



CANADIAN IMPROV GAMES

## OUR STORY

*as of March 2002*

The Canadian Improv Games for high school students is a “loving competition” between teams of students trained to perform spontaneous, improvised scenes. Thousands of students at hundreds of high schools across Canada play in the *Games* each year. Finalists from various regional competitions compete annually at the *National Arts Centre* in Ottawa. This is the story of how one idea was transformed into the largest and most geographically dispersed theatre festival in Canada, and perhaps the world.

### ***Like All Stories, It Begins with an Idea***

The idea for competitive team-based improvised theatre originated with David Shepherd in New York City in 1972. Mr. Shepherd was the founder of the *Compass* theatre in Chicago in the 1950s. The *Compass* was a revolutionary force in modern theatre. Imagine this cast – Alan Alda, Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Ann Meara, Jerry Stiller, Shelly Berman, Alan Arkin – these legendary performers and others began their professional careers under Mr. Shepherd’s direction at the *Compass*. Eventually, the *Compass* was reconstituted as the *Second City* – a name now synonymous with improvisational comedy.

While watching a professional football game on television, Mr. Shepherd became convinced that too many people were spending too much time sitting on their backside watching television. He set about to turn the “watchers” into “players” by putting simple theatre games into a competitive setting. In 1974, his idea had its public debut at Toronto’s *Homemade Theatre*. Over three weekends, teams of professional actors and high schools students participated in the prototype of this new form of theatre, aptly called the *Improv Olympics*. One of the first team trained to play in the *Improv Olympics* was a team of Ottawa students from Sir John A. Macdonald High School, Commerce High School and Immaculata High School, under the guidance of teacher Judy Kirsh. The trainer was Mr. Shepherd’s partner, stage, television and film star Howard Jerome. The team included Willie Wyllie and Jack Eyamie, who thereafter

co-created the Ottawa improvisational theatre companies *Stage Fright* and *Skit Row*.

### ***The Ottawa Improv Olympics***

After graduating from high school, Willie and the other members of *Stage Fright* decided to produce an Ottawa-based high school version of the *Improv Olympics*. In 1976-77, eight high schools participated in the *Ottawa-Carleton High School Improv Olympics*. The one-day event was held at a high school and was televised locally. One student of note who played that year was Nancy Sakovich, a star of the television shows *Destiny Ridge* and *PSI Factor*. The *Ottawa Improv Olympics* grew to include 18 high schools in 1978 and 24 high schools in 1979. Meanwhile, *Stage Fright* won the first professional *Improv Olympics* in New York City. In 1981 virtually every high school in Ottawa-Carleton participated in the *Olympics*.

It would be nice to say that from there everything just took off, but sadly that is not the case. A few teachers in Ottawa could not or would not grasp that theatre and competition could coexist beneficially. While their students had a wonderful time playing in the *Olympics* and didn’t seem to mind if they won or lost, some teachers felt it was not appropriate to have their student’s performances judged. The critical spirit of these teachers prompted *Stage Fright* to stop producing the *Olympics* – it just wasn’t fun any more (and who wants to work long hours for no pay and be criticized for doing it!).

But the *Improvisational Olympics* would not die. Brian Kennedy, a teacher at Nepean’s *Confederation High School*, produced the *Olympics* on a small scale in 1982. His efforts and obvious love for the event caused Willie to recommit to the *Olympics*. Willie relinquished the role of general manager, assumed the position of Chairman of the Games, and local actor Johnson Moretti became the new general manager. In 1985, 30 teams participated in the *Improv Olympics* at Ottawa’s *Great Canadian Theatre Company*

*in association with*

NATIONAL ARTS CENTRE



CENTRE NATIONAL DES ARTS

("GCTC"). GCTC would remain the home of the Ottawa games until 1992.

Willie's dream, from the outset, was to create a national improvisational theatre festival for high school students. Under his direction, Johnson Moretti and his assistant, Hugh Neilson, were charged with the task of proving that the games would work outside of Ottawa. This goal required a change in the form and the name of the event.

### ***The Birth of the Canadian Improv Games***

The form of the games had to change. Shortly after David Shepherd originated the idea of the *Improvisational Olympics*, Keith Johnstone, a university theatre professor in western Canada, was creating something he called *TheatreSports*. Whereas the design of the *Improv Olympics* prompted people to learn about one another using improvisation as the method, the design of *TheatreSports* lent itself to the creation of improvised fun and mayhem. Although there were similarities, each had a different set of complicated rules. In order to make it possible to have a national event, Howard Jerome and Willie Wyllie decided that the games must: allow players from both traditions (the *Improv Olympics* and *TheatreSports*) to participate; have simple rules; be educational and artistic; and, most of all, be fun to play. The result was the *Canadian Improv Games*. Instead of being based on theatre games or gimmicks, the *Canadian Improv Games* would be based on theatre fundamentals. Instead of having varying time limits and complicated rules, each event would be 4 minutes long and the rules of the events were simple: in 4 minutes, a team must demonstrate in an improvised setting its ability to tell a story (the "Story Event"), utilize a style (the "Style Event"), show character (the "Character Event"), explore a theme (the "Theme Event"), or show sincere emotion (the "Emotion Event", later the "Issues Event", and now the "Life Event"). That's it – those are the rules!

Although this change now seems deceptively obvious, it revolutionized team improvisation by allowing players with diverse improvisational backgrounds to play together. It allowed teams from western Canada to build upon their *TheatreSports* games to produce approaches to the skill-oriented *Improv Games*; it allowed teams from Ontario to build upon their *Improv Olympic* tradition; and, best of all, it allowed teams who didn't know (or care) about *TheatreSports* or the *Improv Olympics* to design their own methods for playing the events of the *Improv Games*.

### ***Expanding in Ontario and then ...***

From 1986 to 1989, Johnson and Hugh worked tirelessly to establish the *Improv Games* in areas outside (but within driving distance) of Ottawa – places such as Cornwall, Brockville, and Kingston. In 1987, the *National Arts Centre English Theatre*, under the direction of Andis Celms, became the principal sponsor of the Games. Mr. Celms imposed one condition on the NAC's support for the Games, it had to become national, and quickly. In a fit of madness or brilliance (it's sometimes hard to tell), Johnson said to Andis, "Alright, give me 7,000 bucks and I'll fly to Vancouver, train a team, and bring it back to play." Andis agreed, Johnson flew, and Vancouver played! That same year, with the help of Toronto's *Out of the Way Players*, a Toronto production of the Games was held for the first time (with 8 teams). This scenario repeated itself the

### ***Winners of the Howard Jerome Trophy (National Champions)***

1978	Sir John A. Macdonald H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1979	Laurentian H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1980	Belcourt H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1981	Lisgar Collegiate Institute (Ottawa, Ontario)
1982	Lisgar Collegiate Institute (Ottawa, Ontario)
1983	Lisgar Collegiate Institute (Ottawa, Ontario)
1984	Confederation H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1985	Sir Robert Borden H.S. (Nepean, Ontario)
1986	Hillcrest H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1987	Brookfield H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1988	Hillcrest H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1989	Canterbury H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1990	Canterbury H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1991	Canterbury H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1992	Canterbury H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1993	Canterbury H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1994	Canterbury H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1995	Francis Lieberman Catholic H.S. (Toronto, Ontario)
1996	St. Mary's H.S. (Pickering, Ontario)
1997	Westwood Community H.S. (Fort McMurray, Alberta)
1998	Francis Lieberman Catholic H.S. (Toronto, Ontario)
1999	Lisgar Collegiate Institute (Ottawa, Ontario)
2000	Lisgar Collegiate Institute (Ottawa, Ontario)
2001	Westwood Community H.S. (Fort McMurray, Alberta)

following year, with new teams coming from Halifax and Regina. In each city Johnson visited, he encouraged local teachers to produce their own *Improv Games* the following year. While Johnson trotted around the Northern Hemisphere as the *Games*' Vice-President, Hugh Neilson assumed the role of National General Manager.

#### ***YTV and Video***

Although this approach to growth worked, it was slow and costly. By 1991, the *Games* needed more exposure and the NAC stepped up to the plate to provide it. The NAC decided to pay the costs of producing the *Improv Games* for television for three years and YTV agreed to broadcast it. Although everyone involved knew that television could not adequately convey the magic of improvisation, it was hoped that this exposure would encourage new teams in new places to play – and it did. All of this attention posed a new problem – what would happen if a school in some remote part of Canada wanted to play? How could they be involved? Willie, in a moment of inspiration (which is something Johnson and Hugh did not allow to happen often because it always meant more work for them), proposed that teams everywhere could enter by video and the winner of the video competition could be brought to Ottawa to play in the National Finals. The NAC liked the idea and agreed to provide the resources to invite every English high school in Canada to participate and to fly the winners to Ottawa.

#### ***A Truly National Competition***

In 1990, Scott Florence joined the *Improv Games*' (unpaid) staff as its "time-keeper" – at least, that's what he was told. Secretly, he was being groomed by Johnson and Hugh to take over as general manager, so that Hugh could manage the television and video initiatives. In 1992, Scott assumed the position of National General Manager and he oversaw a huge increase in the number of tournaments held and teams playing. The *Games* grew in amazing and unexpected ways. For example, Howard Jerome visited Newfoundland to adjudicate its annual high school one-act play festival. While there, he introduced them to the *Games*. Students and teachers in Newfoundland immediately embraced the *Games* and with Hugh's help a province-wide tournament was established. Dedicated teachers and former players now produce the *Games* in Vancouver, Edmonton, Regina, Winnipeg, Toronto, Kingston, Ottawa, Sudbury, Montreal and St. John's. Tournaments are popping up everywhere!

#### ***Celebrating our Twentieth Anniversary***

In 1997, the *Canadian Improv Games* celebrated the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the first high school *Improv Olympics*. Having completing twenty years of play, we looked back with pride and amazement at our accomplishments (who else could produce a national theatre festival of this magnitude on a budget of \$50,000 per year!). In addition to Nancy Sakovich, other players have gone on to successful careers in the performing arts (such as Sandra Oh, an international film and television star, and winner of a Cable Ace Award and Gemeni Award, most recently seen in the *Princess Diaries* with Julie Andrews; Tyly Ross, star of

#### ***Winners of the Willie Wyllie Trophy (National Championship Runners-up)***

1978	Laurentian H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1979	Gloucester H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1980	Gloucester H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1981	Gloucester H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1982	Gloucester H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1983	Glebe Collegiate (Ottawa, Ontario)
1984	Cairine Wilson S.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1985	Canterbury H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1986	Brookfield H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1987	Nepean H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1988	Sir Robert Borden H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1989	Lisgar Collegiate Institute (Ottawa, Ontario)
1990	Sir Robert Borden H.S. (Nepean, Ontario)
1991	Francis Lieberman Catholic H.S. (Toronto, Ontario)
1992	Prince of Wales Collegiate (Vancouver, British Columbia)
1993	West Carleton S.S. (West Carleton, Ontario)
1994	Lord Byng S.S. (Vancouver, British Columbia)
1995	Canterbury H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1996	Canterbury H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1997	Canterbury H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
1998	Lisgar Collegiate Institute (Ottawa, Ontario)
1999	Canterbury H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)
2000	St. Mary's H.S. (Pickering, Ontario)
2001	Holy Trinity H.S. (Ottawa, Ontario)

the Toronto production of *Tommy* and *Miss Saigon* on Broadway; and Daniel Taylor, a world renowned classical vocalist). Other players are becoming leaders in law, music, education, advertising, technology, and all other walks of life. In recognition of its past, Willie Wyllie and Howard Jerome, the co-founders and co-creators, established the "Founders' Award". Unlike other awards, this award is not given on an annual basis; rather, it is awarded only as and when earned by students, teachers or volunteers who have made a sustained and lasting impact on the *Games*.

After serving for five exhausting years as general manager, Scott Florence handed over the general manager's position to Drew Tucker in 1997. In 1999, our beloved Johnson Moretti passed away; our Vancouver Regional Manager, Alistair Cook, assumed the position of National Vice-President, and former player and National Head Judge Dan Lajoie joined the Board of Directors.

***Looking to the Future ... The Story Continues ... Celebrating our 25th Anniversary***

In 2001, Alistair Cook assumed the position of President of the Games. Tournaments have been added in Vancouver Island, Edmonton, Halifax, Waterloo and Moncton.

We have plans to make the *Games* bigger and better. In addition to expanding the number of participating schools, we have strengthened our infrastructure. We now have in place certification process for judges and for instructors – in doing so, we will draw upon the talents of our most experienced and successful teachers and trainers. A key component of this strategy will be the development of an Improv Institute that will offer improv classes and workshops in various cities throughout Canada. Although many of our regional tournaments will continue to be coordinated by teachers, it is our aim to have certified staff available in every province to facilitate the production process; to that end, we are developing a business model to produce the resources and opportunities that will financially and logistically allow professional producers to assume leadership positions in major regional centres. In addition, we are hosting improv league play in many regions as a prelude to play in the regional and national competitions. This enables more players to play, and to play more often.

In the summer of 2002, the *Games* in partnership with the YMCA is hosting the first *Improv Camp*.

The vision of the *Games* remains big – that every high school in Canada should have the opportunity to play - one day, soon, we'll get there!

***Winners of the Andis Celms Trophy***  
(National Video Competition Champions)

- 1994 Westwood Community H.S.  
(Fort McMurray, Alberta)
- 1995 St. Vincent's H.S.  
(St. John, New Brunswick)
- 1996 Westwood Community H.S.  
(Fort McMurray, Alberta)
- 1997 Thousand Islands H.S.  
(Brockville, Ontario)
- 1998 St. Malachy's  
(St. John, New Brunswick)
- 1999 St. Mary's H.S.  
(Pickering, Ontario)



***Winners of the Founders' Award***  
(for significant and lasting contribution)

- 1998 Jane Moore
- 2002 Roger Finlay
- 2002 Ted Stewart
- 2002 Victoria Steele
- 2002 Johnson & Terri Moretti
- 2002 Hugh Neilson
- 2002 Scott Florence
- 2002 Drew Tucker
- 2002 Alistair Cook



***Winners of the Vision Award***  
(for having the vision to imagine a world  
in which high school students,  
through improvisational teamwork,  
might enrich their lives forever)

- 2002 David Shepherd
- 2002 Howard Jerome
- 2002 Judy Kirsh
- 2002 Jamie ("Willie") Wyllie

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In addition to the above persons, many teachers and volunteers across Canada act in a variety of capacities.



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