

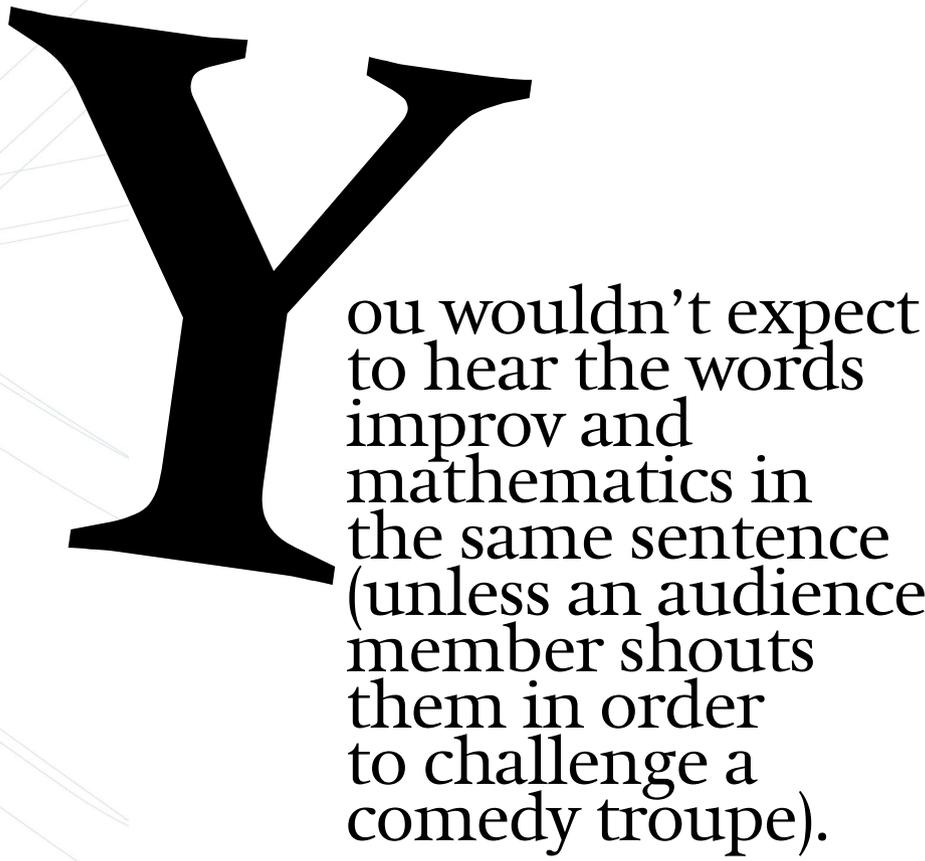
by leticia perez

Life

Improv master
and slam poet
Jesse Parent '96
acts out

rhymes

photography by kathleen dooher



Y

ou wouldn't expect to hear the words improv and mathematics in the same sentence (unless an audience member shouts them in order to challenge a comedy troupe).

But it turns out that the two disciplines have something in common. They're both anchored by formulas and patterns, which, once mastered, can guide you safely into new territories. Math might help you navigate through engineering or computer science; improv could launch you into slam poetry.

Which is what happened to Jesse Parent '96, improv master and second-place winner of the prestigious Individual World Poetry Slam (IWPS) competition in 2010, and again 2011.

"Improv is about pattern recognition and understanding how things are supposed to come back to you," explains Parent in a calm voice that belies his commanding stage presence. "You know where you're going because you've seen this pattern before."

Since earning his degree from WPI, Parent's life looks a bit like improv: grounded in the formulaic (marriage, two kids, technology career) with side trips into the exotic and creative (Ultimate Fighting, Jiu Jitsu, improv, slam poetry, tattoo artistry).





“Improv is like playing a sport in that sometimes you run plays. You have no idea how that play will come out, but you hope it will be successful.”



“WPI is not just about getting your math done. You have to go out and make yourself well-rounded. And that means getting out of your comfort zone.”

In many ways, WPI was the perfect incubator for Parent’s wide-ranging interests. While studying computer science, he competed on the wrestling and rugby teams, acted in WPI’s main theatre group, Masque, and performed with Chain Link Fence, the university’s improv group. He also was inducted into the theatrical honor society Alpha Psi Omega and earned his tattooing license while an undergrad.

“What WPI really gave me was the knowledge that the humanities do matter. You can be a nerdy guy and still have art in your life,” he says. “WPI is not just about getting your math done. You have to go out and make yourself well-rounded. And that means getting out of your comfort zone.”

In addition to an excellent education, one of the best things to come out of his WPI experience, says Parent, was his marriage. He met his wife, Julia Moench, when they were undergrads. She later transferred to the University of Utah to study art. When they reconnected a few years later, Parent says the light went on immediately. “I was sitting there with my best friend in the whole world, which is Julia, and that’s when it hit me. I should just ask her to marry me.” Which he did, and today he and Julia are the proud parents of three kids, Alec 12, Jasmine 10, and Kai 3.

The couple moved to Salt Lake City 15 years ago when Parent landed a job writing software. Now he’s a director at Sorenson Communications, a company that makes video phones and provides American Sign Language translation services and live captioning for the deaf and hearing-impaired. “It’s a pretty neat position,” he says. “We create video phones and give them away to our customers who use them to talk to each other using sign language, which is a language quite different from English.” Sorenson Communications’ efforts are funded by the government, so the company is able to provide these services at no charge to their customers. Parent jokes, “It’s almost like altruism, except we get paid a lot of money.”

The Playbook

Parent dabbled with improv (which he calls “mental athletics”) while a student, but says he began to really take it seriously when Julia was pregnant with their first child and he needed an activity to replace Ultimate Fighting. A perpetual class clown, he took a free workshop with Knock Your Socks Off, a Salt Lake City improv group, and soon was performing with the group for pay. He traveled to the Chicago Improv Festival in 2002, an eye-opening experience that led to his full immersion in the craft. When the group dissolved, Parent formed a duo with the group’s director, Joseph Kyle Rogan.

They call their improv project “JoKyR and Jesster” after their nicknames. The pair are regularly invited to improv festivals and asked to teach, so that what Parent initially took on as an expensive hobby is now a self-supporting part of his life.

Parent describes the short-form improv he performs as “safe for all audiences,” but his performances at improv festivals can be R-rated. “Festivals can be very risqué, very ribald, very honest,” says Parent, who points out that improv is not always comedy, especially long-form, which is more theatrical and less games-based than short-form. In long-form, subject matter is often drawn from serious personal events and experiences such as illnesses and marital strife. “We bring our whole lives onstage,” he says.

As to how it works, Parent points to the structure found in improv patterns. “The television sitcom *Seinfeld* is based on an improvisational structure called the Harald. It has three distinct story lines that eventually blend together. Each story line has a different beat. The stories progress, and either they tie together or they do not,” he explains. “There’s a lot of math to it. The pattern has beats like music and the form sometimes dictates recurring themes or when to tie stories together.”

In his workshops, Parent teaches improv techniques that allow performers to break down audience suggestions and be funny under pressure. “Improv is like playing a sport in that sometimes you run plays. You have no idea how that play will come out, but you hope it will be successful. There’s a play-book, but like in sports, you don’t always know what play the other performers might call.” Among the tools a performer might use are puns, synonyms, celebrities, and physical traits. And, of course, anything related to audience suggestion. “There are types of deconstructions you can use to train your brain to create good fodder for scene work.”

Hooked

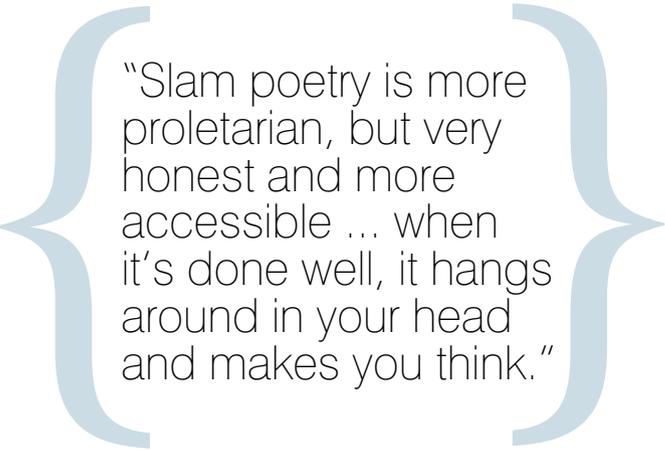
Parent’s passion for improv took a dramatic turn when he stumbled upon the Russell Simmons show *Def Poetry* on cable television. He was inspired, particularly by the group Floetry, who performed poetry to a cappella music. Parent began to experiment, eventually combining a cappella, improvised scene work, and poetry to create a new improv form, which he dubbed “The Hook.”

Interest in his new form led to more invitations to perform and teach, and Parent was among only a handful of innovators to be named an artistic associate of the Chicago Improv Festival in 2006 by its director, Jonathan Pitts.

“We asked Jesse to become a CIF artistic associate because of his passion about improv and the arts,” Pitts recalls. “He’s fiercely intelligent, very talented, and as good a man off-stage as he is onstage.”

Parent considered isolating the improvised poetry pieces of “The Hook” and investigated taking his performances in a different direction – the poetry slam. For the uninitiated, slam poets perform their work before an audience in monologue-type dramatic form. Competitors are evaluated and awarded points based on the impact of the poetry and the artfulness of the performance. Judging is done by audience members selected randomly just prior to the competition. A competitive poetry slam also has a touch of old-time religion to it, as audience members respond in mid-poem with shouts of approval or rapid-fire finger snaps, the latter serving as a sort of micro-applause.

Likewise, slam poetry competitions bring together an interesting mix of American cultures. From hip hoppers to academics to suburban hipsters to rappers, audiences are significantly more diverse than the typical poetry reading. The poems, too, are different. The medium is live performance,



“Slam poetry is more proletarian, but very honest and more accessible ... when it’s done well, it hangs around in your head and makes you think.”

so the poems rely more on imagery and verbalization. But, when it comes to themes and topics, slam poetry and traditional book-bound poetry have much in common.

“Slam poetry is probably more proletarian, but very honest. It’s more accessible than traditional poetry,” says Parent, “But like any good poem, when it’s done well, it hangs around in your head and makes you think.”

That ability to be thought-provoking while taking the audience on an emotional journey is Parent’s real reward. He recognized this at the 2010 IWPS. He had just finished what he considered an imperfect performance, when he was pulled from his self-recriminations by a tap on his shoulder. It was Taylor Mali, a legend in poetry slam circles, and someone Parent hoped to meet one day. Mali was impressed by Parent’s performance and told him there was greatness in what he’d just heard and seen.

“I’d actually placed second that day,” Parent says with a chuckle. “But it felt like I’d won.”