

“The Improv Handbook: The Ultimate Guide to Improvising in Comedy, Theater, and Beyond”

By: Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White

*Reviewed by Miss Ginger Devine*

*“...few adults really get to play or have the lack of self-consciousness required to do it. It’s a real gift to improvise regularly. Furthermore, to stand in a theatre and see an audience come in a group of excited performers backstage and think ‘None of these people would be here if I hadn’t produced this. They’d all be somewhere else, somewhere less exciting, if I hadn’t done this’ is a lovely moment. “ – 306*

It is important for a manager of a comedy troupe – a manager of any group for that matter – to continually educate themselves on their profession. It is important to be updated on new trends in marketing strategies, management outlooks, and what is currently happening in the world of pop culture. One of the books that has proven to be invaluable in its knowledge and information is the “the Improv Handbook” by Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White. Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White guide the reader on a journey through the fundamental basics of improv, with each chapter building off the previous one, and when readers reach the final chapter they have a broader conceptualization of the world of improv – both on and off the stage.

Most of the book outlines strategies for teaching improvisation and provides step by step instruction on how to structure your class so that it will be most effective for the new improver. The book is set up almost in modules so that all of the information that Salinsky and Frances-White provide is easily laid out and accessible for readers. They overview the basic rules of improv but also provide exercises and games that highlight various concepts of improv. Salinsky and Frances-White create a rubric that builds upon itself in incremental steps – a perfect introduction to improv for any newcomer. Most importantly they speak directly to some of the fears and doubts that individuals have when they initially began performing improv. The authors present talking points to address the concerns that people initially have and methods for breaking those individuals out of their shell and challenging them to step outside of their comfort zone.

One of the reasons that this book in particular was beneficial and useful for me was how the authors extended beyond the classroom or the stage. Instead of simply having a number of improv warm-up games or improv exercises with a description and set of instructions, Salinsky and Frances-White truly examine the mechanics and logistics of creating a class, a comedy troupe, and putting on a show. Their discussion of intra-group dynamics and hurdles improv troupes can expect to encounter served as an essential resource in the management of the Utility Players. Their anecdotes of not only their successes but failures as well provided comfort and solace and an example to model after.

One observation that I have noted in my time as the Utility Players’ manager is that while improv is unscripted and scenes are created at random, it is an art form like any other performance and requires instruction and practice to truly master it. I feel that sometimes there is an impression that because the

scenes are made up on the fly, individuals – especially people who have never done improv in their life – tend to think it is something that does not need to be studied. Or for that matter, anybody could step up to the challenge and improv perfectly on the spot. I recommend this book to any individual who is interested in improv, forming a comedy troupe that is rooted in improv, or for any pre-existing group that is looking for a book to provide some insight on how you can take your comedy troupe or show to the next level.