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MAGAZINE

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The author in
Bozeman, Montana.

Life Is an Improv Show

If you're willing to make a fool of yourself, you're on your way to being yourself. But you don't have to take the stage at a comedy club to get real. **KATIE GOODMAN** explains.

IM STANDING BACKSTAGE ON OPENING NIGHT, waiting for the second act of my new show, *Broad Comedy*, to start. A Pepto-Bismol moment under normal circumstances, but this time an entire bottle of Nexium wouldn't help. This is the part of the show I'm dreading, and I'm not even in it. Except I am in it. I wrote it.

The monologue about being the mother of a 3-year-old begins. Funny, I'm the mother of a 3-year-old myself. My hands begin to sweat (why don't they make antiperspirant for hands?), and I strain to hear over my adrenaline surge. The actress is doing a beautiful job. She hits just the right over-the-top, slightly hysterical, exhausted mom

note. I know this note intimately.

"It's great; I love being a mother," her character chirps unconvincingly to her unseen eight-months-pregnant friend. "But you know," she continues, "there's that point when he grabs the milk out of the baby's hands and when she tries to get it back he pushes her and she starts to scream, and you just want to take him by the ankle and swing him round and round until you get enough momentum to launch him over the porch railing."

I hold my breath, picturing audience members looking for the name of the author (me) in the program and, after the show, going directly into the lobby to call

Social Services.

The actress sighs. "But you just can't do that, can you?"

Much to my stomach's relief, a burst of unimpeded laughter erupts. They get it. I have taken the risk of sharing an authentic piece of myself, and I'm not being ousted from the Mommy Club.

Our egos, monsters that they are, are desperately afraid that people won't accept our authentic selves. That's why we fear speaking in public. And making a toast. And telling someone we love them. And putting our creativity on display. And wearing *that*. We're afraid that when we put ourselves out there, we won't be worthy, lovable, understood, or good enough. We're afraid to be authentic because we're so worried about being *authenticated*, as in validated, like a piece of art that some expert is going to pass judgment on.

I run workshops called *Improvisation for the Spirit*; they teach people how to apply the skills of improv comedy to everyday life. These skills include trusting yourself, being present, and as one participant put it, "crowbar[ing] open the fire door between your brain and your muse." In the workshops, participants play improv games in which they have to think on their feet, with no time to prepare or to censor themselves. One favorite game, called *Psycho Date*, calls for two people to start a scene in a bar and shift emotional gears according to my cues. They might begin with a lust-filled romantic encounter, and then suddenly be told to switch to paranoia. It's a provocative exercise. Because there's no script, they're forced to use the resources they have: past experience, their unique perspectives on life, and their true voices, which can't be rehearsed.

And invariably, during this exercise or another one like it, everyone has at least

one moment when they either freeze or succumb to a whopping self-judgment that halts their spontaneity in its tracks. When that happens, I stop the scene and ask what went on inside their heads, and it generally goes something like this:

"I couldn't stop thinking that the other person was so much funnier than me."

"And what happened to you then?"

"I wasn't in the scene anymore. I was looking at it from a separate place."

"Right. And?"

"Then I wanted to be that person, not me."

"So your inner critic said everyone else is better than you."

"Right. More creative, more interesting, smarter, more acceptable."

"Is that true?" I ask.

"I'm not sure...."

And on we go to see what this person can do now, with a little more awareness of her internal blocks. People head back into the game with more commitment to staying present and involved in the creativity. They focus on what's happening while trying to ignore interruptions from their inner critic. Finally, they let loose with a spontaneous, genuine line. And when their authentic self leaps into view, everyone gasps. *Wow. There she is.*

A teenager who interns at my theater camp once told me how improvisation and authenticity translate in her fiasco-filled life: "I was walking down the wet, slippery ramp to the gym locker rooms, feeling really

Why a Real Picasso Costs Zillions

What's the difference between a poster and the original—besides the money? **ALAIN DE BOTTON** looks at the strokes of genius.

My feeling is that works of art conjure up very intense, very personal feelings in people: They make us cry and laugh and reflect on our lives. Through this power, we develop a feeling that is akin to a friendship. Works of art tell us personal, true things that even our best friends sometimes don't tell us. They are better than friends. And almost all the time, with paintings, a copy isn't as good as the original. Something gets lost. The copy tends to lose all sorts of information along the way—a particular kind of light or texture or brushstroke that isn't understood by the copyist. Getting it perfect is far, far harder than one might think. One would have to perfectly imitate the hands of a master, which is quasi-impossible.

I don't want to say that we love the original out of mystical reverence for the artist. For the most part, we love the original because it's plain better. The reproductions of paintings are like poems that have been reproduced in a paperback with half the words left out. And the joy of seeing a work of art in the flesh that one has previously known only from, let's say, an image in a book, is that suddenly our eyes can benefit from a lot of new information. Let's imagine that the image has 10,000 pieces of information in it. Six-by-four-inch photographs in books necessarily lose a lot of information that can be gained only by seeing them in person.

If architecture is properly reproduced, it could be interesting. Mies van der Rohe's Barcelona Pavilion was rebuilt in the 1980s on the spot where the original once stood, and no one seems to mind. It's very popular because it's been meticulously copied. But architecture tends to depend a lot for its success on its site. Uprooting a building is like transposing a piece of music with a different set of instruments—like playing a Bach cello concerto on an electric guitar. Much is likely to be lost.

The only art form in which copies have a good name is literature, and that's because the copies of books are excellent in quality. They convey all the things we care about. —AS TOLD TO JANCEE DUNN



Picasso's *The Dream (Le Rêve)*, 1932.

next to me, stuck out my hand and said, 'Hi! While we're down here, I'm Addi!' He was like, 'Hi, I'm Jason. Pleasant seeing you here!' Then I took a deep breath, gave a thumbs-up, started walking, reached down to pull my pants back up, and kept walking."

This kid has made a conscious decision to be real. She doesn't hide under masks or pretenses. She's living the code that if you're going to have to suffer through adolescence, forget grace, forget popularity—just be present and real. She sees the humor in everything. I love this kid. And so does everyone else.

Our willingness to trust ourselves is the first step in making friends with our authentic selves. And, interestingly, when that self comes out, the rest of the room always laughs. It's why they always laugh at the idea of a mother using her 3-year-old as a shot put: They recognized themselves. (Interestingly, recognition cuts both ways. Zen teachers around the world tell us that what we criticize in others is exactly what we identify in ourselves. Which means that, if we let it, what we resent in others can point us toward the things we'd really like to be or do or have. Look at anything you judge

in anyone else and see if you really wouldn't like a little for yourself.)

Laughter is a good way to gauge when the real you is being acknowledged. If you look at what [CONTINUED ON PAGE 269]

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others might laugh at you for, and if you own it and even laugh along, then you're on your way to living in a brave, authentic way. When you react with defensiveness or embarrassment, it's because you're not okay with your imperfections. To be authentic, you have to let go of perfection and accept yourself—the good and the bad.

Sometimes we fall into the trap of saying what we think our "audience" wants to hear. We try to be someone else. We try to be "better" (whatever that is). Yet even if we get kudos for being that way, imaginary person, it's ultimately unsatisfying (who wants credit for something they didn't really do?). And it never resonates. But the minute you're genuine and unpretentious, people respond.

In the theater, this is called playing for truth. There's a classic tale (possibly apocryphal) from the old days of vaudeville involving Abbott and Costello. One night

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Costello comes running onstage genuinely thirsty, and asks for a glass of water before he can start the scene. The audience laughs. The next night he decides to replay the bit: He comes running out, asking for a glass of water, but this time no one laughs. He's confounded—until Abbott tells him, "Last night you asked for a glass of water. Tonight you asked for a laugh."

Here's the thing: Your authentic self cannot rely on other people's validation. Now, note that this is coming from an actor; I am a professional applause seeker. Yet I know

There will invariably be people who don't accept you. And in that case, you must be your own badass self, without apology.

that when you are genuinely genuine, there will invariably be people who don't accept you. And in that case, you must be your own badass self, without apology. At some point, the importance of being real makes you stop caring about what others think. Ever had that kind of moment? It feels good. Strong. It cures the disease to please.

My friend Kari King is a writer who sometimes invents new words. Recently, she came up with "blesson"—a combination of blessing and lesson. One particularly hard week, she kept walking around trying to be positive, saying, "What's the blesson in this?" with a forced smile when anything went wrong. Then the last straw came, and she paused, looked up, and said, "You know what? Fuck the blesson."

And we all laughed. We could see the real her. We loved the real her. It was a genuine authentic moment. ●

Katie Goodman is the creator and director of Broad Comedy, a nationally touring women's satirical show, and coartistic director of the Equinox Theatre Company. Her book, Improvisation for the Spirit: Using the Tools of Improv Comedy in Everyday Life, will be published in 2008 by Sourcebooks.