

SAAD KHAN

IMPROV COMEDY

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ABOUT THE SPEAKER

Saad Khan, born in Mumbai, India, is an Indian film director, screenwriter, acting teacher, creator & host of popular comedy show 'The Improv' and the founder of Centerstage, a new wave media movement based in Bangalore.

Centerstage deals with end-to-end television, digital & film production, casting, event management, cinema training portfolio and promotion of new artists. After working in Bollywood as an Associate Director to Oscar nominated filmmaker Ashutosh Gowariker, Saad made Bangalore's first Hindi feature film station, independently produced by Sumit Ghosh and released across India by PVR Director's Rare in 2014.

The film released in Indonesia as well, to positive reviews, and has newcomers acting alongside the established Bollywood actor Gulshan Grover. In 2015, Saad filmed his first Hollywood feature film titled 'Love and She' in Louisiana. Produced by Dr. Jatin Patel from Atlanta, the film is a drama about a married couple dealing with postpartum depression after miscarriage and stillbirth which came out in the year 2016. Saad graduated as a Mechanical Engineer from Bangalore, India and has a Master's degree in Communication and Film from the US.

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01

What is Improv Comedy?

In the first lesson, Saad defines improvisational comedy and briefly talks about what makes a good act



Overview of Improv Comedy

Improv comedy is a type of comedy that is live and unprepared. It is performed without any script. The only support that you have as a comedian is a co-actor. The topics are chosen from a set of suggestions given by the audience. A host mediates the performance and everyone on set ensures that the scene ends with fits of laughter. Everything happens spontaneously on stage and involves two performers at one time. Usually, an Improv scene lasts for about 1-2 minutes.

Four Essential factors

“Yes and” are two golden words in Improv Comedy. When you say “yes and”, it implies that you agree to any idea that is thrown at you. Use these two golden words to take an Improv scene forward. Improv Comedy is all about listening to your co-actor, reacting and then responding back to him/her.

Improv comedy is not a one-man show. The success of your performance is dependent on your co-actor. Do not try to think about funny punchlines just to make yourself stand out. A successful Improv comedy performance is one in which you feed your co-actor with enough material for him to come up with something funny and humorous.

01 What is Improv Comedy?



Improv comedy is all about making the other person look great in front of the audience. It is important to enjoy what you do on stage. If you are having a good time, then, the audience too can be a part of the fun. Improv Comedy is not about being funny but having fun.



02

Rules of Improv Comedy

Saad further explores what makes a good improv act and defines a set of rules to make a good act



“Yes And”

You need to agree with your co-actor. This is the only way through which you can take a scene forward. For instance, in one scene, Danish Sait acts as a chemist whereas Richa acts as a customer. Richa asks for an “18 again” cream and Danish gives it to her. If he had refused to provide her the cream, then, the scene would not have gone forward. The Improvisation would have ceased to exist. If your co-actor asks you to drink, then drink it even if you are not thirsty.

“Yes But”

If you do not have the opportunity to say “yes and”, then, you can say “yes but”.

For instance, a principal asks his student, “Why didn’t you come to school yesterday?” The student replies, “I did not come to school but I have completed my homework.” In this case, the student does not agree with the teacher but takes the scene forward at the same time. Interestingly, the student does not negate the statement of his principal.

Listen to Your Co-actor

It is essential to listen to your co-actor. If you are attentive, then, you can take the scene forward. For instance, consider a scene between two painters where one talks about existential paintings and expressionism whereas the other one jokes about nude paintings. In this case, the second actor is a distraction to the first actor.

Therefore, it is extremely important to listen, react and then respond to your co-actor.



Improve Your Acting Skills

You need to improve yourself as an actor to become a great Improv Comedian. It is important to know that acting helps as a skill set in Improv Comedy. For instance, Sal Yusuf portrayed himself as the son of Sumukhi Suresh in an Improv scene. His great acting skills helped Sumukhi behave like his mother in a convincing way. If Sal had behaved normally, then, you as a viewer, would not have believed the scene.

Be in the Moment

There is no ordinary moment when you are performing on stage. Everything is extraordinary and special in an Improv scene. A smile or a glance is enough to convey emotion through your performance. This makes Improv Comedy interactive and spontaneous for the audience. Therefore, you always need to be in the moment.

Make Choices

You need to make choices in a scene while performing Improv Comedy with a co-actor. For instance, consider a doctor-patient scene between you and your co-actor. You are the doctor in that particular scene. If you ask your patient the reason for coming back to your clinic, then your co-actor can come up with any reason of his choice. That choice will help you to take the scene forward.



Watch each other's back

When you are performing with a co-actor, you need to be supportive of him or her. If you want to take the scene forward in a unified manner, then, you need to watch your co-actor's back in every possible way. This will entertain the audience and help them perceive that you and your co-actor are on stage to take the scene forward.

Practice

You need to practice with your co-actors to be able to understand their strengths and weaknesses. This will also help you assess your strengths and weaknesses as an Improv Comedian. Practice will enable you and your co-actor to function as a team.



03

How to build an Improv scene?

In this lesson, Saad talks about how to build a scene using the acronym "CROW"

03 How to build an Improv scene?



Improv Comedy is all about building scenes on the spot by taking suggestions from the audience. You can use the acronym “CROW” (Character, Relationship, Objective & Where) to build your scene.

Character

You are performing an Improv Scene with a co-actor. He/she addresses you as the “boss”. You can therefore gauge that you are the boss and he/she is your employee. Since you are able to understand your character, therefore you can take the scene forward.

Relationship

In an Improv Scene, you can ask your co-actor, “Mom, can you make some food for me?” This will immediately establish a mother-son relationship between you and your co-actor.

Objective

The audience may suggest an Improv Scene, where the actors play out the role of a husband and wife. If an actor tells his co-actor that their relationship is not working out, then it implies that the objective of the scene is to end the relationship.

Where

If you walk up to a co-actor and ask, “When will the bus for Mysore arrive at the stop?”, then, the audience will know automatically that you are going to Mysore. This is the “where” part of the Acronym CROW.



04

How to find your funny in Improv comedy?

Saad talks about various techniques you can use to find a comedic sense of timing



Gain Knowledge

Many Improvisers believe that the limited information that they possess will be enough to sustain them on stage. Unfortunately, this is nothing but a fallacy.

You need to gain knowledge about current affairs and world events. Read a lot and watch visuals to prepare yourself for the unpredictability and spontaneity required on stage.

Pay Attention

Paying attention to the minute details will help you become a great Improviser. You never know as to which observations will help you perform better on stage with a co-actor.

Strengthen Your Memory

You need to ensure that your observations help strengthen your memory. The more memories you possess, the better is your performance on stage. For instance, the memory of your mother scolding or interaction with someone in the past will come to your mind at the time of Improvisation. The moment will be special, as you did not know that you had a particular joke in mind.



Be Crazy off Stage

Most of the Improvisers who are crazy on stage have a track record of being crazy off-stage. When you start off your journey as an Improviser it is essential to do everything that you always wanted to accomplish. Chase your interests and be crazy.

Tell Simple Stories

When you learn to narrate simple stories, it automatically reflects in your performance on stage. If you know to create a story from scratch, then, you can weave it around your act and complete it through your performance. Join storytelling groups. Use your storytelling prowess to become a great Improviser.

Body Language

Physical humour is a crucial part of Improv Comedy. You need to work on your body language to be able to help your co-actor on stage while performing Improv Comedy. Use your physical traits to convey humour on stage. Presence of sound body language will make you confident about yourself and your performance on stage.



05

How to learn improv?

In this lesson, Saad describes ways
to learn improv and get better
after each act



Be active in the Scenes

How can you be active in an Improv Scene? You need to attend workshops and jam sessions to be active in the performance. Meet fellow Improvisers and spend time performing Improv Comedy.

Use Rules & Practice

You need to use the rules of Improv Comedy and practice consistently to be able to engage the audience. Irrespective of whether it is a coffee shop or a canteen, take out time to read the rules of Improv. When you make mistakes, go back to the rulebook and figure out a way to not repeat the same mistakes again on stage.

Stay Adventurous

Saad Khan recommends using creativity and knowledge to do things that you have not previously accomplished. For instance, when the audience gives you a suggestion for a bar or club, you need to think of ways to make the scene adventurous. As an Improviser, you need to be brave and open to ideas. If you stay adventurous, then you can perform without thinking too much about the outcome.



Perform Constantly

You should practice Improv whenever you get a stage and a bunch of fellow Improvisers. The more you perform, the better you will learn. Do not put yourself under tremendous pressure. This is because Improv Comedy is all about having fun and engaging the audience.

Fail as much as you can

You may ask, "How can one fail in Improv Comedy when it is spontaneous and off the cuff?" You want to sound funny on stage as an Improviser. You may not be able to deliver the right jokes or fail to make the audience laugh. You may be just anchoring in a particular scene but you are taking the scene forward in one way or the other. Sometimes, your co-actor may be anchoring while you are delivering great jokes. Being focused and aware of the surroundings and your co-actor will enable you to learn from mistakes and recover easily from every failure on stage.



06

Tips & Tricks

Saad explains a few tips and tricks
to improve an act





Take it Easy

One of the most crucial aspect of Improv Comedy can be summed up in three words. "Take it Easy!" Being in a hurry will not make any difference to your performance on stage. Many Improvisers are under tremendous pressure, while performing live on stage. This, in turn pressurizes the co-actors and the audience. The audience has come to relax and have fun. Once they realize that you are under pressure, then it automatically makes them feel tense.

Know Your Audience

As an Improviser, you should be able to gauge the reaction of your audience. You cannot focus only on your co-actor. You need to be aware of the jokes that are making your audience break into fits of laughter. For instance, when you say something to your co-actor and the room is filled with laughter, you know that you have struck the right chord. At that point, you need to take the scene forward in the direction perceived by your audience.

Understand Status

The word "status" does not refer to your financial or religious affiliations. In an Improv scene, one character always has a higher status than the other. For instance, a person with a high status can be the boss of a company whereas the person with a low status can be the employee. You, as an Improviser, can shift your status without interchanging the character.



For example, if you, as an employee, find your boss cheating in the company, then you have a higher status than your boss in that particular scene. You need to understand your character in the scene to be able to convey to your audience that whether you are shifting from a higher status to lower or vice versa.

Don't Drink & Improv

Saad Khan recounts a time when a fellow Improviser had a drink and performed on stage. He recommends to not drink prior to a performance on stage. As discussed in previous lesson, it is imperative to be aware of your surroundings and listen to your co-actor. When you are drunk, you may not be able to respond to your co-actor effectively. This will, in turn affect the performance of your co-actor.

There is No Hero

Everyone is a supporting actor and there is no hero in Improv Comedy. When you appreciate a fellow Improviser before and after the show, there is a sense of confidence that prevails within the team. The synergy is going to make the team unstoppable.



07

How to start your own improv comedy show?

In this lesson Saad breaks down a
live improv scene



Find the Right People

In order to start your own Improv show, you need to have funny people around you. You need to find a bunch of like-minded people who are willing to have fun. You have absolutely no idea about the number of people who will be interested in joining your bandwagon. Everyone loves to see people having fun. When you go to a party and find a few people dancing and enjoying every moment, you instantly want to be a part of that group. Therefore, the first step is to find the right people.

Space

You need a space to get started with your show. Do not think of packing 300 people for the first show. Even though it sounds great, it is imperative to start small. This will enable you to test the waters. If only 50 people turn out for your first show, then, ensure that they have an entertaining night with your Improv Comedy. You will be surprised when more people turn up for your next show. It will give you immense satisfaction when you will find the size of audience growing day after day.



Sound & Light Designer

You need to have a sound and light designer. Technicality is extremely important when you are doing a theatrical production. Improv Comedy is usually performed in front of a live audience. Therefore, it is crucial to have all the technicalities in place. If you are technically sorted out in your early shows, then your audience will automatically become your patrons. The audience can gauge that you have made efforts to have the right mic-setup, sound design and the audio cues. Saad Khan is of the belief that every Improviser should wear a lapel mic on stage so that the audience does not miss out on a single word uttered by the actor.

Props & Costumes

When Saad Khan and his team started the show called "IMPROV", they did not have props or costumes. They got a prop-table only in their third or fourth show. Get a few basic props such as a saucer or an apron. You do not need large-scale props to get started. Props will enable the Improvisers to use them and their creativity to engage the audience.



Production Team

A Production Team is extremely important while starting an Improv Comedy show. It will be difficult for you to perform on stage without a production team. If you have a producer, then he will make sure that you can perform on stage without any worries. As an Improviser, you need to be spontaneous and funny on stage. You cannot get anxious about your mic setup or the prop table. Let your producer get all the necessary items for you while you focus on delivering a great performance on stage.

Have a Host

Lastly, you will need a host for your Improv Comedy show. He will act as a mediator between the audience and the actors. He will ensure that the suggestions given by the audience are conveyed to the actors and the scenes are cut on time.



08

Is Improv comedy a viable career option?

Saad articulates a few steps as to how to start your own successful improv show





Join a Team

“The Improv” show started by Saad Khan does 30 to 40 shows every year. He has a full-fledged team. However, it took him and his team a couple of years to create a name for themselves. If you want to join the group, then you can reach out to Saad Khan. There will be an interview, followed by assessment of your strengths and weaknesses. If the team feels that you have the potential to become an Improv comedian, then they will integrate you into the show. If you feel that you are passionate about Improv comedy, then you can contact Improv shows such as “Improv Comedy Mumbai”, or other famous ones around the country.

Start Your Own Improv Show

You can go out there and your own show. Assemble a team and start practicing. You need to rehearse day-in and day-out. If you are passionate about Improv Comedy, then you will definitely progress to the next level. Improv Comedy is all about moving from strength to strength. Collaborate with other Improv comedians and perform on slots when they cannot. These can become your initial gigs. Be consistent with your show and more people will flock into your show eventually.

08 Is Improv comedy a viable career option?



How much money can you earn?

A beginner-level Improviser can make around Rs 10,000 to 15,000 per gig. You can also have two gigs per month. An intermediate level Improviser can make about Rs 20,000 to Rs 25,000 per gig. You can also make Rs 35000 to Rs 50000 per gig if you are a professional level Improviser. You can also be booked for corporate shows as an Improv Comedian. When you have a year-old Improv group, your team can make around Rs 1,00,000- 1,50,000 per gig. Once your team gets better at the craft, you can always hike the prices.



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