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Lawyer Walks Into a Comedy Club

But can Shawn Westfall teach legal types how to get laughs?

By Robert Loper
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If "funny people are smart people and lawyers are smart people," as Shawn Westfall maintains, does that mean lawyers are funny people?

While the answer is clear to a logician, the puzzler is a challenge Westfall takes up one improv class at a time. The 42-year-old senior copywriter at the Washington Speakers Bureau has taught improv classes at the **DC Improv Comedy Club** for the last four years.

Since this is Washington, that means that Westfall has taught a fair number of lawyers. To some it might seem he's attempting the impossible: teaching a group of professionals trained to be risk averse to take the plunge into spontaneity in front of an audience looking for laughs.

As improbable as it sounds, the effort seems to be working. If you've seen the TV show "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" you're likely to be pretty familiar with improv's basic setup: The audience suggests a relationship or location that the actors use to create a scene on the spot.

In Westfall's case, the students give a graduation performance after they have completed two courses in improv. Under his direction, they run through some of the classic games of the genre, such as the ABC game (one of the simplest), which might begin something like this:

First performer: "Are you sure we're going in the right direction?"

Second performer: "By looking at the sun, I know that's east."

First performer: "C'mon, you don't even know your right hand from your left."

The first performer starts it off: The first letter of his first word starts the pattern. The second performer follows with a line in which the first letter of the first word begins with the next letter of the alphabet.

Simple, right? But the trick is to be quick. You have to come up with a line that plays into what becomes an increasingly zany conversation, always remembering which letter of the alphabet you have to begin with.

At a student performance, as the game goes on, inspiration begins to flag and desperation takes over.

"Don't give me that, you're the one that got us lost in the desert."

"Every time you bring that up, I want to punch you in the face."

"Frankly my dear, I don't give a damn."

"Gee, that's really original."

"Ha, you think you're so clever."

Any word with the right first letter is pressed into service, and as the responses shorten and ricochet off one another, the audience inevitably sees a mature adult with a responsible job forget his alphabet.

It's easy to see that these sorts of word games quickly create a "will they pull it off?" suspense in the audience. Westfall describes the situation by saying "there are two things happening [onstage] simultaneously — chaos and magic." Although by definition, improv is not rehearsed, there are some basic principles that help students control the chaos and reach for the magic.



From left to right: Improv comedy Instructor Shawn Westfall (back), and students Rishi Nangia (foreground), of Winston & Strawn; Donna Lewis, of the Department of Homeland Security; David Levine, of Groom Law Group; and Sean Stokes of Baller Herbst.

Credit: Diego M. Radzinski/Legal Times

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The ABC game illustrates two of these principles — “yes and” and active listening. Improv students are taught to always accept what their fellow actors provide them. If two performers are having a conversation and one says, “I’ve fallen in love with your aunt,” the other person cannot reject the notion and say, “I don’t have an aunt.” She may say something like “Good luck to you, she’s a nun,” but she can’t deny the premise offered.

In improv, since each scene is improvised, the performers can’t just concentrate on what they are going to say. They have to closely follow what the other person is saying and doing and then, on the fly, come up with something that drives the scene forward.

Although Westfall describes improv as the “most difficult theatrical art form [because] it combines the comic sensibilities of stand-up with the skills of a gifted actor,” he thinks anyone — even lawyers — can be taught to do it. The key, he says, is just “getting the hell out of your own way.” It requires “turning off the inner monitor” and making the choice to be spontaneous and playful. Can lawyers really do that?

FAST LEARNERS

Westfall says that lawyers actually make great improv actors. He calls them “smart, intellectually fearless...fast learners” who “work well under pressure.” In the process of taking improv classes, Westfall thinks lawyers learn to “check their egos and [their] urge to criticize.”

While that’s certainly a wonderful benefit for anyone, is ego-abatement the reason lawyers give for dabbling in improv? For Sean Stokes, 42, the motivation was simply a desire for a “fun sort of release.” Stokes, a principal at the Baller Herbst Law Group, based in D.C., says that as a lawyer “you have to restrain your impulses.” Improv, where, as he puts it, “the wronger” it is, “the better” it allows him to “avoid over-thinking.” David Levine, 34, a principal at the Groom Law Group in D.C., was looking for something “new and completely different from the legal world.” Improv lets him lower his “critical guard” and “invent on the fly.” Aliza Schechet, 29, a lawyer at the IRS’s Office of Professional Responsibility, says that because improv teaches you to “act and react to the unknown,” it’s a “fun way to let loose.”

But improv does more than that, the lawyers say. It also has a positive impact on their professional lives. Almost unanimously they describe being quicker on their feet, becoming a more active listener, and adopting a more collaborative style in interacting with others. Mitch Rothenberg, 25, an associate at Towson, Md.-based Bowie & Jensen, is “much more comfortable [in handling] an unknown situation.” Rothenberg, who took classes at the **Baltimore Improv Group**, says, “improv makes you want to work with other people.” He thinks improv provides “a really valuable skill for any [type of] interpersonal communication.”

Schechet agrees and thinks improv “teaches you to switch up your personality, outlook, and the way you interact.” Rishi Nangia, 32, an associate at Winston and Strawn’s D.C. office, says he reacts “better to novelty in depositions or with clients,” while Praveen Madhiraju, 31, in-house counsel at the Center for American Progress, says improv taught him the “importance of not scripting legal presentations.” And Luke Clippinger, 35, who most recently was managing a political campaign, has found the practice of “deliberately listening” to be “vital in working with a client.”

Donna Lewis, who took an improv class from Westfall as a form of mental “cross-training for her humor writing,” says improv “teaches critical skills that public speaking courses overlook.” A former litigator and now at the Department of Homeland Security, Lewis, 44, is a huge fan of the “yes and” principle. She asserts that lawyers, who she thinks are “all litigators at heart,” would do well to “adopt ‘yes and’ instead of saying ‘no.’” Nangia takes it a step further and says he wants his firm “to make improv part of the summer associate program.” He’d like to see the attorneys “mix it up with the summers” and really get to know one another.

The staid hierarchy of a law firm collapsing into a spontaneous free-for-all? Partners and associates playing the “Dating Game”? Now that sounds like a show well worth paying to see.

Robert Loper is a freelance writer living in Washington, D.C. He may have been in the audience at an improv performance or two, especially when his wife Rachael, a legal marketer, has been onstage.

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