Arts & Humanities

Mad Libs

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What if in *Oedipus Rex*, the blind soothsayer Tiresias is an annoying old crank instead of a somber sage? And if, rather than delivering a message of doom — that Oedipus has killed his father and had children by his mother — he bickers with his page and delivers fortune cookie clichés? That, at least, is what happens when the dramatic climax of Sophocles’s play is staged with an actor, who cannot stray from the script, and an improviser, who has no knowledge of the scene and must make up his lines on the spot. In a new show of experimental theater called *Gravid Water*, actors and improvisers meet onstage to perform a series of unrehearsed scenes from well-known plays, books, movies, and musicals. And the results are wickedly funny.

“It’s a new take, or jazzy riff, on a familiar scene,” says Stephen Ruddy ’94CC, the creator of *Gravid Water*. “Sometimes serious situations become comic and comic ones become serious. The goal is to inject some of the excitement and spontaneity of improv into acting.”

Traditional improvisation has roots in 16th-century Italian *commedia dell’arte*, but its modern form took off in the 1950s. Improvisers take a suggestion from the audience, usually a word or phrase, and build a scene from scratch. A story line develops organically as the improvisers discover their characters. But in *Gravid Water*, the foundation for the scene already exists.

“So the improviser is building his character’s reality and kind of discovering the small bits of reality that are already established,” says Anthony King, a *Gravid Water* regular and artistic director of the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, New York’s prestigious improv venue.“There is much more set in stone, which is both a luxury and a challenge and makes for surprising, grounded, and richly detailed scenes.”

The idea came to Ruddy, himself an improviser, after he took a few acting classes at the Atlantic Theater Company. “Most modern acting theory relies heavily on improvisation,” he says. His experiment made its debut in November 2004 at Galapagos Art Space, a hip performance venue in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Ruddy had no idea whether his concept would work in practice, much less be funny. “I figured at best it would be really good and at worst it’d be very weird,” he says.

The show was an immediate success, drawing laughs and larger crowds, and two months later it was given a slot at the Upright Citizens Brigade. Ruddy began taking more risks with the stagecraft, introducing musical numbers, experimenting with less conventional plays, such as Tony Kushner’s Angels in America, and running identical scenes back to back but reversing the actors’ roles. In unusual cases, improvisers were given some hint of their character right before going onstage — the improviser in Tiresias’s role, for example, knew he was supposed to be blind. In a scene from All That Jazz, Ruddy added a piano player to accompany the scene and told him to play something “Bob Fosseesque.” The show built up more buzz, attracting top-tier New York improvisers, and Charna Halpern, the founder of the renowned i.O.Theater (formerly the Improv- Olympic) in Chicago, invited Ruddy to give *Gravid Water* an eight-week run this spring.

Along with Oedipus Rex, Ruddy has staged Antigone and Euripides’s Alcestis, which he had studied at Columbia as an ancient history major. “I was attracted to ancient history because of the literature,” he says. “Euripides, Sophocles, I like their way of thinking. It translates well into the modern world.” Ruddy is also an avid reader of Irish literature, which is where the name Gravid Water originated.When Galapagos first called him, he had to come up with a name for his show, requiring a bit of improvising on his part. He was reading Flann O’Brien’s The Hard Life. Gravid means pregnant, but in the book, gravid water “refers to a snake oil, a cure-all that makes you healthy but also heavy,” explains Ruddy. “I could come up with some elaborate connection about why that’s an appropriate name, but honestly, I was just put on the spot.”

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