



# DAENA GIARDELLA'S

# ACTING LABORATORY

Daena Giardella



*above,*  
Daena directing students in her class.

*right page top left clockwise,*  
An improvisational moment in Daena's class.

Daena Giardella

Daena Giardella coaches a student.

All photos are by Damian Hickey.

My journey as an acting teacher and coach grew directly from my passion as an actor. I love everything about the process of acting on stage - the freedom, the creativity, the exhilaration of investigating a character idea and transforming it into a living human being in whom the audience can recognize itself. The acting process feels like a microcosm of our birth to life to death evolution that allows the actor to learn something about herself that she did not know before she encountered this new character, script, or story. For me, the best way to nurture this creative process is to have an open laboratory for exploration that allows the actor to experiment, take risks, stumble, and discover. I enjoy being on both sides of that process as both an actor and a director or teacher. As an actor, my passion has been the creation of numerous solo theatre performances that focus on themes from the zeitgeist of current events in a format of structured improvisation where I play multiple characters in a specific story.

My impulse to offer ongoing improvisation and acting workshops began in 1980. I was inspired to create dynamic laboratories for the imagination where actors, writers, directors, and dancers as well as people from other professions could learn, explore, and invent together. Over the years I have had the privilege of collaborating with over ten thousand students both here and abroad.

When I teach students in my workshops the skills of acting and improvisation, I am calling upon my own instincts as an actor, while simultaneously sensing what each person needs to learn in order to express his fullest potential. It's a thrill to see people grow and discover their creativity, freedom of expression, and ability to be in the moment! In my workshops we explore both comedic and dramatic material scenes, characters, and monologues. While improvisation has often become associated with comedy, I have always been interested in improvisation as an acting form that can give honest expression to the whole range of human emotion and stories from the profoundly dramatic to the wildly funny. I often work with actors, writers, and directors who are developing original plays, rehearsing one of the classics, or preparing for an audition. The improvisation laboratory is an ideal environment to flesh out a character or experiment with story ideas.

Most of us lose touch with our spontaneous selves. There are many factors that contribute to this erosion of spontaneity. In our fast-paced and very structured lives there seems to be little space for freedom from external constraint. First, most of 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 tough early 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 criticism.



As a leadership and communication consultant and executive coach, Daena has offered numerous programs for world-class companies, organizations, and academic institutions in the USA and abroad. She currently teaches at MIT Sloan School of Management and she was formerly on the faculty in the theatre departments at Boston's Emerson College and Boston Conservatory.

Daena has co-authored a book with Wren Ross called, *Changing Patterns: Discovering the Fabric of Your Creativity*, which explores the creative process as a tool for selfdevelopment and change. Her spoken word CD entitled *Improvisation in Everyday Life* discusses the application of improvisation skills for professional and personal settings.

Secondly, our lives are over scheduled and saturated with externally generated digital media information and imagery that leaves little room for the emergence of our spontaneous thoughts, impulses, and ideas. 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, which add to our sense of inhibition, tentativeness, numbness, and fear.

Our "inner critics" play a large role in causing 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. I have found that this is a universal inner experience that transcends culture, geography, and family background. A reliable pathway to recover our sense of aliveness and spontaneity is the practice of improvisation, which also has the advantage of being great fun!

Many people assume that all actors are comfortable improvising. I have found that this is not necessarily true. Countless actors have taken my workshops and told me that cultivating their ability to improvise has greatly helped them with auditions, rehearsals, and the creation of original performances. The audition process requires dexterity to be in the moment to respond to the unexpected prompts of the casting director. Many times in auditions we are given a script on the spot where the challenge is to transform a cold read into a warm point of connection with the camera or audience. Or even if we have the script in advance, our ability to navigate the unpredictable atmosphere and pressure of the audition experience with

presence, humor, confidence, and creativity may be the ingredient that ensures that we will stand out. Improvisation is a very useful tool for actors to explore a script in the rehearsal process as they dissect the character's arc, back-story, motivations, intentions, and inner obstacles. And improvisational skillfulness is an indispensable tool for actors, directors, dancers, and writers who wish to transform personal or fictional material into theatre or film.

I realized very early in my career that improvisation cultivates the same skills that are most needed for freedom and success in everyday life and work. Many people from diverse occupations take my workshops because improvisation develops their ability to take risks, express their creativity, and trust their spontaneity. They tell me that it helps them become more comfortable in their own skin and more facile thinking and speaking on their feet. Improvisation helps us to overcome our fears, shame, and limiting self-images as we learn to respond to the unexpected and enter the unknown with a spirit of "Yes, and..." instead of "Yes, but" or "No." The improvisational "Yes, and..." mindset is the key to successful collaboration.

Improvisation is a practice, like yoga or tai chi where we learn to stretch our confidence muscles and transform the rumblings of the self-doubt and self-consciousness. Everybody has a very industrious "inner critic" who perpetually tracks and reviews our every move. Who has not heard the familiar grumbings inside our heads that sound like: "Why did you say that at the meeting? You sounded like an idiot! 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...." One of the first lessons I introduce to students

is that the "inner critic" can be transformed into a source of constructive energy and creativity. 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 act and respond with grace and gusto as they meet the day.

The skills of improvisation are directly applicable to other professional settings. In addition to running my own thriving acting and improvisation teaching programs, I also work as a leadership and communication consultant and executive coach. Shortly after I began teaching acting many years ago, I created a consulting business, which brings me to numerous organizations around the USA and abroad.

I also teach Improvisational Leadership at MIT Sloan School of Management through the MIT Leadership Center. My dual careers in business organizational and leadership development as well as in the performing arts have always cross-fertilized each other and stimulated my own learning. I love bringing the skills of acting, improvisation, and leadership to diverse populations.

Improvisation and leadership are closely connected because each of these areas of expertise relies on one's ability to influence others effectively and creatively while building strong collaborative teams. The best improvisers and leaders share three essential traits: Generosity, empathy, and keen listening. As we face today's current events and global issues, these are qualities that are surely needed.

For more information visit <http://www.daenagiardella.com>.