



# “YOU’RE PLAYING,”

BY ALI MCNALLY  
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Hilary Blair said to me as I walked into her acting class for business professionals on the third floor of the Robert & Judi Newman Center at the Denver Center for the Performing Arts.

An observer by trade, I wasn’t prepared to yell out how I was feeling, or to act out a marriage proposal in front of 30 other classmates I barely knew.

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Blair, a veteran actor and voice-over artist from the Denver Center, coaches attorneys and other business professionals on those skills by getting them outside their comfort levels. Classes

are informative but also serve as a confidence crash-test room, said Linda Lautigar, one of my classmates and an attorney at the U.S. Department of the Interior’s Office of Natural Resources Revenue.

“Some of the exercises at the beginning seemed silly, but we don’t get to be silly at work, and some of your best creativity in business comes from silliness,” she said.

Improv isn’t just a technique used in the short slapstick acts of Denver’s comedy clubs. It involves spontaneous thinking and collaboration. It’s also what helps Lautigar, who’s taken acting classes for almost a year, build confidence and communicate more effectively. In our class, Lautigar watched as an unsuspecting classmate stood on a chair, telling an impromptu story to the class.

“No, he didn’t,” said Blair, interrupting at



random points as our flustered classmate tried to continue her tale while addressing Blair’s disagreements. It was good practice for cross-examinations, Lautigar said.

“It helps you think on your feet,” she said. Aside from lacking spontaneity, the biggest mistake most attorneys and business professionals make in presentations is defaulting to a monotone “business voice”

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to make themselves sound more important, said Blair, a seasoned voice actor.

“It’s really hard to convey information when you’re not using inflection, intonation and prosody,” Blair said. “Our perception of status may change, and that may inflect in our voice consciously or unconsciously. All of these things throw us all the time. It’s amazing what we do vocally.”

Voice inflection also conveys social status, validates us during job interviews and helps us win arguments during negotiations. But speaking is only half the job.

“In an argument, you concentrate on what you’re going to say instead of listening,” said the Denver Center’s Allison Watrous, who teaches an acting class with Blair. “There’s more magic in hearing what the other person has to say.”

For attorneys in both boardrooms and courtrooms, the message is the medium. But acting coaches say the medium must be authentic.

“People often think we teach attorneys to ‘lie better than they already do’ or some similar remark, but we actually try to help them be themselves honestly in front of a judge, jury or arbitration panel, and we help facilitate the truth in that sense,” said Len Matheo, who with wife, Lisa DeCaro, operates Courtroom Performance, a trial consulting firm in Denver. “There’s no room for acting in the courtroom. It’s



Husband and wife team Len Matheo and Lisa DeCaro operate Courtroom Performance, a trial consulting firm in Denver. | LAW WEEK PHOTO JAMIE COTTEN

wrong to teach lawyers how to trick people. We’re trying to teach them how to advocate for their clients better.”

Matheo and DeCaro are professional theatre and television actors who’ve worked with litigators at all stages of their careers since 1997. They work primarily with commercial litigation firms on the defense side, and among their top clients is Denver law firm Wheeler Trigg O’Donnell. The husband-and-wife team coaches attorneys to engage jurors through one-on-one eye contact and conversational tone.

“When you think of great actors, you think of credibility—you believe them in the roles that they play,” Matheo said. “All great acting starts with this comfort level of being yourself. We want to help them get beyond that comfort level and bring in storytelling skills like telling, structuring, and in our case a persuasive story.”

Preparing for written communication

without thought of oral presentation is another top mistake of even the most seasoned trial lawyers, acting consultants said. Although written ideas look and sound organized on paper, they may still confuse jurors.

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“They’ve already got a lot of facts running in their mind,” DeCaro said. “Once it gets off the paper, it’s an entirely different animal.”

Some of Denver’s best-performing attorneys had past lives as professional theatre actors.

Before embarking on his white-collar defense practice, Charles Mitchell, a partner of Denver law firm Sander Ingebretsen & Wake, was a contemporary theatre actor in New York, where he worked with Pulitzer Prize-winning playwright David Mamet, who penned *Glengarry Glen Ross*, and ‘night, Mother author Marsha Norman. He also appeared in TV shows like 1980s private detective drama *The Equalizer* and *Law & Order*. Even when he was acting he frequently watched federal trials.

“I was always a trial junkie and enjoyed the legal shows,” Mitchell said. “In New York, I lived across from the federal courthouse for the Eastern District, where all of the mob trials were held. I would go and just watch. I was fascinated with the process, the story.”

Denver Deputy District Attorney Sean Moynihan attributes his courtroom

successes to his life as a stage actor, rather than the skills he learned on his recurring role in ABC soap opera *One Life to Live*. Unlike screen acting, which requires multiple takes, live theatre resembles presenting in front of jurors.

“Screen acting is very meticulous, very technical and just doesn’t have that live adrenaline feeling of doing a play in front of an audience,” Moynihan said. “When someone is in front of a jury, I think you’re technically onstage. Learning acting or doing theatre can do a lot in terms of how you use your voice, how you use your body. You’re not just stationary in the courtroom. You’re telling a story and you’re hopefully using your body to tell that story.”

Theatre training also helps attorneys anticipate unexpected courtroom gaffes.

“You need to be a chameleon, depending on your role in the courtroom,” said Julie Walker, partner at Wheeler Trigg O’Donnell. “A trial itself is one of the most dramatic things you can experience in a professional setting because witnesses are human. Attorneys could prepare a story they’re committed to, but things often change when they take an oath and face a jury. A judge could ask an unexpected question, or someone will fail to show up. There’s a lot of drama.” •

— Ali McNally, AMcNally@CircuitMedia.com



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