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Applied Improvisation Magazine



Issue 4 Summer 2026



Applied
Improvisation
Network

Contents

| | | |
|--|----------------|----|
| Letter from the Editor | Maarten Joosen | 2 |
| Letter from the President | Vicki Crooks | 3 |
| “Unwind, Unlock, Uplift”: Florida Conference 2025 | Amy Angelilli | 4 |
| Jason Miller interviews Staci Block | Staci Block | 6 |
| From Pivot to Tradition: Overview of Virtual Conferences | Anna Alexander | 8 |
| Improv Game: Mind Meld | Jason Miller | 10 |
| 2026 AIN Global Conference in Rimini, Italy | | 12 |

Letter from the Editor

Welcome to the newest issue of the Applied Improvisation Magazine.

Over the past months, we have been playing with different ways to describe what this publication actually is: a magazine, a newsletter, a guide, perhaps even a companion for the applied improvisation community. For now, we are still calling it a magazine — but we would genuinely love to hear what you think. You can find a short survey on the last page, and we warmly invite you to share your thoughts with us.

Originally, we had hoped to publish this issue much earlier in the year. I especially want to thank and apologize to our wonderful authors, who delivered their contributions within the timeframes. However, life, as improvisers know all too well, sometimes offers unexpected directions to me that did not entirely align with getting this issue out on time.

But here it is at last, and we are delighted to share it with you.

In this issue, our president, Vicki Crooks, looks ahead to the upcoming conference in Rimini. To help us get into the spirit of gathering together again, Amy Angelilli reflects on the warmth and energy of the previous conference in Florida. Jason Miller brings us an inspiring interview with Staci Block, who shares the remarkable work she is doing with teenagers through applied improvisation.

Anna Alexander takes us through the story of the virtual conference — an initiative born out of necessity during the Covid years that has since grown into a valued annual offering within the Applied Improvisation Network. Jason also shares another playful and practical game to add to your facilitation toolbox. And finally, you will find all the details and practical information for the conference in Rimini.

We hope this issue offers inspiration, connection, reflection, and perhaps a few new ideas to bring into your own work and life.

Enjoy the magazine — and this time, I truly promise we will be back much sooner with the next issue.



Maarten Joosen

He made it his mission to help organizations work better and to inspire people in meaningful ways—so that businesses, individuals, and today’s complex and uncertain world as a whole become better, and more enjoyable. At the heart of all his roles is a strong focus on communication, applied improvisation, and the exchange of ideas.

Letter from the President

by Vicki Crooks

Greetings,

I am so excited that the latest edition of the AIN Magazine is now available. Each edition provides insights, stories, and resources for the applied improvisation community. Seeing the cover photo, I am reminded of the terrific time we had at last year's global conference in Safety Harbor, Florida. Our theme was Unwind, Unlock, Uplift and as you can see, we were doing just that!

This year, our global conference is in Rimini Italy, and it marks AIN's first time in Italy. Our conference team is busy putting together all the details and it is looking great. There have been a few changes made this year. The first was offering a packaged early bird rate that included lodging and registration. As we saw in Florida, being together in one location provided us with more time together. We have also moved to a fall conference. Moving from August to October means our members will save money and avoid heatstroke!

So far, the response has been great. Conference tickets are still available, but our room package has sold out. We have arranged for discounts at nearby overflow hotels. If you haven't registered yet, there is still time but don't wait too long. You can check out all the details on [our Rimini webpage](#).

[Click here to visit our webpage and learn more!](#)

If you are interested in leading a session or learning journey, the deadline to submit proposals has been extended until June 30th and we would love to hear from you. Check out the website for all the information about submitting a proposal.

My first AIN Global conference was in Baltimore, Maryland. At the time, I was a graduate student, and I often attended academic conferences. This conference was unlike any conference I had ever attended. There were still plenty of learning opportunities. I met new people, participated in scholarly sessions, demonstrations, and workshops. The difference was that these were improvisors, creative, funny, and welcoming. Attendees came from

different backgrounds, different specialties, and different countries. Despite those differences, the sense of connection and community made this I conference special. Since that first conference in 2011, I have attended 8 global conferences, and they remain the most valuable conference I attend.

In this crazy, harried world, of online lives, and artificial intelligence, it will be good to get together and practice "The Art of being Human" with like-minded others. Whether this will be your 1st conference or your 21st, I have no doubt that you will also find connection and community, just like I did in 2011. And when you are in Italy, please come and introduce yourself to me at the conference. I am looking forward to hearing your story!



Arco di Augusto, just 1.8km from our venue and hotel



Vicki Crooks

Vicki is the president of the Applied Improvisation Network (AIN) and is currently teaching at Scripps College of Communication at Ohio University. She has incorporated improv in a variety of settings over the years ranging from classrooms to theatre stages to nonprofit trainings. She particularly enjoys using applied improv as a tool to help groups and individuals focus on creativity, play, and flexibility. **Email: crooksv@gmail.com**

“Unwind, Unlock, Uplift”: A Triumphant Return to Community at the 2025 AIN Global Conference

by Amy Angelilli

From July 31 to August 3, 2025, AIN gathered in beautiful Safety Harbor, Florida, for its annual global conference under the theme “Unwind. Unlock. Uplift.” Hosted by the Safety Harbor Resort & Spa in the Tampa Bay area, the event offered an immersive experience including workshops, keynotes, performances, jams, and spirited community-building rooted in the practices of applied improvisation—and the spa services helped attendees unwind.

A New Locale, a Renewed Energy

This was the first time AIN held its flagship in-person conference in the U.S. South—a deliberate shift to broaden geographic access and reflect the network’s growing diversity. After prior conferences in regions like Vancouver (2023) and Prague (2024), the Safety Harbor signaled both a logistical and symbolic pivot. Factors such as travel accessibility, regional infrastructure, and the potential for new local partnerships, that enable everyone to be under the same roof, were key in the decision.

Despite Florida’s famously hot and humid late July–early August climate—and occasional afternoon thunderstorms—attendees embraced the rhythm of the season—with a bathing suit and a cool cocktail by the pool.

Setting the Stage: Learning Journeys



Erica Marx

Two days of Learning Journeys (pre-conference deep dives) ran on July 30 and July 31, enabling participants

to explore specialized topics and stretch beyond the usual session format. These immersive experiences set the tone for the main conference, building relational trust, sparking curiosity, and priming creative engagement.

Opening Sessions

When the conference officially opened Thursday evening, a sense of anticipation rippled through the gathering. From the outset, participants were invited to unwind—to slow down, decompress, and reconnect with playful curiosity. And that’s exactly what happened as attendees “fla-mingle, mingle, mingled” around the main ballroom in groups making stops along the way to play a game with conference committee members facilitating. To ensure a playful spirit, and with a nod to the location, the facilitators carried paper parasols with Florida artwork on them such as manatees, flamingoes, pineapples and so much more.



Highlights: Keynotes, Workshops & Performances

Over the course of four days, the conference delivered a rich tapestry of offerings:

- **Keynote: Andrew Tarvin — “Humor That Works”**
On Friday, humor strategist Andrew Tarvin delivered a keynote on how humor is more than entertainment—it’s a tool for connection, resilience, and creativity in organizations and teams. His talk emphasized that well-applied humor can shift cultures, break down barriers, and help team members engage more fully.
- **Keynote: Maria Schaedler-Luera — “The Resilient Protagonist”**

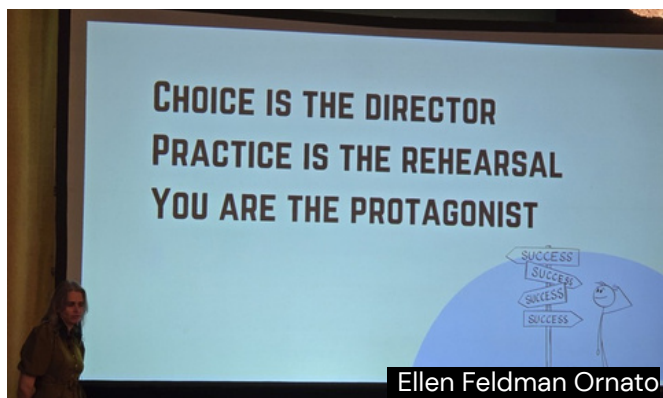
On Saturday, Schaedler-Luera guided participants through emotional coherence, improvisational narrative practices, and micro-resilience exercises.

Her goal: not just to teach resilience, but to practice it in real time with attendees, offering tools for navigating uncertainty with curiosity, care, and adaptability.

- **Performance: Will Luera and Friends — “Resonance — A Tapestry in Motion”**

On Saturday evening, conference-goers gathered for a unique ensemble performance merging movement, sound, and unscripted storytelling. “Resonance” invited all levels of performers into a shared experiment in coherence and surprise.

Beyond those marquee moments, the schedule included dozens of workshops, AIN Talks, open space sessions, and micro-lessons exploring applications of improv in education, leadership, healthcare, social justice, organizational change, and community — all rooted in the notion that improvisational principles can catalyze growth, connection, and transformation.



Ellen Feldman Ornato

Community, Access, & Inclusion

A key thread through the 2025 conference was **accessibility and equity**. AIN offered scholarship awards to people from underserved or under-represented communities—particularly those in the Tampa Bay region—to lower barriers to participation. AIN was also committed to safety, diversity, and inclusion, and noted the conference would actively manage accommodations and consider attendee safety in a sociopolitical context.

The conference also preserved one of AIN’s long-standing traditions: the AIN bookstore, where participant-authored books, decks, and tools could be showcased and sold during the event.

Reflections & Next Steps

As the conference wrapped up on Sunday afternoon, participants departed with renewed inspiration, fresh tools, and deeper connections. The arc of “Unwind, Unlock, Uplift” felt not merely thematic but experiential: many attendees remarked that the act of unwinding—letting go of constraints, learning humility, welcoming surprise—was itself a catalyst for unlocking imagination and uplifting capacity.

Looking ahead, the legacy of this gathering will ripple through classrooms, boardrooms, community groups, and nonprofit organizations—wherever practitioners bring improvisational mindsets to pressing real-world challenges. AIN’s annual conferences are more than meetups: they are living laboratories where emergent ideas are tested, practices refined, and alliances formed.

Safety Harbor in August may have been humid, but the atmosphere among conference attendees was electric. The 2025 AIN Global Conference demonstrated that when a community shows up with openness, heart, and playful discipline, the lines between workshop and life blur—and new patterns of possibility emerge. Thank you to the board, the planning committee, the presenters, and the attendees for traveling from far and wide to make this conference meaningful, impactful, and fun!



Carrie Klewin Lawrence

On a personal note: While I, and the rest of the planning team, realize there were challenges hosting the conference in Florida, I stand firm in what I said when I welcomed participants—there are good people and good things happening in Florida. And because we were there, we had the opportunity to experience these powerful people and their progressive programs that represent the spirit of AIN. May we continue to highlight local achievements in future locations.



Amy Angelilli

She is the owner and ringleader of Third Space Improv, a place where creativity meets connection and collaboration, in St. Augustine, Florida. She was also a proud member of the AIN conference planning committee.

Jason Miller interviews Staci Block: “Freeze!” How One County’s Improv Based Program Reaches Teens

Bergen County, New Jersey. The teenager in the back row stood up, voice shaking but sure. “I was that kid last year,” they said after watching a scene about suicide warning signs. “I made my friend promise not to tell anyone, but he did. I was angry then. I’m alive now.”

Moments like this are why Staci Block, LCSW has been saying, “yes, and...” for more than three decades.

Block, a licensed clinical social worker with a theater background runs Reflections, a youth-led, volunteer, interactive improvisational theater program out of the Bergen County Division of Family Guidance, Department of Human Services. Since 1989, Reflections has tackled such issues as bullying, dating abuse, prejudice, addiction and mental health issues. Reflections goes wherever they are needed: schools, community groups, client programs, parent groups, conferences, and youth groups. The program is free, completely funded by Bergen County, and rooted in this one idea: give teens space to explore the various issues in their lives.

“We freeze the scene at the moment of conflict,” Block says, “Then the audience has a discussion with the actors, while they stay in character, and suggest different choices. We replay it with their ideas so they can see another path and feel with the actors what it’s like to take it.”

Saying Yes...And figuring it out

Block joined the county in 1986, doing traditional social work, until a visionary director asked her to build a teen theater program. “I had no idea what she was talking about,” she laughs. “But that’s improv. You say yes and figure it out.”

Early on, Reflections auditioned large cohorts from across Bergen County’s 70 towns. Over time, Block dropped the auditions to make it more inclusive. “Anybody can do this if they want to commit,” she says. “Everybody grows.”

Growth is baked into the program. New members are welcomed with an orientation buddy, a welcome call, and even a handmade prop. Twice a year, the group members formally reflect on their journey using 15

Foundation Stones; skills like leadership, communication, respect, and self-growth.

Theater that solves real problems

A school might request a workshop on cyberbullying. Block works with her actors to assign the relevant roles like bully, victim, bystander, and upstander. After a few warmup exercises, they improvise a scene. When the tension peaks, Block calls, “Freeze!” Students in the audience question the characters on the stage and offer alternatives and interventions. Audience members are even allowed to join as upstanders, modeling positive action. Every show ends with cast members coming out of character, introducing themselves and sharing thoughts about the topic and local resources.



The moments that stick

Some memories make Staci laugh, like the teen who quipped, “When I’m not at Reflections I keep thinking you’ll jump out and yell, “Freeze!” before I make a decision.” Other memories are heavier, like the suicide-prevention performance previously

mentioned or a teen moms' group where a scene about absent fathers brought raw emotions and honest talk.

Reflections reach even spans generations. Two former castmates met in Reflections, stayed friends for many years, fell in love, married, and now their child has joined the program. He told me, "I owe you my existence," Block says, smiling.

What teens learn on stage and off

High schoolers often arrive anxious about "looking foolish." Block normalizes vulnerability with partner interviews, small group games, and full group warmups. "When everyone's a chicken, no one's the only chicken," she says.

The benefits ripple outward

- Confidence: Students handle public speaking and interviews with more ease.
- Perspective: Playing parents, teens practice empathy and problem-solving.
- Leadership: Roles rotate weekly so everyone has the chance to facilitate group meetings.
- Upstanding: Having rehearsed and performed interventions, they recognize real ones.

Alumni of Reflections have become actors, educators, and counselors. All of them have become leaders wherever they are.

A rehearsal in motion

Each two-hour rehearsal session blends structure and spontaneity. The rotating facilitator for the day is called the Group Star and opens with a playful vibe check. Warmups follow and flow into creative check-ins. For example, one week, teens described their week as if they were a "fly on the wall." Then comes scene exploration, working with relevant issues like vaping or peer pressure. Of course, after all that hard work the teens earn a snack break and then they handle group business under headings like Hot Stuff (urgent), Reruns (ongoing), and New Releases (new business).

Adapting to new times

Reflections endures because Bergen County has funded it continuously since 1989. No grants or fundraising. "People can't believe it when they hear this," Block says, "The county truly believes in the impact Reflections is having."

Today's challenge is attention. Teens are busier, more anxious, and glued to screens. Outreach happens at community service fairs and through social media. "If a teen is at the table with me, it's ten times more compelling," Block notes. We accept new members on an ongoing basis, giving high school students a way to stay engaged all year long. The school-year program and our Summer program RISE (Reflections InterACTIVE Summer experience) offer exciting activities, personalized support, and meaningful opportunities to connect, learn, and grow.

Parents, meanwhile, learn new boundaries as well. Block communicates through the teen, not the parent. "That's how they build responsibility," she says.

Rehearsing for life

Reflections is part theater, part leadership lab, part resilience building. It turns empathy and courage into reflex. Years later, alumni still hear Block's cues: Freeze. Breathe. Focus. Choose. Act.

All Bergen County Division of Family Guidance services are free to county residents.

For more information about this program, [click here](#).

Or email Staci Block:

SBlock@bergencountynj.gov



Staci Block

Staci Block, MSW, LCSW is the founder and coordinator of Reflections; a teen improvisational theatre program that addresses adolescent issues. This runs out of the Bergen County Division of Family Guidance, Hackensack, NJ. She uses applied improvisation as a Sociology adjunct professor in the college classes she teaches, as well as in her private practice. A performer of musical theatre, comedies and dramas, Staci is especially passionate about cabaret singing; "it's all about communicating the lyrics and telling the story."

From Pivot to Tradition: How Going Virtual Expanded Our Conference World

by Anna Alexander

Our most powerful tool: “Yes, And.”

In the world of applied improvisation and here in our community, we teach and embody the power of "Yes, And." We believe in the value of accepting the reality of a situation and building upon it to create something new. Everyday we are faced with offers, unlimited chances to accept and say "Yes, And." Looking back at the history of our gatherings over the last few years, it is clear that the Applied Improvisation Network didn't just preach these concepts—we live them.

2020: The Pivot

Before I joined AIN as your Administrator in 2021, the organization and the world faced a global hurdle that no one saw coming. Remember March 2020? The pandemic forced a pause on physical gatherings, pushing back our beloved in-person conferences. Faced with the inability to meet face-to-face, our community had a choice: wait it out, or adapt.

True to our nature, AIN chose to adapt. The result was the *2020 Virtual Symposium: "Imagining a Better Normal."* It was born out of necessity—a way to keep our spirits up and the important conversations going when travel was impossible. At the time, it felt like a temporary bridge, a placeholder, until we could return to the way things were.

2021: A New Era Begins

When I stepped into the role of Administrator in June 2021, the digital landscape was shifting from a temporary fix to a need for a sustainable platform. That year's theme, "What Comes Next?," was perfectly timed. We weren't just waiting for the pandemic to end anymore; we were actively exploring the future of our field, our network, and our community in this new reality.

We realized that the virtual space offered something unique and something we needed. It democratized global access to our conference, welcoming voices who might not have been able to travel to an in-person event due to cost, distance, or scheduling. The "temporary" fix to our in-person conference hiatus was actually opening doors we hadn't realized were closed.

2022-2025: A Tradition Cemented

By the time we were finally able to embrace in-person gatherings again, the virtual component had proven it was no longer just a backup plan.

From "The Power of AI" in 2022 to the clever focus on "sustAINability" in 2023, our Virtual Conferences have allowed us to explore deep, resonant themes in the online space. In 2024, we tackled "Applied



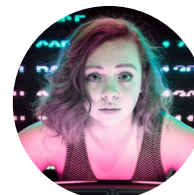
Improvisation: Against All Odds," a testament to the resilience of the work we do and the people in our community. Most recently in 2025, our Virtual Conference went camping! We had fun with our CAMP IMPROV theme, exploring the connection between applied improvisation, creative play, and the spirit of a classic summer camp.

2026-And Beyond: Looking Forward

Out of that initial pivot during an unknown time, a new and amazing tradition was born. We have held a Virtual Conference every year since our first symposium. We learned that these events are not "less than" compared to our in-person gatherings; they are simply different. They are a testament to our resilience and our commitment to connecting with one another.

Today, our annual Virtual Conference stands as a reminder of our collective capacity to adapt. Whether on a screen or in a conference hall, the spirit of AIN remains the same: we are here to support, learn, and grow—together.

Naturally, this raises the question: When will the next Virtual Conference take place? With our 2026 Global Conference gathering in Rimini, Italy this October, we are navigating a new rhythm for our calendar. Will the virtual gathering happen before we meet in Rimini, or will it follow? We are currently in the planning stages and look forward to sharing the details soon. Keep an eye on your email for the official announcement!



Anna Alexander

Anna is a creative, multi-media artist and independent contractor. She earned her degree in TV & Film at Southeast Missouri State University. Having grown up in show choir and drama, Anna understands the stage and performance world firsthand. In her free time, she loves watching movies, sewing, cooking, journaling, cuddling her three cats, and baking delicious treats. She lives in St. Louis, Missouri.

Improv Game: Mind Meld

by Jason W Miller

Introduction

In this section, we highlight a game by walking you through its design and setup, explaining its goals, and sharing key debrief questions. For applied improvisers, the debrief is often the most important part of any game—after all, as Thiagi says, “The game is just an excuse for the debrief.”

We feature games that work well both in-person and in virtual settings. We hope this inspires you and encourages you to share how you're using these exercises in your own practice. In the case of the Mind Meld game, as far as we know there is no single original inventor. It is also referred to as Convergence or Got It.

Description

Mind Meld is an improv game designed to build **connection, creativity, and quick thinking**. The goal is for two players to say the **same word at the same time** by finding common ground between their previous words.

How to Play:

1. Start with Two Random Words

- Two players face each other.
- On a count of “**1, 2, 3**”, each says a random word out loud (e.g., “apple” and “car”).

2. Find the Connection

- The goal is to find a word that connects the two previous words.
- For example: Round 1: “apple” + “car”. Connection might be “road trip” → both think of something that links apples and cars.

3. Say the Next Word

- On the next count of “**1, 2, 3**”, both players say a new word they think connects the previous two.
- Example: Player A says “picnic” Player B says “basket”

4. Repeat Until You Match

- Keep going, using the last two words as inspiration, until both players say the **same word at the same time**.

- When they match, celebrate and start a new round with two new players.

Virtual Variation

Of course you can also play this game online. Due to the asynchronous nature of online devices it is better to use the chat function. You can also divide the group in break-out rooms

1. Start with Two Words

- Two players type their first random word in the chat and press send **at the same time** (use a countdown like “Ready? 3...2...1...SEND!”).
- Example: Player A types “mountain,” Player B types “coffee.”

2. Find the Connection

- Each player thinks of a word that connects the two previous words.

3. Type the Next Word

- Both type their new word and countdown again.

4. Repeat Until You Match

- Continue until both type the same word.
- When they match, celebrate in chat with emojis or GIFs.



Anna Alexander

Tips for success

Sometimes people get frustrated at not getting on the same page. Important is to stimulate them

- Don't overthink—go with the first connection that comes to mind.

- **Stay positive and playful**—there’s no wrong answer.
- Encourage **speed over perfection**—the energy matters more than logic..

Benefits & Skills Developed

- Builds **collaboration** and **listening skills**.
- Encourages **adaptability** and **creativity**.
- Creates a sense of **shared success** and **fun**.

Debrief questions

- What helped you converge? This helps to explore (listening, pattern recognition, and adaptation.)
- How did your attention to your partner’s word choices influence your own decisions? Such a question taps into active listening and responsiveness.
- Was there a point where you stopped trying to be “clever” and start trying to align? What changed? These questions dive more into ego, overthinking, and the shift toward collaboration.
- What happened when your assumptions about your partner’s thinking were wrong? This question highlights the flexibility, recovery, and reframing.
- How does this game mirror collaboration or decision-making in your day-to-day work? This question explicitly makes the transfer to workplace dynamics.
- What would “mind-melding” look like in a real team situation you’re currently in? This final question lets participants think and encourage them to apply the experience in their team and enable them to come to action planning.



Jason W Miller

Jason is a facilitator, trainer, and executive coach striving to bring applied improv into the corporate vernacular in any way he can. Jason loves to collect games and frequently tests them out on his children before he takes them to work. Jason discovered improv while living in The Hague, the Netherlands in 2013 when he stumbled upon some Improv classes. He is now back in the USA and strives to infect corporate culture with the magic of applied improv.

2026 AIN Global Conference Conference

Our Theme: “The Art of Being Human”

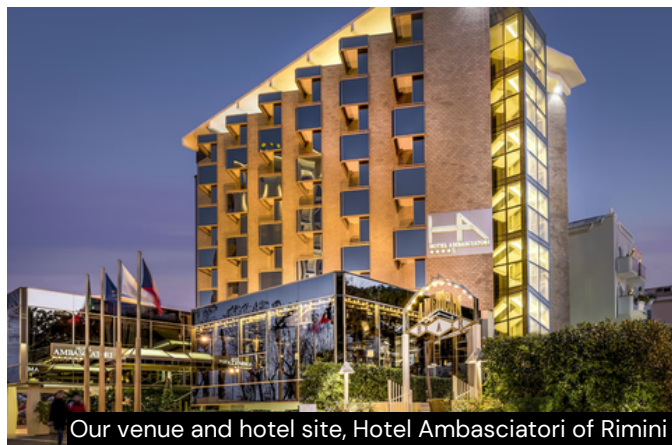
Location:
Rimini, Italy

In the vibrant streets of Rimini, where Commedia dell’Arte once tore up the rulebook, our theme—“The Art of Being Human”—is a high-spirited invitation to reclaim our spontaneity from a world obsessed with “optimization.”

While algorithms and rigid protocols try to script our every move, Applied Improvisation reminds us that the best parts of life happen off-book.

We’re trading the safety of a fixed script for the spark of the *canovaccio* (the scenario), shifting from functioning like efficient machines to thriving as present, creative beings.

By celebrating the messy beauty of the “mistake” and the magic of radical listening, we’re reclaiming our “Human Edge.” After all, in leadership, learning, and life, the most meaningful work isn’t found in a manual—it’s an improvised art.



Our venue and hotel site, Hotel Ambasciatori of Rimini



Key Dates:

Submit your proposal by:

Tuesday, June 30th at 11:59pm Eastern (NY Time)

Conference Date:

Thursday, October 22nd – Sunday, October 25th

Learning Journey Date:

Wednesday, October 21st and Thursday, October 22nd

Bring your expertise to AIN

At our conferences, we sculpt an outstanding, diverse program. Unlike traditional conferences that rely on rigid slides, our sessions are built on engagement, experimentation, play, and real-world applications. We are looking for:

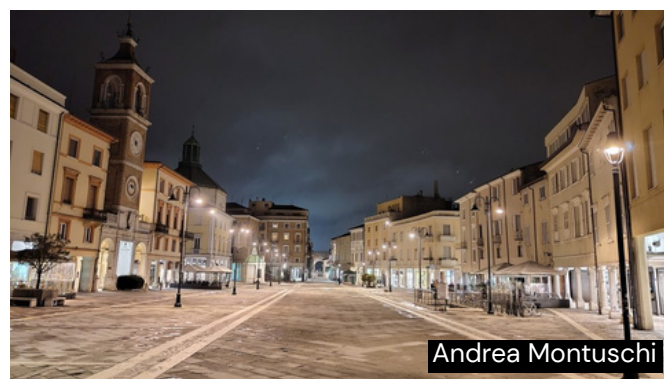
- Workshops: 90 minute sessions
- AIN Talks: 8-10 minute TEDx-style presentations
- Learning Journeys: Full day or half day deep-dive immersions (aka pre-conference!)

Registration/Ticket includes:

- All conference sessions (workshops, talks, Open Spaces) and performances during the conference
- Conference swag-bag
- Meals and coffee breaks during the conference
- Antipasti Meal on Thursday Opening Night
- Lunch on Friday and Saturday
- Dinner on Friday and Saturday

Grab your ticket for just (€775) \$900 USD!

Our global conference is the best applied improvisation experience of the year! Don’t miss out, spots are filling up quickly. Register today and we’ll see you in Italy!



Andrea Montuschi

Register today: <https://www.appliedimprovisationnetwork.org/2026-registration>
Questions? Reach out to us! We’d love to see you in Italy this year!

Applied Improvisation Magazine

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 Anna Alexander – USA

Photography and Graphics

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 Photos: Authors in the articles

Layout

Anna Alexander
 Maarten Joosen
 Made on Canva

Mission

The AIM magazine articulates, researches and promotes what is going on in the field of Applied Improvisation. Written by and primarily for AIN members, it has leanings both to academic rigour and to spreading the word to potential collaborators, clients, and related practitioners.

Copy

Our magazine exists thanks to the contributions of applied improvisers. We love hearing stories about how improvisation principles are applied across all kinds of fields. We also welcome discussions, interviews, insights from experienced improvisers, and fresh perspectives from those new to the practice. Furthermore, we love receiving graphics, illustrations, photos, and other content.

Contribution

We've reshaped our production process to reflect the spirit of our volunteer-driven community. This means every contribution—big or small—is welcome and valued. Whether you're helping with editing, typesetting, design, or volunteering to conduct interviews, there's always a meaningful way to get involved. Feel free to contact us.

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