On top of that, we accumulate lots of life’s battle scars and waxy build up along the way that add to our sense of inhibition, tentativeness, numbness and fear. Our “inner critics” play a large role in encouraging us to lose touch with our spontaneous selves by telling us that everything we say and do must be monitored or else disaster will happen.

**Tempo:** *Is your workshop for actors and non-actors alike?*

**DG:** My workshops are always for both actors and non-actors. I believe that the

learning process benefits greatly when people from diverse walks of life cross-fertilize each other during the improvisational training. People from a wide variety of backgrounds and professions come to my workshops. They improvise alongside actors who may or may not have experience in improvisation. Participants in my workshops have included educators, business owners, accountants, psychotherapists, lawyers, yoga teachers, massage therapists, organizational trainers, human resource employees, managers, police officers, helping professionals, dancers, writers, artists, doctors, nurses, clergy, group facilitators, CEOs, social change activists, healers, and child care providers. People from all levels of experience in improvisation, including beginners, are welcome. The beginners help us remember the value of “beginner’s mind” as we advance in the mastery of the skills.

**Tempo:** *Do you find that improvisation benefits both actors and non-actors in much the same ways or differently?*

**DG:** On a personal level, both actors and non-actors benefit similarly as they develop freedom of expression, confidence, emotional flexibility and trust for one’s impulses. Actors can then apply these skills to their craft. Improvisational dexterity serves an actor tremendously in auditions, during the development of original material for performance, and in the rehearsal process for scripted plays. Many of the techniques of improvisation can be very useful as an actor is developing a character or investigating the various “beats” of a script. The non-actor can apply the skills of improvisation to the countless work and/or life situations that call for adept handling of unexpected events and obstacles. Improvisation is a tool for everyday life — it gives us direct access to our creativity. It helps us to be proactive instead of passive.

**Tempo:** *How has improvisation changed your life and yourself?*

**DG:** Improvisational practice permeates my life. I feel totally alive and energized when I am on stage improvising. I view it as a kind of spiritual practice for the development of self and community. It informs my relationship to just about everything. And it greatly influenced my work in that the body of original performances I have created are largely inspired by the art of improvisation.

For more information, fees and registration details on Giardella’s workshop visit her Web site at [www.daenagiardella.com](http://www.daenagiardella.com) or call (505)776-9636.

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