

SPECIAL TO THE NEWS-RECORD

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SMARTEN UP @ THE ADULT SCHOOL

How to Foil Stage Fright? *Improvise!*

Tongue-tied at cocktail parties? Fraught with stage fright about speaking in public?

Meet two Maplewoodians who can cure all that and promise you'll have great fun in the process. Actors Lulu French and Brad Barton will share their Rx in classes at the South Orange-Maplewood Adult School, starting October 3rd. Their prescription: learn to practice *improv*, aka improvisational acting. Or, as defined by 17-year *improv* veteran and teacher Lulu French:

"*Improv* is a theatrical art form where one gets on stage and discovers what they are doing at the moment. There's no preplanning, no script."

No fear either, she says. And no long years of training required: "The trick lies in listening, really hearing what the other person is saying (on stage or at that cocktail party), and immediately responding," Lulu explains. "Listening and making eye contact. It's like joking with a friend: she says something and you respond. It ebbs and flows. There's no agenda. No one is in control."

Which can feel a little creepy at first, admits Brad, Lulu's early partner on the *improv* stage and now in life (they met at Gotham City Improv, moved to Maplewood in 2010 and have two sons, 12-year-old Scott and toddler Charlie).

Also an accomplished performer who has appeared on gigs like *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*, *MTV*, *One Life to Live*, and *Comedy Central*, Brad says he first came to *improv* "looking for something fun" when he had a day job "I wasn't too thrilled with."

Discovering *improv*, Brad reports, "Unlocks a door. I've had students go from saying, 'I don't know how you guys do that' to being the guys up on the stage, doing it."

Lulu likens the *improv* process to playing sports. "Sports are improvised, too, but there is also some structure to the games." Ditto for the way she teaches *improv*: "We start in a circle and play games that warm up our bodies, our brains, and let us connect with each other."

"*Improv* takes so much brain power," Lulu declares. "Concentrating is hard. You have to be so aware of what's going on. There's no time to think of what you're going to say next.

"Actually, I don't like speaking in public," she confides. "But I love to improvise because I'm not speaking for myself; I'm immersed in a character."

Improv is also a lot of fun, both teachers emphasize. "It requires some silliness," Brad adds. "You get to leave the day behind."

How does that work when both halves of a couple are playing at being someone else?

The answer: they rarely perform together these days. "When we were still young and crazy and living in Manhattan," Brad recalls, "we performed together at least once a week. But then, the children...."

At least one of those children is following his parents' footsteps to the *improv* stage: Scott, a Maplewood Middle Schooler, is now in his third year of studying with his mother. And Charlie?

"He's a two-year-old," Brad reports. "And a terrible listener."

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and jealous trustee of the
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