

Meet NYC's most popular improv coach, SAMANTHA JONES!

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Samantha Jones is SERIOUSLY funny. She's first and foremost an improv coach who teaches some of the most effective and sought-after improv workshops in New York City. She's also a stand-up comedian, actor, director, producer- just to name a few. I'm laughing the moment I hear her laugh, because it's so infectious, and I can see why people are banging down her door to take her workshops. She could no doubt unleash the inner actor in each of us and teach us how to let our authentic selves fly. But what sets her apart from other teachers and courses of this ilk is that she doesn't care about whether or not you can be funny. She cares about whether or not you are getting in touch with your soul.

Love and Water- Can you talk about how you came to teach improv?

Samantha Jones- In my process of trying to find my voice as an artist I found improv to be one of the most liberating experiences in my life. That immediately lead me to 15 years of stand-up comedy. I felt there was nothing more scary than stand-up, and even though I didn't care for the actual business of comedy, I felt there were too many challenges for me to face to give it up. I was able to face those challenges in stand-up because of my training in improv. My coaching and directing continued because when I was put in the position of directing a group of people who wanted to break free themselves, I felt a tremendous sense of responsibility to them, as well as a sense of understanding what they were going through every step of the way. That humbled me. I realize as an artist that challenges such as that never

end. I continue to be interested in that. I've been doing this now since 1990, which is a testament to how much I love what I'm doing. I tend to get bored with things that are not compelling artistically, which can cause me to walk away fairly quickly. But this has been a constant in my life, and I'm more and more interested in it as time goes on. Even if I was an Academy Award winning actress, I think I would still be coaching improv because it is one of the most organic experiences you can have as a performer and artist.



L&W- How did improv help you with your stand-up work?

SJ- I could deal with hecklers and with forgetting my material by getting off myself, which is a big part of improv work. As a stand-up comic you need to be very aware of the audience at all times, and while delivering the material be looking around at your audience and sizing them up. You can see really good stand-up comics do it who are great at crowd managing. Judy Gold does it brilliantly. She'll be talking about one thing and sizing up the woman in the front row at the same time, and then bring something up about that woman later. So it's multi-tasking and being aware of everyone around you. I learned all of that by doing improv.

L&W- Can you explain how your classes are structured and what you do in them?



SJ- I don't call them classes anymore, I call them workshops or courses because I think it gives more respect to the people in the group to not focus on a teacher/student scenario. The first meeting is where I get everyone really naked, figuratively, so that they can get out of their heads and I can see what I'm up against, as in where they're blocks are. And the way I do that is to get them completely exhausted! The warm-up we do is usually over an hour, and the workshop itself is only two hours, so it's extremely and immediately physical. By the time everyone is doused with sweat and exhausted they can't think anymore, and that's where the work really begins. We play a bunch of games to reach specific goals, all of which are essential building blocks toward learning how to be an actor. It starts with getting off of oneself, and learning skills in the process. It's so much fun that they end up learning without knowing that they're learning, which is another really rewarding aspect both for me and for them.

L&W- I know your family plays a huge role in your work as well.

SJ- They do, definitely. I have a production company with my family called Dora Mae Productions. It's an important aspect of what I do because they've helped me develop all of my work over the years. My

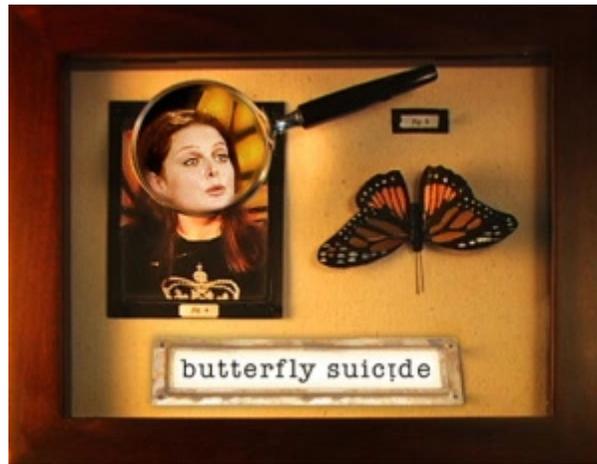
mother was my director for three of my solo shows, and my sister also directed one. Any solo performer is never really solo. They all have to have a successful team behind them in order to do well, and mine have always been my mother and my sisters. It adds an interesting element to my work, because I grew up doing this and have always had such a supportive team behind me, which plays a huge role in my wanting to give that back to each person who works with me.



L&W- What is the most moving moment you've had so far with your work, both as a teacher and performer?

SJ- As an improv coach, I had a guy come in to a course once who had a lot of "cool guy" issues. He was into putting on a show to mask what he was really feeling. He knew this about himself, which was why he signed up for the course. We started doing a simple exercise called "freeze," where two people get into the middle of a circle and freeze when we tell them to, and then begin improving based on their reactions to one of their positions. He was so blocked that he couldn't think of anything, ever. Nothing was coming up for him and he wasn't able to give to his partner. I could tell that it alarmed him, and he started crying. He had to leave the room and collect himself, and I thought I would never see him again. Ten minutes later he came back into the room and said, "Ok, I'm ready." And from then on he was present and working. That was a moment I realized why I love what I'm doing so much, because to witness that kind of transformation is just incredible.

In terms of my own performance career, I remember playing a role in a play that my mother wrote called "Breezeway." My mother is a playwright and won huge awards for this play, and I remember hearing readings of it from when I was a little girl. I then had the opportunity to play one of the lead characters, and was so happy to have this chance. It was about a bunch of sisters in New Jersey, and my character is the narrator of the play. It's a very bold play with lots of love and drama, and one of the elements of the story was abuse between an aunt and an uncle. One of my monologues was about a brother who couldn't take it and ran away. The rhythm of that monologue was such that all of my technique up to that point seemed unnecessary. I started to say the words and there was so much depth and emotion involved that it moved me in a way I hadn't felt before on stage. I had never been that vulnerable. I still do that monologue today for auditions, and it's still as effective as it was back then.



L&W- What is one of the most important aspects of your coaching that you would want people to know?
 SJ- I grew up in a house with a single mom and two sisters in New York City. My mom instilled in us that the most important thing was our art, and that the second most important thing was that we didn't work for anyone else. That we were our own bosses. It was such a progressive lesson for a single mom to be teaching her daughters in the 70's and 80's in New York City. I was always focused on doing what I knew I wanted to do, and now I'm at a point where I'm finally my own boss and all of my hard work has gotten me to this point. It's such an important element of who I am, and it's also why I'm so passionate about my coaching, because I feel we don't have much time. We only have one life and we want to do so much, so why not do it in the most efficient and bravest ways possible? That's how I approach my work when I coach both celebrities and actors just starting out. I treat them exactly the same in that respect. Also, my courses are not geared to help people get on Saturday Night Live, as a goal, which is why I choose to work with short-form improv instead of long-form improv. My work is not about trying to make people funny; in fact, I tell people I'd rather they be serious in class and get as much as they can out of it for themselves and their personal goals. Of course, everyone ends up being hysterically funny because of the nature of the work, but there is no competitive aspect involved- no one is competing to see who is funnier. I feel strongly about bringing out the best in everyone so that everyone succeeds. That's really important to me, and I make sure everyone knows that before signing up for my courses.

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Postcard from Samantha Jones' fourth solo show, "Butterfly Suicide"



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