

‘Yes, and’ Liz Allen

By Lea Warren

On Thursday, February 6th, Winter With the Writers welcomed Liz Allen, the acclaimed improv instructor, to coach a master class here at Rollins. Liz Allen, who has been directing and performing improv for the past 25 years, not only has years of experience and several awards (such as the Del Close Coach of the Year Award, which she received on three occasions) under her belt, but also served as a coach for the actors in *Don’t Think Twice*, which was screened on Wednesday after an interview session with director and actor in the film, Mike Birbiglia.

The two hour master class offered the chance for Liz Allen to show off her improv knowledge and teach our WWW interns for this year—most of whom had little or no experience—the basics of improv. After introducing herself and her craft, Allen put her interns (and her audience!) to the test with a whole manner of exercises, from tapping into the ‘group mind’ by having a dozen students nonverbally walking and pausing on stage in unison, to conducting a group story, in which one individual would point to each workshop member at random and ask them to continue the thread of a story with a theme decided upon by the audience. Our story, for instance was about a happily running flamingo, which turned into an adventure of yo-yos and broken arms as person after person added to the narrative.

In one of the last exercises of the class, Allen asked her students to construct a monologue, and encouraged the scene as it morphed from a test in consistency to an exploration of character, each intern stepping up to the plate with a new character. By the end of the scene, it had grown into a hilarious cacophony of Southern and British Accents, Frankenstein’s monster, and a search for love that had everyone (including those performing the exercise-turned-narrative) laughing out loud.

Throughout the evening, whether it was interns or audience members on stage, and whether the exercise was verbal or nonverbal though, Allen had a way of inspiring unity in her students. She urged everyone to let go of ego, fear, and thought, and give in to impulse and group work, supporting one another from beginning to end. With the command of someone who has been loving and teaching improv for years, she allowed interns and audience members alike to step outside of their comfort zone and find freedom in the art form of improvisation.

At the end of the evening, she asked for a word or phrase from each intern that embodied what we had learned. We answered with things like “work together,” “let go of ego,” and “trust yourself and your group,” all of which centered around her message that improv is about the whole, and about the freedom of expression that comes from letting go and having fun with this wonderful art form.