

AN INSPIRING
RETREAT SHOWS
HOW CONFRONTING
STAGE FRIGHT CAN
BE A FUN-AND
FUNNY-WAY TO TAP
INTO HIDDEN
CONFIDENCE AND
CREATIVITY.
BY FRANCES
LEFKOWITZ

YOUR INNER showoff

PHOTOGRAPHS BY DOUG LONEMAN

THE BROCHURE FOR THIS "IMPROVISATION FOR THE SPIRIT" weekend retreat promises "laughter and self-discovery," but it's after lunch on the first day, and no one's laughing now. In a conference room at a Montana hot-springs resort, twenty-three women sit in a circle, talking, eating cookies and trying to keep their nerves at bay. "Who wants to go first?" asks Katie Goodman, leader of this unique workshop that uses theater improvisation games to spark personal growth. Timid squawks of "For what?" come from the circle. "I'm not going to tell you," says Goodman, who somehow manages to be charm-

ing and challenging at the same time. The chatter stops as the nerves take over. Then Ruthmarie, tall, thin, fifty-ish, jumps up. "I'll do it," she says, and the group, which includes lawyers and nurses, mothers and massage therapists, applauds her bravery. Goodman hands her a slip of paper with five words on it and tells her the assignment: Read the words to the audience, then, without stopping to think, deliver a monologue that incorporates all five words.

"Kleptomania, purple, Josh, how, buddy," reads Ruthmarie and launches right into a tale about a hypothetical nephew, Josh, and his buddy, who get caught stealing from a department store and wind up in prison, where an exemption from the usual uni-

form puts them in white suits and purple hats instead. This time the applause is for her accomplishment, which seemed to flow with hardly any effort at all.

The "Improvisation for the Spirit" workshops grew out of Goodman's overlapping interests in yoga and improvisational theater. "I've been doing both for so long, I'm not sure which came first," says Goodman, 31, an actor and certified Kripalu yoga instructor. She runs the Equinox Theatre and acting school with her husband, Søren Kisiel, also an actor, in Bozeman, Montana, and performs with two comedy improv groups, Spontaneous Combustibles (founded by Kisiel) and her own all-female group, Broad Comedy. But it was teaching yoga and theater classes that made her realize that the two disciplines operate on the same "rules." Both yoga and improvisation ask participants to be fully present, to trust in themselves and their surroundings, to let go of self-judgment, to take risks, to listen to their intuition, to be open to change and to give up their goals and surrender to the moment. It wasn't long before Goodman saw how these lessons applied to all kinds of people in all kinds of situations and created the workshops as a fun way for people to jump-start some personal transformations.

"I think people involved in personal growth can take themselves too seriously," says Goodman. "The playing aspect of this workshop is not only fun, it also allows for more creative expression, because you're more relaxed when you're laughing." The setting is important as well. This all-women's retreat is taking place in the rustic luxury of the Chico Hot Springs Lodge on the edge of Yellowstone National Park, adding to "a whole package of gentle exploration, gentle creativity," as Goodman describes it. In addition to the



improv games, that package includes journal writing, group discussion and off-time for reflecting alone and with new friends under the auspices of big mountains and even bigger sky. Though many of the women are attracted to the retreat for what Goodman calls “the sheer physical release of laughter,” the

their tissues. Goodman, a bundle of positive energy, cultivates this atmosphere of trust and openness. She likes to say, “How can we reframe that?” whenever someone uses the word “don’t,” and after every scene she asks the group, “What did they do well?”

The talk moves from Jackie to Deb,

especially poignant, and everyone in the room feels it. But it is Ginger, a recent transplant from Long Island, New York, to a Montana town of 150, who puts a voice to the feeling. “What we’ve learned here,” she says to the group, “is that if we just grab one thing and start, we’ll do OK.”

“If we keep laughing, we will remember that it’s OK if we aren’t perfect all the time.”

weekend won’t be all fun and games. “But my belief and experience is that they want that—they want deep exploration and epiphanies—but if they had to say yes to that right away, it’d be too much.”

ALL THE BRAVE AND WILLING HAVE delivered their monologues, and now it’s down to the most reluctant. Jackie, who’s here with a more outgoing friend, forces herself to stand up and take her list, then, grimacing, crams her five words into two brief sentences and sits down as quickly as possible. She clearly has not enjoyed a second of this, and Goodman, who’s handing out the word lists, pauses the game. “What were you feeling up there?” she asks.

“Fear,” says Jackie.

“What were you afraid of?”

“My inner critic,” says Jackie, tears now welling up in her eyes and throat. “I was afraid that I wasn’t going to be good enough or smart enough.”

Now the circle launches into a full-blown rap session—this is a group of women, after all, and they can talk—on fear, and confidence, and self-censorship and the omnipresent inner critic who seems to lurk like Darth Vader behind every performance this weekend. This is women at their best—laughing, empathizing and noticing and applauding every tiny milestone that anyone reaches. They are happy to share their vulnerabilities as well as

who wants to find “the source of the feelings of inadequacy,” and then on to several women who complain about criticism from the men in their lives. Goodman, who also offers coed workshops, believes that women-only groups create a unique atmosphere of safety and support. “I think all the stuff we learn here would apply to guys as well,” she explains later, but in coed groups, girls and women tend to hold back. “There’s a cultural bias that says women aren’t funny,” Goodman says, and part of her goal is to enable women to discover their own style of humor. “I think it’s just taken a while for women to decide what they want to say, and we have to get the men out of the room so we can stop copying them.”

Twenty minutes later, the discussion winds up and the five-word monologues continue. Then Goodman leads the group into a journal-writing exercise called “Ready, Fire, Aim,” in which the women write about something in their lives that they are going to do even though they are not quite ready to do it (buy a sailboat, enroll in graduate school, start a bodywork business). On the heels of the monologues and the talk on fear and criticism, this exercise is



SATURDAY EVENING, THE POOL, HEATED naturally by a hot spring, is steaming in the cool air, enveloping swimmers in a cinematic fog. Peg, whose teenage son takes classes at the Equinox Theatre, is hovering around the pipe that shoots the 101-degree water into the pool and talking about the impact that improvisation can have on life. “I’m really learning about recovery,” she says, describing a mistake she recently made at work, and how she was able to “accept it and let it go.” Tired of being a perfectionist, Peg is here because she wants to learn how to be more spontaneous. She got her first lesson before

she even left home. Packing for the weekend, she spilled coffee on the photo she was planning to show at the opening circle and was able not only to laugh it off, but to bring the stained photo and share the story with the group during the introductions. It was, as she points out, a perfect example of the improvisational concept of making something from the mishap.

Several of the women in this workshop are performers or aspiring performers—one teaches singing, another acts in local commercials. A few others give trainings and presentations at work and want to do better in front of

life.” Improvisation skills just may help. Some of the first lessons this weekend are about trusting your instincts and going with the flow, which Goodman teaches through simple group games, such as composing a story with each person in the circle contributing just one word. Then the games become more performance-oriented, with participants assuming characters, collaborating with other players and acting these scenes out in front of the rest of the group. In one exercise, player A sets the scene, B creates a conflict and C resolves it—all in about thirty seconds. It’s tough work, and midway through, Goodman offers the group a hint about

adjustments, these are social skills that could come in handy in almost any situation, from getting lost on a family vacation to negotiating a business deal. As Goodman puts it, “Improv teaches us how to live life. It teaches us to trust that everything you need is right there inside your head. It teaches us to stay open and flexible so that when something unexpected happens in the course of a game or a scene or life, we can go with it and not feel blocked or block others. And *comedy* improv teaches us that if we can keep laughing, we will remember that it’s OK if we aren’t perfect all the time.”

But how does performing in front of others help a person grow spiritually? Goodman sees performing as a catalyst



an audience. But for Peg and most of the others, improvisation seems almost irrelevant to their daily lives. Why, for instance, would an interior designer want to put herself on the spot by standing in front of two dozen strangers with no plan and try to come up with things to say and do to make them laugh?

Mary, the interior designer and one of the most withdrawn on-stage, says she’s here “to improve my ability to think on my feet.” Or, as thirty-something Liz Ann puts it, “I don’t want to walk away from this as ‘Miss Comedy Improv.’ I just want to be better at my

cooperation: The key, she says, is a combination of listening and responding to your partners plus paying attention to your own instincts and desires. “There are fine lines between sticking to your guns no matter what, adjusting and then giving yourself up altogether. Those are the three options—in the game, and in life.”

Goodman also talks about staying in character and affirming a partner’s offering, which is an improv way of saying acknowledge all suggestions, even if you don’t agree with them. Like making

“PEOPLE INVOLVED IN PERSONAL GROWTH CAN TAKE THEMSELVES TOO SERIOUSLY,” SAYS WORKSHOP LEADER KATIE GOODMAN (IN BLACK, DIRECTING SCENES).

for personal growth because it forces participants to confront their fears. As becomes clear during the retreat, the major fear is of inadequacy. Whenever players blank during a scene, paralyzed in awkward silence and unable to think of anything to do or say, Goodman believes they are responding to the harsh self-judgment of their internalized criti-

cal voice telling them that they can't do it. In her brochure, she mentions "gagging the inner critic," but at the retreat she explains that it's really a matter of negotiating with it and "assigning it a new job." Ruthmarie, the brave one who delivered the first monologue, agrees. "I've decided that there's no way I can quell my inner critic, so instead I'm cultivating another personality, my supporter," she tells the group. "And I find that I'm listening to my supporter more and more."

DAY TWO, AND A TABLE FULL OF HATS IS added to the mix: metal hard hats and lacy nightcaps, felt beanies and floppy straw hats and little-old-lady hats with fake flowers on the brim. Just a day ago, this group was giddy with anxiety; now they are jumping up like eager school kids when Goodman asks for volunteers. Four by four, they put on cowboy hats and Western drawls and enter the world of Cowgirl Poetry, creating spontaneous rhyming couplets on such disparate topics as ice cream and haircuts.


rules of the game

PARTY QUIRKS: AN IMPROV GAME
 Improv games can be used as icebreakers, team-building exercises and parlor games in social and professional get-togethers of all kinds. In Party Quirks (from the manual *Spontaneous Creation: Using Comedy Improvisation in the Classroom* by Katie Goodman and Søren Kisiel), groups of six or more children or adults will have fun laughing while learning observation skills.

HOW TO PLAY: Players pick or are assigned a character quirk—they are itchy or paranoid or speak in a singsong pattern, for instance. Players cannot say what their quirks are, they can only act them out. The setting is a cocktail party (or board meeting or other gathering), and one by one players enter the party acting out their quirk. As each new player enters the party, all of the other partygoers pick up the same quirk. The goal here is to show your own quirk as clearly as possible while trying to figure out everyone else's quirks. After everyone has entered the party, players sit in a circle and see whether the quirks were figured out correctly—misinterpretation is common and adds to the fun.

After poetry comes musical comedy, which draws on every skill this group has learned so far, from focusing to rhyming and problem solving, from taking center stage to knowing when to walk off-stage altogether. With Goodman at the piano, players take turns grabbing a hat—and a character—and contributing to the

scene. Then, when Goodman starts hitting the keys, those on stage respond by breaking into made-up songs about whatever they happen to be doing at that moment—whether it's strolling on a nude beach or lifting weights in front of a mirror. Wearing wigs and tablecloths and belting out arias, show tunes and coun-



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try-and-western ballads, the performers have the rest of the group laughing and clapping at their brilliant spontaneity and their sheer willingness to be silly.

Mary, the timid interior designer, enters the musical finale wearing a Mexican sombrero the size of a hula hoop—the most outrageous hat on the table—and literally brings the scene to a halt. On Mary's small frame, the hat is huge and cartoonish and looks like it's announcing her victory over her own shyness. The women in the audience, celebrating their own victories as well, break into laughter and applause.

As the sun goes behind the mountains, exhaustion has replaced anxiety. Goodman gets up from the piano and gathers the players into one last circle to think about how improvisation applies to life. After a few minutes of quiet writing, each woman, in turn, shares her life lessons with the group. They talk about learning to really listen, and how to deal with people who have different ideas of how things ought to be. They mention

empathy and spontaneity and self-forgiveness. Sharolyn brings up the importance of being a participant, instead of a bystander, and coming to your partner's rescue; others talk about trusting your partners to help you. For Kelly, the key lesson is to stay in character, in life and on-stage: "I tended to flounder more when I didn't have a clear identity of who I was," she says. Nancy brings up "the willingness to be bad and not feel bad about it," and Kathryn talks about "being able to stay calm and focused in a situation that feels out of control." They talk about making do with what's at hand, muddling through when things don't turn out as planned and seizing the moment without wondering whether they could do better.

Round the circle they go, describing the connections between improv and daily life in surprising and poetic ways. "One person can turn things around," says quiet-spoken Kate, and everyone nods in silent agreement. Then Deb, one of the younger players, talks about how

she would like to become "comfortable with creating conflict in my real life," and everyone laughs out loud in agreement. Just yesterday morning, these women sat in this circle and introduced themselves to a group of strangers. Now they are thanking each other—for the encouragement and the laughter—and trying to make the weekend's lessons concrete. But the final word belongs to Mary, of the giant sombrero. "Many of us started out out of our element," she says in her small, firm voice. "With nervous adrenaline yesterday, we blew into uncharted waters. We felt a little adrift at times, but only until a new wave came through—and if it didn't, we got out a paddle and we just kept trying." ♦

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