

“I don’t believe in success and failure.” – Viola Spolin.



We all approach new things with some trepidation. I’ve been told by new students that they are there in the workshop because Improv terrifies them and they want to face that fear. Bravo to them for their courage, but ‘sheesh!’ I tell them that they need not worry. My workshop is not terrifying. In fact it is the opposite. It’s fun.

Fun is the antidote to fear. My goal is to get their mind completely off their fear by making the workshop more fun than fearful. Rather than

talking about the value of the work or reassuring them that it’s not all that scary, I start by playing a game right away. Playing reveals that better than any lecture.

Dependency on authority obstructs players from directly experiencing self and the world – Viola Spolin.

One of my pet peeves when I hear people talk about the principles of Improvisation is “Get used to failure” or “Celebrate failure” or “Expect to fail quite a lot”. We all fear failing because we are conditioned in our culture to respond to what Viola called the Approval/Disapproval Syndrome. To some degree we all seek the praise and approval of others and wish to be seen as ‘good’. That means on some level we all fear the disapproval of others and want to avoid being bad.

When you lay in fear, you cripple people. – Viola Spolin.

This ‘Get used to failure’ principle is meant to allay people’s fear of failure. You say “Don’t worry about it. Feel that fear and do it anyway.” By mentioning failure you make it part of the premise of improv training. In a way, you make fear an important prerequisite. Tony Robbins refers to this idea of misplaced attention in one of his talks. He says “Ask a race car driver to drive as fast as he can and keep his eyes on the track, but tell him also to watch out for that wall at the quarter mile turn. What does he look at? – The wall!” Bringing up the notion of failure is like mentioning the wall. It keeps students focused on it and makes it an unnecessary hurdle.

Success/Failure is a paradigm that Spolin avoids. This one idea distracts us from joy of the process, and lays in fear. It also sets us up for becoming competitive and seeking a successful result. This can affect the teacher/director who, with the best of intentions, will try to steer students towards their

idea of success, praising students for successful scenes and criticizing (or critiquing) the failures. In doing so the teacher unwittingly sets up the students to be mindful of success and failure.

Spolin Games is not about Success or Failure. It's about fun. Playing creates shared energy and a psychological and social condition that activate our intuition, and makes us part of the whole in a dynamic way that needs no explanation other than the rules.

When you play the game of Tag, you try not to be it, but if you are tagged, you become 'It' – you respond happily to being tagged by quickly tagging someone else and making them 'it'. Everyone enjoys the game in this way. In presenting the game of Tag you simply start out by saying "Not it!" and the last person to say "not it" is "it" and bam! – the game starts. Everyone runs around and enjoys the chase and the challenge. We don't judge it: "It" or "Not it" – it's all part of the game. Someone has to be "it" and is happy to be "it" and equally happy to make someone else "it". The whole game is fun and we play until we tire of it. Not when there's a loser and a winner. We play Tag for the fun of it.

But if you introduce the game by saying, "Now we are going to play Tag. Some of you will be caught and have to be "it". Don't be so concerned with your failure at remaining free, but seek to make someone else 'it'. You were not good enough to avoid it. Go with it. Accept it. Try hard to tag someone else."

Now when you are tagged, you think "Oh, shit! I'm it! Dammit! I don't want to be it! How stupid of me to be caught. I'm not very good at this am I? I failed. Oh, well, I should get used to it. It's all part of the game."

The physical action is the same in both cases, but the focus is different. Somehow it's not as much fun. Of course Tag is fun. It's just fun – Period. You cannot succeed or fail at Tag unless you don't play. It sounds silly, but it is an important point.

Can you imagine a workshop where you have Tag – level 1, Intermediate Tag and Advanced Tagging? Play is democratic. This is one reason why Viola allowed players with varying levels of skill in her workshops. Evaluating someone on their merits as 'talented' was not her aim. Her goal was to get everybody playing to the fullest. In that state, everyone has what it takes.