

Spolin and Sills Laid Down the Rules. The Generations Who Came After Played by Them. That's How Chicago Invented Itself

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In the beginning, Viola Spolin wrote the word "improvisation" and the darkness that was upon the face of Chicago theatre filled up with light. And the light revealed imaginary space and real people – children first, then college students, then grown-up actors – playing within the imaginary space, passing it between themselves, shaping it into objects, transforming it. And the make-believe space grew solid. It changed into neighborhood bars with small stages and storefront theatres and large institutions, and more people came to inhabit them. Too often, when players departed the space, it seemed that darkness fell again upon the face of the city. Other times there was dazzling light.

Also in the beginning, Spolin asked the first question: "Where are you?" And though it was a simple question that took simple answers – "I am in the kitchen by the toaster and the pantry is on my right and the yard beyond the windows on my left" – it also provided a different kind of speculation: "Chicago...Where is that? What does it mean to be in Chicago in 1953 or 1968 or 1990? Who are we when we stay in Chicago and who are we when we leave? What is community?"

And from the questioning began the begetting, which too, started with Spolin. Her real life son, Paul Sills, begat (with the help of others) the Playwrights Theatre Club which begat the Compass Players which begat Second City which begat too many famous people to list, though these included David Mamet, who became the first Chicago playwright and begat St. Nicholas Theatre. And Second City also begat Stuart Gordon, who begat the Organic Theatre Company, which gave many others the courage to begin begetting on their own. Spolin and Sills begat a community and taught it to improvise. And so it improvised itself an identity: It created a Where.

The "Where," Spolin tells us in her ground-breaking 1963 *Improvisation for the Theatre*, referred to by many in her native Chicago as "the bible," is the environment, the "field" upon which the student-actor plays. Within the Where things happen; people come and go. And every change influences the actor.

"Put Paul Sills and the '50s and '60s groups or movements he sired...in the center of a tree trunk. Give it two branches — on one side, The Reality Makers; on the other, The Story Tellers. For the tree's roots, put Paul Sills' mother, Viola Spolin, and her still-in-print book, *Improvisation for the Theatre*." (Gary Houston, actor, director and critic)

Spolin's own roots are sunk deep in the soil of community. A first-generation American Jew and a natural athlete, the woman who has been called "the great space mother" grew up on the northwest side of the city, possessed by a superhuman passion for street games. At 18 she began training under Christian Scientist Nova Boyd, a Northwestern University-based sociologist who taught a life-course in "play," including sports, folk-dancing and games of every stamp. Boyd's Recreational Training School operated out of Hull-House, a community center founded in 1889 by another pioneer, Jane Addams, for the settlement of a local immigrant population so huge that one early-century observer speculated that "all the millions of human beings disembarking year upon year upon the shores of the United States were unconsciously drawn to make (Chicago) their headquarters." Spolin's games were born at Hull-House, beginning in 1938, when she taught and supervised creative dramatics for children, while working with adults under Franklin Roosevelt's WPA. Throughout our century this kind of partnership – Hull House providing the space for artists to fill – would usher forth more than Spolin's games; it would produce America's first little theatre, house the company that began the flowering of Chicago theatre in the '60s, and provide an upstart suburban troupe named Steppenwolf with their entree into the big city.

"Paul brought my work into the world," Spolin told Janet Coleman, author of *The Compass*, a just-published history of Chicago's first improvisational theatre. Certainly, Sills, born a week before Thanksgiving in 1927, went into what he calls "the family business" and introduced that business into the professional theatre. The business was play and the work was a series of games or, as Coleman tells us they are known in Brazil, "Violas."

Each game centers on one aspect of imaginative reality: transforming space, fashioning objects out of air, creating a “where.” The rules provide the player with a clear focus or “point of concentration.” By keeping their “eyes on the ball” and staying within the rules, the players free themselves to act spontaneously and creatively in the imaginary world. Moreover, they learn to share space, to take impulses for action off of others, to give and take. Spolin’s work provides an alternative to American versions of Stanislavsky’s writings on actor training. In the Russian’s methods, the actor is motivated by internal needs and desires; the character is the actor’s creation. The games, on the other hand, allow character – an extension of the player’s self – to emerge spontaneously, as the performer plays with others. The motivation is built in; action is generated not from psychology but from contact with others in space. Moreover, the improvisational nature of the games roots the actor in what Spolin calls “time present.” According to Sheldon Patinkin, artistic director of the National Jewish Theater in suburban Skokie and artistic consultant to Second City, the games “give the actors a sense of what it means to behave publicly as opposed to acting. And all you have to do is follow the rules.”

Patinkin began working with Sills in 1953 as part of the Playwrights Theatre Club at the University of Chicago, the first stab at blending Spolin’s training with theatre practice. Over the course of Playwright’s two-year-and-25-play life, Sills used the games to move away from psychological acting and to build a sense of ensemble among such actors as Edward Asner, Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Zohra Lampert, Anthony Holland, and the woman who would be his second wife, Barbara Harris. At a time when theatre in Chicago meant touring productions of last year’s Broadway hits, the precocious company – many of whom had graduated from the progressive U. of C. while still in their teens, a feat made possible by the schools policy of admitting anyone who passed its entrance, with or without a high school diploma – dared its community away from the Republican complacency of the ’50s with productions of plays by Brecht, Büchner, Schnitzler and the Jacobean. Through it all, Sills taught the games. When he could, he brought their originator in from Los Angeles – where she was beginning to write her “bible” – to do the same.

Ultimately, the leftist leanings of the young company brought the theatre down. Prodded by the office of newly elected Mayor Richard J. Daley, the fire department did the deed. A 1903 fire at the Iriquo Theater had provoked new laws making only proscenium stages legal and requiring hydraulic fire curtains fed by 26-inch water pipes. These were now invoked.

Between the death of Playwrights and the rewritten codes, theatre artists had to be canny. As Sills explains, they had to adapt to the absurdities of political life in the land of the robber barons. “You’d start a bar and that way you were immune from prosecution. You didn’t have to worry about codes or anything. Money talks and drinks are money. Bars in those days didn’t need more than one exit; theatres had to have three exits. You could smoke in the bar and couldn’t in the theatre. That’s why Compass Players and Second City started with liquor licenses.” Booze has always mixed with blood in Chicago’s veins. Even the original Hull-House was wedged between a saloon and a funeral home or, as it was then described, “Twixt Drink and Death.” Fire laws notwithstanding, the spark provided by Spolin’s work – spread mainly through Sills’ regular Saturday morning workshops – ignited the dreams of David Shepherd, a transplanted New Yorker with a small inheritance in his pocket. An idealist like Sills, Shepherd envisioned a political cabaret that would bring the theatre to the working classes, confronting them with the issues of the day. Also like Sills, he would see the brainchildren of his idealism grow increasingly adulterated.

The Compass’s form – improvised plays based on scenarios worked out in advance – was grounded in the tradition of *commedia dell’arte* and in the games Shepherd had played with Spolin and son as part of Playwrights. This became the nation’s first improvisational theatre; it would spawn numerous heirs, including Shepherd’s own St. Louis Compass and Chicago’s influential Second City. But it would never become the theatre Shepherd and cofounder Sills hoped for. Designed for the working classes, the Compass drew its burgeoning audience from the university’s intelligentsia. With success, the amateur company grew increasingly professionalized. Material ceased being improvised: success led the performers to “freeze” whatever worked. More and more, the ensemble gave over to the will of individuals. “Compass became a vehicle for soloists,” Coleman observes, “individuals concerned and fearful for their own approval and success.”

Throughout the three-and-a-half decades following the Compass’s 1955 debut, what David Mamet calls “a community of groups” has been challenged by outside acclaim for its members. As early as the Compass, the “second city” (as New Yorker writer A.J. Leibling condescendingly dubbed it) was becoming a place to leave, as players Nichols and May and Shelley Berman “graduated” to a national

audience in New York. Companies that arguably did their best work when nobody (outside of this secondary Midwest burg) had heard of them, became star factories.

Though Chicago's Compass soon folded, it is impossible to overstate the imaginative influence the group had. Epitomized by wildcards like Severn Darden, Del Close and Elaine May, the early Compass and Second City companies behaved like erudite lunatics unleashed at a cocktail party in the suburbs. (A fellow Chicagoan, the comic Lenny Bruce, known and admired by many of Sills' crowd, might have been found at the same soiree, shoving sticks of dynamite into crawlspaces and setting the rec room on fire.) Jack Viertel, writing in the Los Angeles Herald Examiner about Sills & Company, a 1985 reunion production with many of Sills' early players, captures the excitement of the best Sillsian improv: "You can practically feel their brain waves screaming helter-skelter toward one another, hoping for that mystical collision that will produce a miracle: a laugh that's true. A humanistic laugh."

Chicago Tribune entertainment editor Richard Christiansen agrees that Sills, under whose direction many actors did the best work of their careers, has proved to be Chicago theatre's most influential father figure. Even two decades after Sills moved on, Christiansen says, "the idea of finding a way through improvisation" persists.

All along, Sills' greatest talent, and his legacy to Chicago, has been for gathering and inspiring such groups. After the Compass moved to St. Louis, Sills – whose touch was better suited to short improvisational sketches than to the evening-long improvisational plays Shepherd envisaged – and partners Bernard Sahlins and (ex-Compass Player) Howard Alk opened up a nightclub revue in a former Chinese laundry. The format called for short scenes created largely from rehearsed improvisation and partly from audience suggestion. Second City (whose name ironically spit back Leibling's condescending label) became a staple of Chicago and spread its web of influence wide, most notably into television and film via many originators of NBC's Saturday Night Live. It became – and still is – an eccentric international family, a brood that playwright Jeffrey Sweet once pegged as a cross between the Waltons and the Corleones. But as the show's format grew set and once-improvised work was passed down in fixed form from company to company in Windville and elsewhere – and as the idea of company degenerated, with early performers like Alan Arkin and Barbara Harris "discovered" by New York and succeeding ensembles less interested in the foundation the games provided – Sills grew restless. When he walked out of a rehearsal and onto a plane for New York, he left a startled Patinkin at the rudder, where he remained until likewise leaving for points east in the late '60s.

For Sills the idea of community supersedes the urge to make theatre. He considers his work "para-theatrical." "It runs alongside the theatre," he explains, when I meet him at New York's New Actors Workshop, a school he started recently with Nichols and George Morrison, at which he teaches – what else? – the games. In fact, community – in a spiritual, even mystical sense – underlies the theory of games that Sills serves as spokesman for. In Sweet's chock-full-oral history of the Compass and Second City, *Something Wonderful Right Away*, Sills quotes his favorite philosopher, Martin Buber, to explain: "The heavenly bread of self-being is passed between man and man". This interaction is possible in the "freospace" created by the games. Former Sills-protégé Patinkin puts it another way: "When you drop all the life problems and just invest yourself in solving problems within the rules of the game – and since the rules are always about getting what happens next off the person that you're responding to – it creates a sense of community."

Sills returned to Chicago in '63 with some vague "communitarian" notions. He launched a series of ventures, all based on Spolin's work. Mother and son's Games Theatre, in which audience members joined rather unsuccessfully with performers in playing the games, evolved into Story Theatre, which presented evenings of theatre built from fairy tales developed through improvisation. Robert Falls, artistic director of the Goodman Theatre and, as a suburban high school student and downstate undergrad, a card-carrying "Second City fanatic," was not alone in being "blown away by the simplicity and wonder and magic" of Sills' later creation. The success of this enterprise carried Sills to Yale Repertory Theatre in New Haven, the Mark Taper Forum in L.A., onto television and, as Sills marvels, "all the way to Broadway with a few fairy tales."

Always politically motivated, Sills maintains that Story Theatre was "a reactions to '68," a time "in which chaos seemed to loom." Nineteen sixty-eight was The Year That Was in Chicago, as "Boss" Daley called on police to overrun Yippie protestors occupying Grant Park during the Democratic National Convention. It was the year Abbie Hoffman and Jerry Rubin, members of "the Chicago Seven," led their theatrical

romp through Judge Julius Hoffman's courtroom, where they had been brought up on conspiracy charges and where the trial's eighth (and only black) defendant, a future Oakland, Calif. mayor named Bobby Seale, was tied up and gagged in the halls of justice. This same Yippie band that brought street theatre to American politics held regular town meetings in Sills' theatre – in the original Second City space and next to its new one. Sills testified at their trial. Meanwhile, on the billboard outside Story Theatre could be read the words, "Coming, The American Revolution," an announcement for the project Sills would develop and produce for two years "of high exaltation."

Sills seems to have regularly created communities in order to leave them, a tendency that underscores contradictions in his character. The same director who inspired lifelong loyalty from performers has been known, in frequent moments of frustration, to throw chairs at them. While most acknowledge that his volatility and impatience have calmed over the years (I found him both kind and eloquent outside the classroom and just a bit less so inside), past colleagues have seen Sills alternate between gentleness and anger like a spiritual giant with a raging itch. (His difficult nature, many friends say, is magnified in his mother.) "What Paul was then was a really inspirational, though basically inarticulate, genius and a real artist," explains Patinkin. "You had to interpret what he was saying because a lot of it was body language and grunts and groans. When he wasn't communicating with his body language, he'd get very angry." In *Something Wonderful Right Away*, which reads equally well as a Rashomon-like character sketch of Sills and as a history of his first companies, Alan Arkin describes Sills' genius for "putting a group of people together who somehow set each other on fire." Former Second Citizen Avery Schreiber calls him "a great technician of the human spirit." Others portray him as "brilliant," "charismatic," "democratic," "impatient" and "juvenile" – all handles that could easily be affixed to the city itself.

In Sills' own eyes, his mother, not he, is the genius. "I'm a guy with an ordinary head. She's a great sage. She measures her words. She has written one of the very few books that will outlive everybody." In one interview, Jeffrey Sweet theorizes that "one of the reasons why Paul and Viola are so into the games is that they find it difficult to make contact with people in unstructured environments. So they created games to create a structure in which they feel secure to communicate." Everyone agrees, finally, that Sills is the man who never "sold out."

Whatever psychological or mystical motivations drove mother and child, they simultaneously unearthed and invented an art form indigenous to their "where:" improvisation.