

T.J. JAGODOWSKI and DAVE PASQUESI

Chicago is the world's capitol of improvised comedy, and perhaps the best improv show in Chicago—as measured by awards, ticket sales, laughs, and general consensus—is “TJ and Dave.” Every Wednesday night for the last seven years, TJ Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi have taken the stage at Chicago's iO Theater for an hour of improvised theater that eschews ‘jokey’ gags for the honest and hilarious absurdity of daily existence. We sat down with the two at Mr. Pasquesi's studio apartment, in a handsome high-rise in Chicago's Old Town neighborhood.

Will Litton, Wag's Revue: Let's start with some biographical questions. How did you get into the Chicago improv scene?

Dave Pasquesi: I was going to college. My brother went to an improv class, and I tagged along with him. He was in law school, he wanted to take an improv class to help him in front of moot court. The teacher's name was Judy Morgan, she was—I found out, after I started—in the company with Harold Ramis, Joe Flaherty, John Belushi, and Brian Doyle-Murray at Second City. One of the great casts. And she was a great teacher. That was the first time I did anything like that. I was studying philosophy at the time, and then I kind of, kind of got the...

TJ Jagodowski: Bug?

DP: The bug. I got bit. Couldn't remember what I was supposed to say there. I got the bite. That's what I was trying to say.

TJ: Hooked.

DP: Hooked, right. I got hooked, I got the bug.

TJ: The bug.

DP: I was bit.

TJ: I was taken to a Second City show by my friend. She was the one who encouraged me to start taking classes, and I took those initial classes at Second City. And I also got smitten.

DP: Then after those classes, then I stopped, finished school, came back to Chicago. I was roommates with Joel Murray and he got some advice from his brother [Bill Murray]: “Go find this Del Close guy, he’s starting to teach again.” So I went up and I’ve been at what’s become ImprovOlympic since then.

Will Guzzardi, Wag’s Revue: And the two of you met at the iO?

DP: No.

TJ: The very first time we met was during a set at Second City. But we really didn’t get to know one another, it was more like, nice to meet you, Mr. Pasquesi.

DP: Nice to meet *you*, Mr. Jagodowski.

TJ: Right, yes. And we both donned our bowlers—

DP: We doffed our chaps, we grabbed our canes—

TJ: We waxed our moustaches, and went upon our way. [Laughter] But the first time we kind of met and played together was for, I think, the second Chicago Improv Festival [1999].

WG: *And how did the “TJ and Dave” show start?*

TJ: I think Noah [Gregoropoulos] said, “You know what would be interesting? To watch you and David play together.” I mean, we had met, but I didn’t really know Dave. I don’t remember how I would have gotten your phone number. I just remember us eventually meeting.

DP: At Savory’s.

TJ: Yeah. And Dave at the time was doing *Glengarry* at Steppenwolf and he said, let’s talk a few times and see if we want to do something similar, to see if we’re of like minds.

DP: Like minds, yes, interested in doing the same kinds of things. I think one of the ideas was, the way I was taught, I didn’t see much of that in performance around town any longer.

WG: *Explain that. You didn’t see much of what you had been taught?*

DP: Right.

WG: *What specifically do you mean?*

DP: I mean, it was real funny and clever, a lot of what I saw, and that’s not necessarily the way I was taught. By Del [Close]. And maybe he changed his mind, or else things were forgotten for whatever reason.

WL: *Yeah, so let’s go into this, about what it is that you and TJ do, and the sort of philosophy behind it. How would you describe the weekly show you do to someone who’s never seen it? Or even to people like us, who’ve seen it a bunch, and are still sort of baffled by the genius behind it.*

DP: Don't diffuse that statement. [Laughter]

TJ: You just said it beautifully. Baffling genius. [Laughter]

WL: *But it does stand in such stark contrast to so much improv, even many of the other shows you see at the iO. So if you were to tell someone what your show is, what would you say?*

TJ: Roughly an hour-long, two-actor semi-play?

DP: Yeah. There will be two people, maybe two people playing between two and fourteen characters.

TJ: So far.

DP: It's difficult to explain. But I think what we do is: fifty minutes of tiny little moments added up, and then the lights go out. And then sometimes the lights don't go out—that fucking guy. [Laughter]

WG: *Yeah. So, okay. That brings up a couple of things, directions we want to go in.*

WL: *Lots of things about what you do in relation to where literature has been going for the past 100 years.*

TJ: We like to think we're still at the forefront of it. [Laughter] It's been a tough thing to maintain for 100 years, but we like to think we're still right at the front, at the leading edge of literature.

WL: *We laugh about it, but I think in the improvisers' community, you two are widely regarded as two of the best. The people at the top of the game. And Noah [Gregoropolous] makes it*

in there of course, and several other names. But everyone's always like, "Go see TJ and Dave."

DP: And Noah? This is not quite the compliment I thought it was. [Laughter]

TJ: Go fuckin' talk to him. He's sittin' around at home. [Laughter]

“You can do a tiny sketch about polar bears fucking cake, but that's not gonna last very long.”

WG: *Here's a question. People often confuse improv with stand-up comedy—*

DP: And “Whose Line Is It, Anyway?”.

WG: *Right, right.*

TJ: There was a stand-up place called “The Improv.” So I think maybe, for some people that just sticks in your head, standing in front of a brick wall.

DP: Right. “What's your act?” I get that asked a lot. “What's your act?” You know, go fuck yourself. [Laughter]

WG: *Okay, so if it's not “Whose Line Is It, Anyway?” then what is improv?*

DP: This is what I'm familiar with as being improvisation, as taught and developed a long time ago by Del Close. It's not just people getting up on stage and talking. And it's not just the clever make-'em-ups. It can be more than that, and it can be a bit more honest. You can do a little tiny sketch about polar bears fucking cake, but that's not gonna last very long. That's just not going to sustain itself very long. So it has to be something closer to genuine.

WL: *The aesthetic of your show is hard to describe. For one thing, you play a lot of the characters close to the chest. There is a kind of honesty and rawness there, right? The aesthetic is conversational.*

WG: *It's mundane, too.*

WL: *Right, whereas in a lot of other improv shows, you're hoping for a three-minute something-that's-funny.*

DP: I think you said something important there. If doing something funny is your goal and you fall short, you've got absolutely nothing. But if the goal is something else, and you fall short, it may well be funny, it may well be interesting.

WL: *You focus on the everyday. The banal. Like in a recent show of yours, you played two elderly people sitting watching an infomercial. When I've tried to explain this to my friends, it sounds like the most boring possible thing to ever watch, and yet it is so engaging when you're sitting there in the audience.*

DP: Yeah, I think there are a lot of rules of improvisation that we don't follow. One rule is: find out who, what and where, immediately. Like, "I've just got the results of your blood test back."

Okay, great. Who gives a fuck? I'm not a doctor, and you're not dying. So why would we do that? I've just told you, probably I'm going to give you some bad news, and pretend that I'm a doctor. That's the information that I've just given you. And that doesn't matter because we still don't know our relationship.

TJ: In improv classes, you're often taught to ask, 'why is this day different?' 'Why is this the one in a million?' For whatever reason—and it might have just been personal taste—I've always liked, 'why is this day the same?' Maybe later in a show something will occur that seems different for these two people's experience. But until how they are the same is shown, then how do you know something's different?

I think maybe it's not just us, it's people in general: whether they're watching a film or reading a book, even if it's some crazy science fiction thing, they still want something that's simple and understandable and has a relationship to it—whether it's in space or underground or on a submarine or just in a living room. You still want something that you can believe, or empathize with, or understand, to make it impactful for you. If it's all just bullshit, what part of it sticks to your person?

DP: And I think a lot of it is dependent on what the audience is looking for. The audience likes "Transformers." They fuckin' love it. Not everybody likes "My Dinner with Andre." Not to say there's anything wrong with any other kinds of improvisation. They're very popular.

WG: "Transformers" is also very popular.

DP: Right, yeah.

WG: *What you were just talking about, TJ, is something that Will and I were just talking about on the way over here. I think your shows have something in common with recent fiction, short fiction especially, that Raymond Carver aesthetic of describing the life of a boring, depressing, middle-aged man. Not that that's your show, but that in plumbing the depths of the banal, you can find richness at the bottom.*

DP: I'm just reading Seymour again. *Raise High the Roofbeam, Motherfucker?* Is that it?

WL: *Even in "A Perfect Day for Bananafish," with its exceptional ending, a huge part of the story is just a very blasé conversation between a woman and her mother.*

DP: But it's extremely well done. And I think that's the thing. If it's well done, I'll watch somebody tie their shoe.

TJ: Well the banal thing, I think we also have the benefit of not being able to be clever for that long. So you'd better do something you can do for fifty minutes, and being normal, or average, you can sustain that, you know. It's tough to sustain or even attempt something extraordinary and maintain it.

DP: Right. Going back to what we said at the beginning, the way I was taught, was you're supposed to have a series of genuine moments. And therefore, watching some people watch an infomercial, as you were just describing, can be interesting. It isn't interesting if there's nothing genuine in it.

“If it’s well done, I’ll watch somebody tie their shoe.”

Conflict is supposedly where dramatic tension comes from. Not necessarily for us. Or, rather, try to avoid creating conflict, because it'll always show up. Something like: "Mom always liked you better!" gets said in every improv class. Rather than come out with that conflict explicitly, maybe later on down the road say, "You bought the wrong bread." The characters may go to blows over that, rather than some artificial imposition of supposed drama or conflict. [sotto voce, to TJ] I just bored myself.

TJ: Not just you. [Laughter].

WL: Almost always the words 'improv' and 'comedy' are attached to one another. For example, what the iO does is always billed as 'improv comedy'.

DP: Right. Second City, 'Fifty years of Funny!' I just saw that today. 'Fifty years of funny!'

TJ: [mumbled] With some breaks.

DP: Yeah, just the last 35 years. Took the last 35 years off. [Laughter]

WL: Is it irksome to you to always have that word 'comedy' uttered in the same breath as 'improv'?

TJ: It almost always is, though. 'Funny' can happen in a lot of different ways. You can play it as intentionally not-for-laughs as possible and you still won't be able to help it.

WG: Why isn't that true of movies or conventional theater? I saw a show that you two did with a guest, Michael Shannon. And he, Michael Shannon, played a person who was coming back from the Iraq war.

DP: You mean Academy Award nominee Michael Shannon?
[Laughter]

WG: *Academy Award nominee Michael Shannon, playing a returning Iraq war veteran, and you guys did not play it for laughs at all. It was at times very sobering, but also at times hilarious. How is it that, in good improv, no matter how hard you try, it will always be funny, whereas in other media you have to try very hard to be funny?*

TJ: I read that to really find something funny it has to go through the ‘surprise’ part of your brain. One of the reasons I think you don’t need to put conflict into improvisation is that there’s already conflict in the form. The dramatic tension comes from the fact that the next word is not written. It’s not planned, the next shot is not known. And then when things go okay, there’s a relief to that, like “Oh, they didn’t fuck it up!” And sometimes I think that relief manifests itself in laughter.

DP: Also I think that people are surprised by people telling the truth: laughter is just a reaction to recognizing the absurdity of just being us. It’s surprising to tell the truth.

TJ: There is something to ‘the moment,’ to it being in that room in that second. Because on tape, on paper, in re-description—

DP: Telling your friends.

TJ: —it won’t be funny. You can describe a scene perfectly, but it’s not in that room with those people in that moment with that crowd with all the other moments that may have seemed unrelated but that all sort of now culminate in this second, and now they all culminate in the next second. And I think that second or moment or whatever has something to do with what makes it funny.

WL: *I'm curious to hear your thoughts on the formal qualities of improv and how they make it a unique art. Great works of literature, great works of film, movies, books, music, they can all be reproduced, and disseminated widely, whereas there's something about improv that resists that. And it's almost like flying in the face of our whole age of technology. You can get a book or a movie on your phone. You can't get improv on your phone.*

DP: Yet. Yet. [Laughter]

WL: *Is there something to that that is part of why you guys love it so much?*

DP: Absolutely. It's really temporary. Like the Dead used to talk about people taping or bootlegging their shows: "Whatever you want. When we're done with it, you can have it." I think we have a similar sensibility. Also, we realize that it's not just the two of us, but that everybody there factors in heavily. Their participation and encouragement.

TJ: I wish I loved it for something as lofty as, "Ah! Improv flies in the face of modern society!" But you just can't explain why you love anything. It just, it bites you. And I'm not good at anything else. I don't write. This is the thing that I got better at because I just liked doing it as often as possible. I love baseball too. But I love baseball because it flies in the face of football. [Laughter].

DP: But there is a sensibility to improvisation that is non-commercial.

TJ: Cause we've tried.

DP: Yeah, right.

TJ: We've been told it's highly non-commercial. [Laughter]

DP: Yeah, it's a pretty—we're talking about a pretty tiny world. We're talking about the world of improvisation, more specifically the world of long-form improvisation. That's like eight people.

But it's like jazz music. That shit on a record? Go f—no! I have to be high and in the room! And I think that's something similar. Like oh wow, that guy's gone. That's fun to watch.

TJ: And the non-guaranteed nature of improvisation hasn't allowed it to be in the place that improvisers—former improvisers, current improvisers—have to find it. Like, it has to be a written TV show, or a film.

DP: Nobody's going to back it. It's an unknown.

TJ: It's inherent that it might not work. Well, why am I giving you eight million dollars to do it? Like, yeah, it might not work for that random guy over there. I can throw a balloon and hit a dude who it might not work for. Although things like “Curb [Your Enthusiasm]” and stuff—

DP: “Factory.” There's a great television program called “Factory” that was improvised.

TJ: Maybe that day and age is changing. Or there are some filmmakers—I saw an interview with Amy Poehler, and when she and Tina [Fey] did *Baby Mama* or whatever they allowed room for improvisation within there.

DP: There was [John] Casavettes. They made—there was some script, but they shot a lot of film.

WL: *A lot of comedians probably improvise towards a script, like Best in Show, and that whole aesthetic. But there's something about what you two do on the stage that's even more raw and liberating by the very fact that it's mimed. That anything could be in that space, that you could grab hold of anything, and moreover that you could be or look like anyone, and that's a discovery that you make.*

DP: Yeah, like you find out that he's 400 pounds.

**“Jazz music on a record?
I have to be high and
in the room.”**

WL: *There's a kind of expected verisimilitude in film. If you are an old African-American woman, you must be and look like her—and there's something about that, when you're improvisers, you can do anything. And that really doesn't translate to anywhere but the stage.*

TJ: Yeah, I hear you. I think in some ways the elements that are maybe as closely—at least in my head—something like that happens on radio. Even our best implied wrench, you're still drawing that line that makes the wrench itself. That the experience, in some ways—we can lay some of the stuff, but you, each person, uniquely, fills in the rest of the look of that room, or what that 400-pound person looks like, to them. What their shirt is. Because it's not the shirt that either of

us is going to be wearing onstage. It'll be your picture. And in that sense it's a unique experience for each person who's attending, like it might be listening to a radio show. Where you're given the dialogue and stuff, and you might get a door creak, but the one you have in your head is specific to your imagination. So it's cooperative in that way as to how it plays on the screen in your head. You're filling in a lot of the gaps and the missing parts and the looks and the pieces.

WG: The analogy to jazz improvisation was interesting. I think that the ideas of structure and rules versus freedom, this is something that jazz musicians have been grappling even since the origins of jazz. But you have this chord progression, and then you improvise based on the structure. And that seems like something akin to the Harold, which is the popular formal structure of improvisation at the Improv Olympic. The Harold has this kind of structure, you're gonna get piece A, B, C, here—

DP: The old Commedia dell'Arte was all improvised, but they had well-known stories and well-known stock characters. Whereas our pieces don't have any of that.

WG: This is more in the vein of free jazz.

DP: Even less possibly commercial. Possibly the least commercial endeavor ever. [Laughter]

WL: The Harold has a kind of teleology to it: you start somewhere, and you know you're going to try to wrap it up. Whereas what you guys do, is you kind of start somewhere, and it's never a big proposition, it's never, "Here's the first sentence," it's, "Let me look at how TJ or Dave is standing and then make an inference."

TJ: To come out of the box like, “Hello, Doctor” that would set us on a false foot immediately. To come up with this faux’d, super-important thing, it’s tough to believe that. But we just look at each other, and see like, okay, he’s standing like that.

DP: He seems worried.

TJ: The look on his face. Then it seems like we can start from something that at least appears to be the truth at that moment. So it kind of puts you on a foot that then you don’t want to start making up a lot of bullshit because it’s not how it began, it’s not how this little piece started.

My friend had read about someone’s quote on improvisational jazz. He couldn’t remember exactly, but it was one of the big ones, it was Miles or Coltrane, and it was that, “You play until you make a mistake, and then you make that mistake over and over and over again.” And improv can be like that, that there’s nothing better than an honest mistake to it. Or the way that you describe what you like about the way Jerry plays guitar, Jerry Garcia, he gets himself in a hole—

DP: He puts himself in a position, he starts playing and it’s like oh man, there’s no fucking way, he’s doing this all wrong, there’s no way he’s gonna get out of that. It seems like he’s falling, and then he catches himself, and he’s fine. He’s fine. And people clap.

WL: *Maybe this is myth, Dave, but I’ve heard that you once won a best improviser award, and in your acceptance speech you just said, “I was always taught that my job was to make my ensemble players look better. I’ll try harder next time.” I’m wondering if you can talk about how this informs how you improvise. Improvisers often say, “The things we*

learn about being a good improviser are communicable to a philosophy of how to live well.”

DP: I think Del [Close] would say that too. He just makes the world a better place through better improvisation.

I remember I was teaching a class one time, and everybody was just fuckin’ moving around, for no reason, I told them all to just stand still and not move until they have a reason to move. And somebody shifted their weight, and I’m like, “Why are you moving? Why are you moving?” and they couldn’t answer, so I said, “Then stand fucking still. Stand still.” And nobody moved, and then they started getting crazier and crazier about why they’re not moving and what have they got to do—one person went over and tied somebody else’s shoe. That is: there’s nothing within me; my use is to other people. That’s really the reason that should motivate me to do anything in improvisation.

WL: *It seems to me that every time you guys start out a piece you’re undertaking a philosophical experiment. Sartre has that famous line in “No Exit” that, “Hell is other people.” That has everything to do with the fact that we’re a person, and we’re self-aware, and we live in a world where we have free will to do anything. That’s great. The catch is that everyone else who populates this world we live in has free will as well, and when those wills overlap, intersect, aggravate, that’s when things get crummy. So you start a scene, a thought experiment, where there’s nothing, an existential void, and everything is built piece by piece by two different players with unique wills, moment by moment, like you said, you’re building everything together, and you’re trying to make it not hell, right? You’re trying to make it a world in which these people are actually great for each other.*

DP: I think we would argue with some of your starting points. That there's a void at all.

TJ: There can't be nothing.

DP: We're exactly on the other side of that school, which is that it's all already there. And our job is to not make it whatever we want but to discover what it already is. In great detail.

TJ: To try and not mess up a good thing that's already happening.

DP: It's already perfect. Like those ideas of the rules: know who you are, say who you are, what's the problem, where are we, what size are my fucking shoes, all that stuff. Or just do a perfect scene, and all that stuff will either not matter or be taken care of.

TJ: As an improviser, even if you attempt to give someone nothing at the beginning, you're still going to be giving them something. You can't give them nothing. There's always already something there.

DP: They talk about "Let it happen," that's a bit of hubris, I think. It's already happening, with or without my permission. My job, our job, is to find out what it is that's happening, what's going on here, what's already going on.

TJ: Almost like every improv show ever is going on right now, and you kind of jumped into this one, and you'll be in this one for an hour, and then you'll jump back out of it.

WL: *I guess before we ask our traditional closer, we're interested in what works of literature you guys have been influenced by. What do you love?*

DP: For parenting skills, Dostoevsky. *Brothers Karamazov* specifically. No. Salinger, I think. I like that. I think it's real helpful for improvisation. I read a bunch of stuff, but I don't think I've read anything more often than I've read Salinger. Boy, if you could improvise like that. There's an awful lot of information in every sentence. And what we were talking about before, we've got "Bananafish," I don't know how many years later, we read "Seymour." That's not a whole story. It's just a little bit in some guy's life. Segmented pieces. It looks like an end. It wasn't an end.

TJ: I read a lot of garbage. Real, real pablum. I was an English major, and I resented it for a while, because it took the joy of just falling into a story away. I was reading for hegemonies within *Wuthering Heights*, imperial societies being exhibited through *Emma*. And this was probably a decent story.

So now I read a lot of things that are easily digestible. Murders and suspenses. I was trying to alternate for a while, go back and read stuff that I should've, so I worked my way through *Dunces*, and *Brave New World*—stuff like that. But right now, if I'm down to picking up *Pilgrim's Progress* or Harlan Coben, I'm probably going to pick up "Tell No One." Mr. Bunyan can wait. [Laughter] I have come to terms with the fact that I'm never going to read *Ulysses*. I've accepted that as a fact.

WG: *I'm starting to grapple with that fact also.*

DP: I'm starting to grapple with the idea that I'm not going to be a huge film-maker by the time I'm 25. [Laughter]

WG: *What did you think of Dunces?*

TJ: I thought it was way too long.

WG: *I couldn't get past, maybe, 50 pages.*

DP: I've made it to fifty pages several times.

WG: *That seems like a nice place to stop.*

WL: *I've done the same thing. I have my bookmark in it.*

TJ: The only thing that got me through *Dunces* was, I pictured Jimmy Carrane. Because it's such an unlikable protagonist, that I had to picture someone I liked and thought was funny as Ignatius. That helped me.

DP: Also, so many people I know, people I admire, think that's the greatest book—fuck, what did I like about you? [Laughter]

TJ: It does make hard lines.

DP: Funniest book ever written? Funniest book ever written?

WG: *If that's the funniest book ever written, it's sad.*

TJ: What, do you also laugh at people getting hit in the leg with shovels? Do you also find that funny?

DP: Woody Allen, I guess. And *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*. That's fucking hilarious.

WL: *For sure. That's one of the best.*

TJ: Hugh Laurie's book [*The Gun Seller*].

DP: Adams?

TJ: Douglas?

WG: *My dad knew him before he died.*

TJ: Was he like 6'8" or something?

WG: *He was huge. But he was in really good shape, and one day he was in the gym, working out, doing his usual thing, just dropped dead.*

DP: That will never happen to me. I will never drop dead working out.

TJ: Oh, darn it.

DP: You're disappointed that I won't drop dead working out?

TJ: Yeah. Well, I'm out of the pool. [Laughter]

DP: Also, apparently, fucking is out of the pool. [Laughter] I will not die fucking, I will not die working out.

WL: *Improv doesn't get you rockstar sex?*

DP: No, this one [pointing to TJ] makes me sit around after the show and go over the thing, instead of getting out there and casting the nets. [Laughter]

WL: *A 'wag' is a sort of wit, a merry, droll jokester. Who are your favorite wags? They could be fictional characters, historical figures, a buddy of yours. Don't say each other.*

DP: No danger there.

TJ: Wouldn't make the top hundred.

DP: Well I like that Woody Allen fella. I think he's pretty funny. But an idiot. [Laughter] He's pretty bright and pretty funny and apolitical. I find those things to be three good qualities.

TJ: I think Noah [Gregoropolous] qualifies in the classic style of that. I read an entire book of G. K. Chesterton quotes when I was a sophomore in high school. I was into witty little things. I imagine Noah would have been that guy in the corner. Dorothy Parker.

DP: H.L. Mencken.

TJ: Jack McBrayer.

DP: And Noel Coward: "I didn't get that laugh, when I asked for that cup of tea." These two vaudevillians are backstage after the show, husband and wife. The husband says, "I didn't get that laugh when I asked for a cup of tea." And the wife responds, "That's because you were asking for a laugh, and not for a cup of tea." [Laughter.] That, I think, really speaks to what we were talking about earlier.

WG: *Yeah, that's a perfect note to end on. Well, thank you guys.*