



*An interview with  
Gary Schwartz*

*By Judy Kerr*

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Viola Spolin, who died in Nov. Of 1994 at the age of 88, is the Grand Dame of all improvisational theater as we know it today. I interviewed actor Gary Schwartz, the Executive Director of The Spolin Center, who teaches and carries on her work. Viola says of Gary, "He is a very gifted player/coach. He has a thorough understanding of my work." Gary directed the "Spolin Game Players" to great reviews for 3 years. He tells me, "I like to play as much as I like to teach'.

Viola began teaching and developing her Theater Games with children in Chicago during the 30's. In the 50's Viola's son, Paul Sills, founded Chicago's famous "Second City" improvisational theater company. Gary told me of Paul having Viola work with his actors; the group included Elaine May and Mike Nichols. "Viola used theater games to solve different acting problems for these actors who needed to be spontaneous and conscious of each other on stage; to be fully involved in the moment so they could respond naturally to the situation that was being asked of them; to make sure their minds were not thinking ahead or based in the past. She developed a game of 'converge and re-divide' and 'give and take 'where' different groups of actors on the stage would pass the focus back and forth like a ball from one to the other and that would create wonderful scenes.

"Viola's books came out of these workshops.

**Improvisation for the Theater** is the basic book that every improv teacher uses. **Theater Games For Rehearsal, A Director's Handbook**, which Francis Coppola used as part of his directorial rehearsal process for "**Dracula.**" **The Theater Game File**, is all of her 300 games, each one on an individual card with directions on how to play it, sort of like a receipt file. it's for teachers, directors and actors.' Gary spoke of how improvisation helps actors. "When you get involved with the spontaneous process you reach an unknown point, an 'off balance moment' that becomes unsettling because you are at a true moment of surrender. if

you can go with that moment, you will get into a very spontaneous free flow where life is great and the scene is working; you are just the instrument. The point of improvisation is to continue to be spontaneous through that moment, which will produce lots Of laughter. When you go beyond it, a lot of very new creative things can come out of you. You will personally grow and have a transformation as an artist, You can have something brand new that both you and the audience are going to discover at the same time. This is a much more exciting, fulfilling and meaningful theatrical experience than just creating a quick laugh.

Gary explained how these games can be used to rehearse scenes for acting class, 'By doing 'gibberish,' which is a subtext game, by singing the dialogue. Sometimes I even have my students spell the scene; it helps actors slow down and actually get inside the words they are saying, 'Slow Motion' is a fantastic audition technique. Auditions go quickly; you're saying hello, good-by, doing your reading. You don't remember who you've met; the world is whizzing past because you are urgent. if you coach yourself into slow motion, it will feel extremely slow to you but to everyone else it will appear as though you are poised, relaxed and confident; you take the time to see and hear them. This game counteracts your natural urgency; you come off on camera and in front of other people as a relaxed, receptive person.'

On how to pick a teacher, Viola says, "Don't pick an improv teacher who wants to be a guru, who lays claim to your talent, who wants to take credit if you make it big. Pick someone who is interested in the actual art itself." Gary adds, "Pick someone who is in the act of exploring the work along with you, one who is interested in allowing you to have an experience on your own, who is going to encourage you to be creative. Go with your own gut. Be on a personal journey to become spontaneous and relaxed. Trust and believe in your own personal experience. Take only the experiences that have a profound effect on you as the truth; let everything else not matter."For information on The Spolin Center contact Gary Schwartz at **425-831-5667.**

Or E-Mail him a [ils@spolin.com](mailto:ils@spolin.com) or on. On the Internet, the URL is <http://www.spolin.com>