



In a nearly empty studio located in midtown Manhattan, a dozen people filled out legal release forms while sitting in silence on chairs positioned against the wall.

"I'm a little bit nervous," said one man dressed in a plaid button down shirt who was last to enter the room.

"I'm glad you said that -- I'm sure everyone's a bit nervous," said Samantha Jones, the only one standing. "I'm a bit nervous, too."

After a brief pause, she erupted into laughter:

"No, not really."

Jones, a 40-year-old redhead with a laugh that could shake the snow from a mountaintop, wasn't nervous that Friday evening because she was about to lead the group in a two-hour session of improv -- a performance art that she has been teaching for almost two decades. The group of mostly strangers had heard about the event through a link Jones had posted on the site meetup.com, and now they were beginning to feel apprehensive about actually chanting, role playing and generally acting silly with people they had just met moments before.

Signing the release forms didn't help either, but Jones made it necessary after a 45-year-old man had pulled multiple muscles from his ankle to neck in a previous session.

However, after some breathing exercises, group hand-holding and encouraging words from Jones -- who wore a brace on her right knee after injuring it at a previous improv night -- everyone loosened up and began participating in the games without hesitation, such as running around the room until Jones commanded that each person quickly find a partner and press elbows together. The next time it is was chins. Then hips. At one point, everyone gathered in a circle as one person shouted a word to someone else of their choice. The recipient then shouted whatever word popped into her or his mind toward someone else in the group. After everyone had had a turn, the cycle was repeated using the same words and order, just must faster.

Jones compensated for her hindered movements with a sonorous voice. "We're all crazy here," yelled Jones at one point during the night, "and I'm probably the craziest!"

While it's rather difficult to define exactly what Samantha Jones does for a living, it's impossible to deny that she's been financially supporting herself for two years by being the craziest person in the room. Part Tony Robbins, part "self-empowerer," part character name from *Sex and the City*, Jones believes she's been called to teach improv and public speaking to a demographic she refers to as "normal people," meaning non-performers who work in the corporate realm. Apart from the actors and comedians she does coach, either in group sessions or privately for \$85.00 per hour, Jones's past and present clients include real estate brokers, law students, individuals preparing for job interviews and others required to deliver speeches before crowds of hundreds.

"There are people in the business world who will just jump in on an acting class cause they think it will be interesting, but ultimately nobody shows them how to use those tools in their life -- and that's what I do," Jones told The Daily prior to the night's activities.

However unique Jones's techniques may be, her service is only one of many in a burgeoning market where improv coaches are being sought by companies and entrepreneurs alike to improve their bottom line. Across the country, improv is gaining legitimacy as a valuable corporate training tool, from Orange County, California where Everyday Improv's Bob Doll says the phenomenon has gone "mainstream," to Jacksonville, Florida where John Bryan of the company Improv! Corporate Workshops has seen such growth in his business that three other companies offering similar services have popped up in the vicinity since he started about a decade ago. And, although the experience is generally a fun time, the workshops are meant to amount to much more than a mere night of entertainment for the office.

"Essentially, we know that a lot of the skills that make our actors successful on stage are also skills that translate really well into business," said Tom Yorton, CEO of Second City Communications, a subsidiary of the legendary improvisation theater, Second City. "Things like how to listen, read a room, quickly innovate, work well as an ensemble -- all of those things that are essential to being a good improviser in a theater context are also really important with corporate clients, too."

Yorton also noted over the phone from his office in Chicago that his company has nearly doubled its output since 2005, now conducting about 400 corporate engagements of various kinds a year around the globe -- half of those being with Fortune 1000 companies.

"I know that for business people, the tools of improv are useful because it's all about agreement," said John Frusciante, an Artistic Associate at New York's Upright Citizens Brigade Theater, an organization dedicated to improv that was co-founded by Amy Poehler. "Rather than saying 'your idea isn't very good, let's talk about my idea,' you say 'here's why you're idea is great, and here's what I can add to it.'"

Aside from the increasing awareness of improv brought on by shows like "Whose Line Is It Anyway?" and those who regularly rely on the technique in their dialog, like director Judd Apatow and scriptwriter Larry David, some, such as Jones, believe the relationship between improv and business is blossoming because now, more than ever, people are self-employed, either working freelance from contract to contract or trying to promote their own Web 2.0 start-up. It's no longer just the lawyers, politicians and sales teams who need to worry about persuading others to buy what they're selling, but everyone who dreams of creating something themselves.

"Everyone's more independent now," said Will Hines, Academic Supervisor at the UCB Theater, who can see the link between self-reliance and improv. "It seems like the more time goes on, the less we are dependent on any company to take care of us." Hines was also quick to note that although he hasn't seen an

upswing in UCB corporate workshops, the demand has remained steady since the theater started offering the service in the mid-2000s.

Not too long ago, Brian Rothenberg and his start-up, SkillSlate, a website that connects local professionals such as dog walkers and photographers with the people who need them, hired Jones for an evening session. Along with a few other co-workers, Rothenberg, who says he's not in anyway an outgoing person, was lead by Jones in a time Rothenberg described as "all about saying 'yes.'" After drinking some wine and getting comfortable, one of the activities that night involved arranging four chairs as if they were car seats and acting out various scenes featuring a jumble of characters, from a strict military officer to The Queen of England.

"It was actually really helpful for us as a small company to break down some of the formalities that we experience at work, and have her take us through a lot of fun exercises that help us interact in a new and different way," said Rothenberg, who recently graduated from NYU with an MBA. "When we're so used to being in a room at our office trying stuff on a whiteboard and talking about how the technical complexities of the site will work, it sometimes stifles the creativity. So going into this session as a team in a completely different context from what we're used to, and just doing crazy things and acting out funny scenes, it made us feel more connected."

In the Pacific Northwest, Leif Hansen of Spark Interaction, a company that helps people overcome their fears and get engaged through group activities and improvisation, couldn't agree more.

"Innovation and creativity are crucial to a business surviving right now," said Hansen, "and I can't think of better group of people to teach about creativity and innovation than the people who are doing this for their life, and having to create entire worlds on their feet."

In addition to his business, Hansen, who sometimes begins his workshops by saying 'The goal of the next two hours is for us to make as many mistakes as possible' and lead a session with a group of accountants a couple months ago, also built and maintains the current Applied Improvisation Network website, a place for professionals and amateurs interested in the field to gather. According to Hansen, the network has grown from 50-100 members to 2000 in under six years. The group is holding a world conference in Baltimore from June 16 to 19. Interestingly, another aspect that some believe is driving the improv-business alliance is the same thing that most start-ups depend on for growth: technology. Despite the advantages smart phones, Facebook and Twitter provide entrepreneurs, Hansen is also aware that too much time spent staring at screens and communicating through text messages can lead to a social atrophy of sorts. If life is performance, then those like Hansen would argue that we all could use a bit more practice getting in touch with our bodies. Hansen designed a workshop called "Soul Tech" specifically to combat our unhealthy dependence on our machines, and it was featured on the Today Show in 2009.

While making clear that he's not a Luddite and that Second City embraces social media, Yorton argues that successful communication skills involve much more than just the ability to select the appropriate emoticon. "There are certain things

that are irreplaceable, like being in a room with someone, knowing how to read that room, recognizing non-verbal cues, and being able to work effectively as an ensemble," he said.

Back in midtown Manhattan, Jones hopes to continue making a living by helping others make a living through a return to innocence with the help of improv.

"Most people are disconnected from anything in their bodies or minds or spirits," said Jones, a native New Yorker who grew up in a show-business family. "So that's why I take it back to when you were 5 years old, when you just threw your jeans on and ran out the door and ran around screaming. And that's how we should all be now. Imagine how successful we would be if we were that free."

PAUL HEIBERT