



"No experience is needed and the only requisite is to be bold and prepared to have a go."

Stage rites

Joe Spurgeon cuts his dramatic teeth.

This month, Bristol welcomes the return of Mayfest: the Old Vic-housed, month-long run of exuberant theatrics and avant-garde performance that lures the cream of UK board-treaders to the city. A quick squiz at the programme reveals the usual assortment of unorthodox, leftfield goings-on: a one-man show about the last day of a doppelganger in a London besieged by flooding; a claustrophobic play about an unimaginably awkward dinner date; and a bloke dangling from the ceiling, dousing himself with flour and water in a very physical exploration of masculinity, sex and 'the messy stuff in between'. It's all in there.

But let's not dwell on this wonderful run of live theatre for too long (the Theatre diary lies thataway, after all), for while it seems that the streets, pubs and play-houses are more alive than ever with a rich tapestry of comedians, actors and the like – just take a wander in the direction of the Bath Fringe later this month for proof – what perhaps isn't so abundantly clear is where exactly all these people are coming from. They can't all be LAMDA seedlings, so presumably there's quite an undercurrent of have-a-go thespians out there somewhere. Sure, the 'am-dram' scene seems as healthy as ever, and in an admittedly brief bid to discover quick-fix drama for Johnny-Nativity-Play, my investigations stumbled across a spate of (admittedly rather pricey) long-term drama and acting schools before I chanced upon The Bath Improvisation Group.

It seemed to fit the bill: operating out of Bath's Invention Studios, the group offer ample opportunity for a RADA-ignorant fledgling like myself to have a crack at getting my hands dirty in three-hour sessions. It's not an acting school per se, more a series of guided improvisation 'games' that develop theatrical skills by coaxing on-the-spot snippets of stories, comedy and performance. Most importantly, no experience is needed and the only requisite is to be bold and prepared to have a go.

Expecting to see a gaggle of Josie Lawrence-types exchanging wise-cracks and merrily cartwheeling around the place, I am relieved to discover I am the first one there. Our host for the evening gives me



Pop your improv cherry at the Invention Studios... we dare ya.

the lowdown, including some of the group's famous alumni (Steve Coogan among them), and I'm unsure as to whether that's supposed to make me feel better or not. The remaining 'improvs' trickle in (there's about eight of us) and we begin gently enough, throwing some juggling balls around the place (to improve our ability to react to other people, presumably). We then break off into pairs and attempt a series of rapid-fire question and answer-type exercises with a few bursts of mime chucked in for good measure. You have to react pretty sharpish and it most certainly requires quick wits to not fall foul or come across as a fumbling dunderhead at the first hurdle. I manage to survive.

We swap partners and repeat the exercise before some larger, group-based games follow (throwing a kind of verbal hot potato round a circle) and the real deal arrives for the final act. In true 'Whose Line...' -style, as pairs and groups we are required to perform a series of off-the-cuff vignettes according to some very specific (and deliberately obscure) conditions as determined by our audience. In summary, my personal repertoire involves becoming a shunned pregnant teenager, a Scottish conjoined twin on the pull, and a

superhero whose powers are based around an ability to put lids on things (toothpaste, dustbins, arguments, my career etc). It's all rather enjoyable. It's also unavoidably silly, but in the safe confines of the studio, it feels completely acceptable.

The mix of people here is, unsurprisingly, diverse: there are a few quite shy people who struggle to make conversation during the break, but unleash their inner Nicholson when the curtain goes up; there are the show-offs; massive show-offs craving centre stage as often as possible; and a couple of genuinely gifted, extremely funny and deft performers of both sexes and all ages.

In the ways that people are drawn to fancy dress, charades, wearing silly hats or listening to Queen, this – once you got over the mild awkwardness of it all – was rather fun (and yes, a little indulgent, too). But who cares – I had popped my improv cherry and hadn't once been covered in flour and water and asked to be a male ejaculation or anything. I'll leave that one to the Mayfest...

THE BATH IMPROVISATION GROUP MEET AT INVENTION STUDIOS, LOWER BOROUGH WALLS, USUALLY ON ALTERNATE TUESDAYS. SEE WWW.INVENTION.TV FOR DETAILS.