

Happenstancery marks five years of weekly open improv in New Paltz

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The people who bring you Happenstancery (clockwise from bottom center Joseph Anthony Davis aka Jolly Joe Jester, Christopher Polack, Ky Welcome, Anika Winters and Charlie Burgner. (Photo by Lauren Thomas)

When it comes to adopting a basic philosophy of life, one could do worse than the mantra of improvisatory performers: "Yes, and..." There's no quicker way to squelch progress and innovation within an

organization than to interrupt a brainstorming session with “No, we can’t do that because...” Robert F. Kennedy, Sr., famously said of his political vision, “I dream of things that never were and ask why not.”

Or as Ulster County’s own environmental titan John Burroughs once said, “Leap, and the net will appear.” Similarly, if one wants magic to happen onstage without a script, one must proceed from Yes.

Last Thursday evening, Happenstancery Improv was celebrating the fifth anniversary of its free, inclusive weekly gatherings at the New Paltz Community Center. Following a warmup exercise, founder Joseph Anthony Davis welcomed a dozen attendees with a reminiscence of how the group had gotten started during Covid, when Davis was mourning the death of his mother and feeling a deep need for connection.

Impromptu outdoor improv sessions with his neighbors on a New Paltz cul-de-sac soon morphed into a new career — the launch of a loose confederation of friends who found that the rewards of off-the-cuff tomfoolery outweighed the risks.

As the main action of the improv session got underway, Davis described “Yes, and” as his “favorite words in the universe – the principle of life. It’s how one thought and another thought are joined.” (Maybe some astrophysicists puzzling over the nature of Dark Matter and the Fifth Force ought to look into that.)

Then, for the beginners in the room, he sketched out a few basic guidelines for embarking on a brief “newsline” improv scene between two players: adding a who, what or where to each successive

sentence. Then he asked for suggestions of two words starting with C to establish a scenario. Armed with "chocolate", "caterpillar" and their own wild imaginations, the participants paired off and began to improvise.

After the lunacy had escalated for a while, Davis called for an emotion as a theme for a "speed round," and someone offered up "embarrassment." Many partner switches, embarrassed characters riffing on caterpillars and/or chocolate later, the first half of the session peaked with an outburst of general laughter and applause. Some of the participants had clearly been doing this for years, while others were sticking a toe in improv for the first time.

Next, Davis called for feedback, asking "How did this feel?" The improvisers offered thoughtful observations about what techniques they found useful, such as being mindful of how they held their "head, hips and hands," or holding "two or three keywords" in their minds. ChrisTophér Polack, an early partner with Davis in organizing Happenstancery, observed that he often found it especially fun and fluid to play a character with "strong opinions loosely held," noting, "All drama is one person being affected by the other." It quickly became apparent how improv skills and practices can be put to use outside the entertainment sphere – in a psychotherapeutic setting, for instance, or in human resources management.

The session wrapped up with a game in which alternating pairs of players sat back-to-back, interacting without eye contact in oddball scenarios pieced together from audience suggestions. A pair of estranged twins accidentally meet in an airport after a ski trip. Two people en route by train to a pirate convention get stuck in a tunnel

(giving Davis an excuse to pull out his guitar and improvise a sea chantey). Two men both dressed as Jack Skellington meet at a Halloween parade and take an immediate dislike to each other, requiring intervention from a costume contest judge.

Naturalistic acting? By no means. By winging it together as a group, the risk is halved, the exhilaration doubled. A little silliness in our lives would probably do us all good. It also builds a sense of trust and community. "Happenstancery has a great way of giving people the courage to go where they need to go," said Anika Winters of Kingston, a regular attendee for about two years. "It's a tremendous community group full of life and spirit."

Another committed participant is Ben Healey, a US Army veteran who has found improv an essential tool in his "PTSD recovery journey" since returning to New Paltz from a deployment in Afghanistan. "The connection and creativity and inspiration that improv brings out is very healing," he said. Members of Davis' network of performers have also helped Healey in practical ways, such as driving him to New York City in time for an early-morning VA appointment. That network, he said, "makes it safer to exist."

Healey has taken on a project to revive New Paltz's dormant American Legion Post 176 by engaging the energies of younger vets and making it "more friendly and community-inclusive." As a fundraising vehicle for the American Legion revamp, he reached out to the owners of the Lemon Squeeze bar and restaurant to host Slice of New Pulse, a new series of comedy open-mic showcases on the third Sunday of each month beginning in September,

That spirit of inclusion is apparent at Happenstancery's myriad events, with LGBTQ folks welcome and the age of participants ranging from 18 to 80-something. One attendee at last Thursday's gathering was an elderly cancer survivor who was organizing a free improv workshop at New Paltz's Woodland Pond senior living community. Other events on the docket include an open-mic "performance party" at Snug Harbor in New Paltz. Something similar recurs at Snug's on the first Tuesday of every month.

In collaboration with other local improv troupes, they also take part in recurring events at venues including Keegan Ales and Night Swim in Kingston, the Morton Library in Rhinebeck and Norma's in Wappingers Falls. In June Happenstancery made its third annual visit to the Hill People's Comedy Fest in Stamford, and it'll be participating in the three-day Catskill Comedy Festival this October. If you attended the recent Rosendale Street Festival, you might've caught Davis in his musical clown incarnation, Jolly Joe Jester, performing on the Uncle Willy Stage.

An Elmira native, Joe Davis graduated SUNY New Paltz in 2019 with a degree in Digital Media Production and a minor in Psychology that involved learning to do music therapy. He had already tried his hand at improv games at summer camp as a kid, but the performance bug bit hard when he found himself "acting in everybody's scenes" as his college classmates worked on their video projects.

Now a member of the Screen Actors' Guild after a string of tech and acting gigs in film and TV productions that included a zombie role in Jim Jarmusch's horror farce *The Dead Don't Die*, Davis has done performance work with children at Amy Poux's Youth Ensemble

Theater in Rosendale, and music and voice work at Arm-of-the-Sea Theater in Saugerties. He also became the musical director and drama club leader at Marbletown Elementary School, until the pandemic turned his focus to creating Happenstancery.

"I like to do it as a free offering," Davis said, now five years on from the troupe's founding. "Seeing so many people come out of their shell – that's my favorite thing about it... This weekly commitment to acting has been such a gift."

To learn more about Happenstancery Improv, follow the troupe on social media at www.facebook.com/Happenstancery and @happenstancery_improv on Instagram. E-mail happenstancery@gmail.com to join the mailing list. Or come to the New Paltz Community Center at 3 Veterans' Drive in New Paltz at 7 p.m. on any Thursday, ready to watch and learn or to jump in and participate. The next open mic party at Snug's in New Paltz takes place next Tuesday, August 5 at 8:30 p.m.