



The art of spontaneity

Text: Jess Bauldry

Photo: © Luxembourg's Pôle Impro (POIL)

Entertaining people on command may not come naturally for everyone but it's a key asset for members of Luxembourg's Pôle Impro (POIL). The 13-strong not for profit group, which was founded in April 2010, regularly entertains audiences in Luxembourg City with its improvised shows. Drawn from the depths of their imaginations, the performers have to be spontaneous on command, offering up a unique experience to each audience.

POIL president Fabien Culot explained: "For audience members it's a one-off show. They will see a piece of theatre that no one else will see. It's not like a scripted play or film which will be the same every time."

Improvisation is one of the oldest forms of entertainment, pre-dating scripted theatre. Its roots can be found in storytelling, which in the past was acted out. Commedia Dell'Arte, the Italian-based theatre style founded during the 1500s, was responsible for many of the comic gestures familiar in contemporary improv and comedy. Since then the art form has evolved, and can now be classed under short and long form improv. Short form games were first developed by performer Viola Spolin, and involve quick game scenarios as seen in TV series "Whose Line Is It Anyway?"

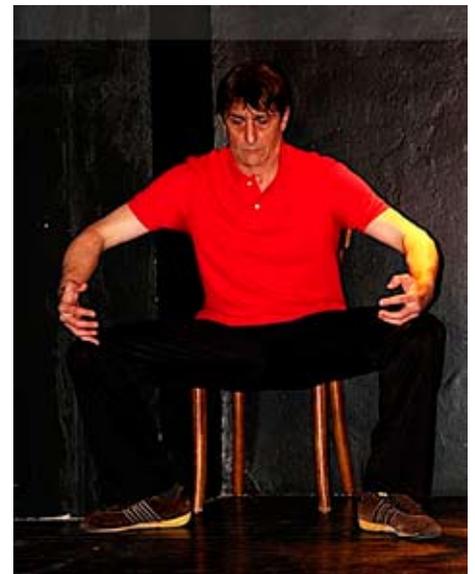
Long form can take the form to a full-length non-scripted play or musical. POIL focuses primarily on short form, though with some improv pieces lasting up to 45 minutes, it can vary. POIL's members are a mix of French, Belgian and German performers but that does not mean to say that each show is exclusive to French and German speakers. Fabien, a Belgian working in Luxembourg for the last 17 years, said: "We use a lot of clown gestures, singing, breathing etc. We work mainly in French but we have a lot of physical humour and gestures which surpass language so you don't necessarily have to be a French speaker to appreciate it. We also use onomatopoeic words, too, like 'blah, blah, blah', it's a language which everyone understands."

The troupe's shows tend to be either IMPRO TV (unique to Luxembourg) or Impro matches. The latter being a competition between teams to create an engaging piece

of theatre in a matter of minutes, which is regulated by a referee.

Improv TV focuses more on audience participation, as performers quiz individuals and create improv pieces inspired by their answers. The result is often surreal but always entertaining.

Surprisingly, the 14 members are not professional performers. POIL is an amateur group whose members have fairly run-of-the-mill day jobs. Fabien explained: "I work in communications. We have bankers, lawyers, oh and one hospital clown. Some people have done a bit of theatre but it's not their job. I started out knowing nothing at all about improv. A friend of mine did improv and took me to a show. After that I thought I would give it a go. That was five years ago. Now I know what I need to do to do it well. What's great about improv is that anyone can do it. There are a few basic concepts you need to learn but really everyone can have a go. Plus, we spend all day working in a bank or an office and improv allows us to express ourselves and above all, it's a lot of fun," said Fabien.



Training to be spontaneous is no easy feat. But, Fabien explained, there are basic concepts which can be learned and built on. "Improv is not prepared but, behind each show there is a lot of work. The main principles are listening and acceptance. When we have a story we

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have to take it further to make it work. It's important to accept what everyone brings to the story. You have to have confidence in yourself. You mustn't be afraid to perform in front of people for several minutes. Then there is imagination. We had imaginations as children but people believe that they lose them as they grow up. With improvisation you have to play, to become a girl in love at the checkout in Auchan, a sorcerer in Africa or a desperate man in the bus queue in London. It's really about calling up the child in us to construct a story and a show. Finally, there needs to be trust between the group and for that we have to meet up regularly, whether to train, attend cultural or other improv events or have a few drinks."

Like any public performance, improv can be a nerve-racking experience and no-one is immune to the odd mental block. But, said Fabien, camaraderie and support from the other performers is important. "That's what's good in improv. The others are always there to help you. It's really the group spirit and solidarity which I enjoy."

Catch POIL members performing at the following events:

January 8 IMPRO 4X4 with guest performers from Dijon, in Walferdange, from 8pm.

January 28 IMPRO 2X2 with guest performers from Belgium at Art Café, Luxembourg City.

January 29 IMPROLABO at Café-Théâtre ROCAS, Luxembourg City.

Entry to each show is 10 EUR (adults) and 5 EUR (children under 12).

Booking via email at resa@poil.lu.

POIL also runs public and private improvisation workshops. For more information, visit www.poil.lu

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