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PH: NATALIE HILL



INTERVIEW WITH **KELLY AGATHOS** | BY MANUEL SPECK

**“LEARNING THAT
IT’S OK TO FAIL
WAS A HUGE THING
FOR ME”**



PH: LAURE GEERTS

Kelly Agathos is an improviser based in Brussels, Belgium. With her Greek heritage and her time being raised in the United States, she has the qualities and the background an international city and community like Brussels needs. Through various duos and ensembles and now her own impro-company ImproBubble, she has become one of the cornerstones of the English-speaking impro-community in Brussels, a fast-growing scene, with various groups emerging and international guests and instructors visiting.

You are an involved impro teacher and performer in Brussels, now with your own company. How did you get in touch with the artform and how did you start an English scene in a city where there was no impro in that language?

I discovered improv in the summer of 2010, while I was at the *Edinburgh Fringe Festival* performing with my university's sketch comedy troupe. I randomly bumped into a friend of mine who was also performing at the Fringe. When he said he was performing in an improv show, I asked him what improv was and he simply told me to come see for myself. **I remember sitting in the audience, with my jaw hanging from my face the whole time; I simply couldn't believe they made up everything on the spot!** I was so impressed, that from that moment on, I went to see every improv show I could find at the Fringe: improvised movies, improvised musicals, improvised Film Noir shows...

When summer (and my Master's degree) came to an end, I moved back to Brussels, where I had gone to school. Though I had come back to do an internship at the European Commission, **I was determined to keep my artistic side alive.** I auditioned for every play I could find and ended up getting really involved with the *American Theater Company of Brussels (ATC)*.

While I was rehearsing for one of their productions, I saw them advertising an improv workshop with **Ryan Millar** (a talented Canadian improviser and all-round wonderful human being). Even though I loved to watch improv, **I never thought I would be able to do it myself.** At the same time, I was so intrigued and curious, that I decided to sign up. At the end of what was both an exciting and scary weekend, Ryan asked me if I wanted to perform in a show. I remember being terrified and thrilled at the same time while on stage and after that, I had caught the bug for good.

The ATC gave me the opportunity to do and organise more improv in English, through the establishment of an improv sub group within their company, *ATC Improv*. Through it, **the first anglophone improvisation troupe of Brussels, The Ghost Sheep, was born,** which was made up of myself and some other very enthusiastic members of the slowly growing English speaking improv community of Brussels. Through my many years of involvement with ATC Improv and The Ghost Sheep, **I got to grow as a performer, producer and eventually as an artistic director and teacher** in my own right, but always as a hobby.

Around the time I was turning 30, **I realized improv was my one consistent passion, the only thing in life I had never quit but kept on loving more,** so I decided to make a more serious commitment to it.

In February 2017, **I started my own professional improvisation company, ImproBubble.** I chose the name because we operate in what is called the EuroBubble, the community in Brussels that works in the field of EU affairs. I want the two worlds, the two 'bubbles' to merge through the shows we do, the classes we teach and the corporate improvisation trainings we facilitate. Here I have to mention that I've been very lucky to have met **Ben Hartwig, Pierpaolo Buzza and Rozana Radu,**



like-minded improvisers who all moved to Brussels around the same time as I was setting ImproBubble up and who have become an integral part of it, either as cast members, teachers, facilitators, or all three.

You are a Greek, born in the United States and now living in Belgium. Do you think that international mix influences the way you approach improv? The style you perform in or the way you are able to connect in our international scene?

Yes, very much so. I think **one of ImproBubble's strengths are all the different nationalities you encounter**: everyone brings their own distinct flavour and, at the same time, **there is an inherent open-mindedness**, because the city in which we operate is such a melting pot... Of course, that means that you lose a certain amount of common cultural references. On the other hand, it brings a simplicity to improv, a focus on what everyone can understand. I think it helps the improvisation become **more truthful and less dependent on witty word games or pop culture jokes**.

Because I was among the first to want to do improv regularly in Brussels, **the only way**

to get taught and grow, was by regularly inviting guest improvisers to come to Brussels or going to international festivals. Much like our international community, the diversity of our guest teachers and performers has inspired me, my peers and my students. **Having many teachers rather than just a couple of regular ones has taken us a lot further by showing us different approaches, perspectives or philosophies through which to learn and perform improv.** And in this respect, I must say that the Belgian improv community at large is not only already very active, but also very helpful. Through personal connections and online groups, coordinating and organizing the visits of guest teachers is one of the ways in which the local Belgian improv and the international improv community comes together, no matter who the organizer is.

Similarly, I feel immediately at home when I go to international improv festivals, meeting and connecting with improvisers from all over the world, taking incredible workshops and witnessing everything improv can be. **There are few things as exhilarating as coming back from five days spent living and breathing improv**

with old and new friends, inspired by what you have seen, with new plans and dreams for yourself and your community as a direct result!

Also, you have quite an academic background and you are still working for the EU as a speechwriter in the European Commission. How did impro influence your work and vice versa?

Completely! **Impro has made a huge difference in my professional career.** I was brought up in a household where academic excellence was pretty much expected. So **learning that it's okay to fail was a huge thing for me.** It allowed me to be less hard on myself (and others) and to take more risks in life. The ultimate step in this regard for me, is that **not fearing failure is what has ultimately made me brave enough to leave a comfortable, safe career in the EU institutions to become a full-time improviser** (which I will be as of mid-April!).

Whilst developing as an improviser, I started noticing that the soft-skills that we get taught - embracing mistakes, listening, trusting and supporting others, saying 'yes and' - were creeping into my everyday life. I was less intent in 'winning' or getting my ideas through than I was in solving problems. **I became the person who would figure out what we can do with any given situation, instead of complaining about it.**

This has come in super handy in speech writing, because in the institution I am a part of, you never have complete control over the content of the final product. Everyone, from the high ranking official you are writing for to the policy experts and your bosses will have an opinion or tell you what to add or edit. So not taking things personally, having a *yes and* attitude is extremely helpful in the creative process.

Speaking of vice versa, the influence impro has had in my work has been very much recognized, especially in my time at the European Commission. I've been asked to assist in facilitating team buildings for small groups as well as for the entire Directorate General which I am part of, consisting of circa 400 people. I was also invited to talk at the annual *European Speechwriters' Network* conference in Cambridge last year about what speechwriters can learn from improvisation.

You mentioned before that many improvisers from abroad stopped by Brussels and there are probably many that you could mention for various reasons. But can you give us an example of two or three improvisers who strongly influenced you?

This is hard to choose, so I'll pick from some of the ones I either ask to come to Brussels repeatedly or deliberately seek out when I'm in festivals. These are **Shawn Kinley, Inbal Lori and Patti Stiles.**

Let's start with Inbal. She was one of my first teachers and yet, no matter how many workshops of hers I take, no matter what the subject, I feel like I can never get enough! Her teaching style and feedback has given me *'aha' moments*, made me aware of behavioural patterns I didn't even know existed, and has stayed with me throughout the years. She is also one of my all time favourite performers to watch on stage, a true artist who never ceases to amaze and inspire.

Next comes Patti... There is a reason she is such a beloved teacher. She makes everybody in her workshops feel valued and safe enough to become truly vulnerable, from the minute they walk in. I remember noticing how the energy in the room shifted within the first five minutes of her workshop. Her workshop *'Scenes That Matter'* has, in particular, strongly influenced the work Pierpaolo Buzza and I do in our duo, *Hic Sunt Leones*.

And finally, Shawn Kinley. Working with him makes Keith Johnstone's books come alive. In fact, it is better than reading the books, you really get a visceral experience of *'Johnstonian'* improv! Shawn has also been a tremendous influence on me, especially when it comes to teaching improvisation. Like Patti, he is acutely aware of how important it is to make students feel valued and get what they need, as individuals. As we speak, he is on his way to Brussels to work with both the students and teachers of ImproBubble for three weeks, which I could not be more thrilled about!

What things on stage do you enjoy the most? Are there things you strongly dislike and disagree?

I love watching improvisers who are generous with their partners on stage and really take the time to listen and react to what is there instead of trying to "invent". Though I am more of a verbal improviser (unfortunately!), **I love to watch silent scenes** and improv where you don't really need words because the emotions and

interactions on stage are enough. **I am becoming more and more interested in improv that is political, improv that is dramatic. Performances that really make you think and wonder where you stand, like a good play.** I felt this in particular when watching *Blackout* at Impro Amsterdam talking about issues connected to race and with *7 Women of Different Ages* tackling issues connected to women. **It takes courage to be that vulnerable on stage, knowing from the outset that you are doing something that not everyone in the audience will understand or agree with.**

What I don't like is improv where it is obvious that the players are not trying to connect, or worse, openly judging their fellow players onstage. *Players who resist being affected by what is going on and are only going for the laughs via cheap jokes.* **I also dislike seeing sexist and creepy behavior on stage.** I am really glad more and more improvisers are having conversations on and off stage about what is okay and what is not.



PH: NATALIE HILL

Is there a popular “impro-wisdom” you disagree with? Do you have a controversial opinion about impro that you want to put out there?

I don't know if this is controversial, but, though I am all for there being more and more improv in the world, more and more troupes, players, etc, **I don't believe anyone is 'owed' stage time.** I say this even as I am busy putting a small theatre together in our new venue to give my students more opportunities to get up on stage and perform. I get annoyed when I come across an attitude of entitlement: if you want to do it, make it happen, don't expect others to do it for you. This also ties into my being impatient when faced with improvisers who aren't as willing to help out backstage or on the less 'glamorous' parts of putting a show together. These are the bits no one is going to praise you for, because they are less visible (logistics like setting dates, coordinating your players, booking venues, promotion, marketing, front of house, bar).

I can tell you a impro-wisdom that I do like, that Joe Bill recently reminded me of, which comes from Del Close: **“Fall, then figure out what to do on the way down”.** I have the tendency to be bit of a control freak, so **letting go and surrendering is hard.** Entering a scene without any inspiration can still be scary, but it is also one of most liberating experiences impro has offered me.

The other thing I love about improv is that **the possibilities on stage are as limitless as our imagination is.** It's like the Adidas slogan: **'impossible is nothing!'** Everybody who plays impro knows this intellectually, but looking back at what you created, just you and your partners on an empty stage, is something I find incredibly empowering. It excites me because that 'nothing is impossible' attitude is a great way to go through life, and it's a trait shared by inventors, dreamers and leaders.



Is there an underrated impro-figure that you would like to promote? If so, who and why?

Hard to stop at one, can I pick two? One from the international scene and one from our Belgian improv scene. **Beata Rozalska** from Poland, who some of you might know as Gosia's younger sister, is an incredible performer in her own right. Not only does she have the **versatility to play with status, characters and emotions**, she also has **fantastic comedic timing** and doesn't let anything go to waste on stage.

Marie-Pierre Thomas is an improviser I have only met recently, but she has already made quite an impression on me. **She is the definition of a generous improviser, with incredible range, who allows herself to be affected deeply.** She is quite known already in the French-speaking community and I cannot wait for the international scene to discover her.

Are there still things you want to achieve in impro? Styles and ways to perform? Skills to learn?

Where do I start? The list is never ending.

As a performer, I would like to **further work on my physicality and ability to play diverse characters.** Gender-equality (including the non-stereotypical portrayal of gender) is important to me, so I want to find more ways to honour this on stage, but also in the way I teach.

I have been lucky enough to get opportunities to teach and perform in Europe. I'm dreaming of **making the next step and travelling to different continents for improv!**

In terms of shows, something I'm particularly excited about is **exploring the magical realism genre.** I was inspired by a workshop I did on the subject with **Felipe Ortiz** and a truly incredible magical realism show I saw from the **BATS Improv** ensemble in San Francisco. I've noticed that improv shows tend to either be very much

grounded in the real world, or go completely into fantasy land. The subtlety of bringing in one magical or supernatural element in an otherwise 'normal' world, makes it look that **much more poetic and powerful.**

Something I'm very aware of is **how much I have benefitted from the help of both the local and international community.** My students, teachers and friends from other improv groups here in Brussels have been vital in helping ImproBubble grow, whether through recommendations, volunteering for shows, lending their expertise or time. Similarly, my international friends and mentors have always made themselves available and been extremely generous with their time and advice. Having been inspired by BATS Improv and ImproVIBE for certain aspects of the set-up of ImproBubble, I am particularly grateful to **William Hall** and **Menelaos Prokos**, for sharing the lessons they learned along the way. So I very much hope that I too will be able to **give back when a budding improviser who wants to make the leap to something bigger asks me for my help.**

Last but not least, the last couple of years especially have brought me **closer to the Belgian improv community.** I collaborate a lot with friends in Antwerp, Ghent and Leuven. In Brussels, I'm currently discovering more and more of the francophone community, something that has been greatly helped this year by the opening of *l'Improviste*, the first theatre in Belgium dedicated entirely to the art of improvisation. Even though we have spoken a lot about the growing international improv scene of Brussels in this interview, there is so much local Belgian talent, so many good teachers, performers and organisers, that **I want to help these links become stronger in the future and create more opportunities for all our communities to mingle and collaborate.** So watch this space...