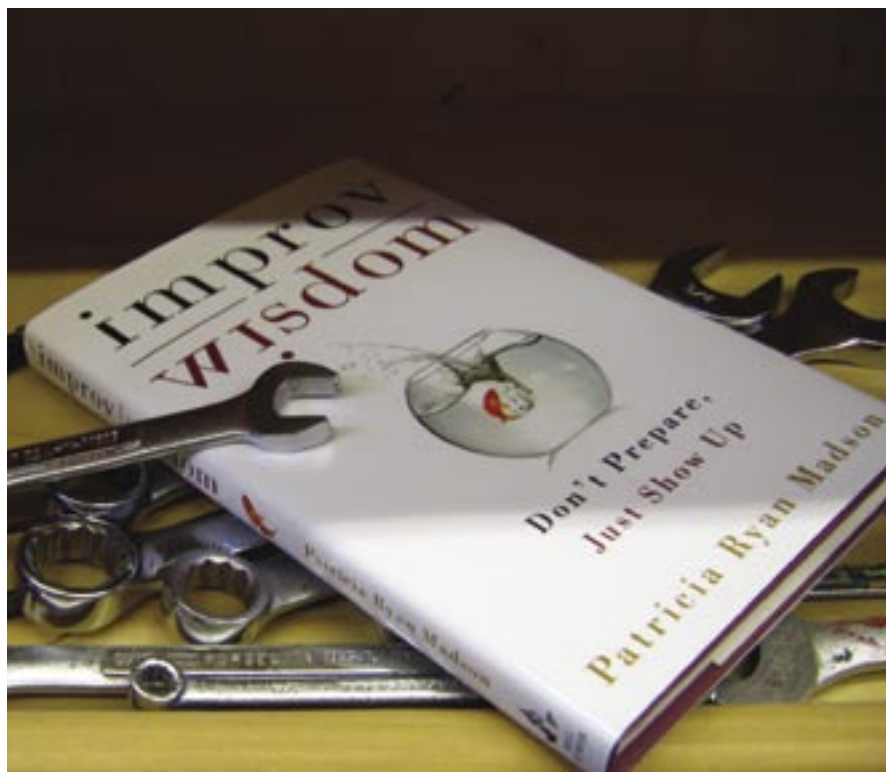


Where Theater and Design Intersect:

How *Improv Wisdom* can be a tool for designers

by Michael Helms



Even though my professional and research interests are in engineering design, I have often considered theater to be a source of inspiration, learning and growth—both for the audience and the performer. In fact, if I had my way, all engineering students would participate in improvisation workshops. Years ago I thought the two domains were unrelated, but experience convinces me that improvisation and design share a felicitous connection.

Patricia Ryan Madson recently retired from a long career with the Stanford Drama department teaching (among other things) “improv” or improvisational theater. When I learned recently of her new book, *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up*, I immediately purchased and read a copy. The book provides a thorough discussion of her philosophies on improvisation.

The book is structured around thirteen maxims, each one the theme

for a separate chapter. Madson discusses each maxim in detail, supporting each with anecdotes. According to Madson, improvisation is applicable in many situations. But while improv can often contain elements of humor, it offers far more than simple comedy; the practice of improv teaches us to pay attention to what is happening around us. Stepping outside our routines challenges our current view of the world, and learning to notice details is rewarding, both in process and result. Further, developing interdependence and synchronicity between people (teamwork) is a skill with applications that reach beyond theater. She maintains that creative space in your life is essential to generating new and challenging opportunities.

The book's broad scope ranges from house cleaning to Zen, stage fright to the practice of common courtesies, taking risks to making mistakes—simply put, being human. The traditional boundaries

of individual disciplines melt away: Readers are placed on a stage where everyone can contribute, learn and grow.

Madson has distilled a life of wisdom and experience into this compact and complex volume. I believe she would be delighted if designers read her book and experimented with the tools she provides. I find this book (the author's first) to be a valuable resource, with direct applicability to not only theater, but also to design, research, and life itself.

Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up, by Patricia Ryan Madson. (May 2005). Bell Tower; 160 pages. ISBN 1400081882. List \$16.00.