

# Adam Meggido

## Finding out what facilitates your creative flow

### Speakers:

**Nick Skillicorn – Innovation and Creativity Expert and Host of Innovation & Creativity Summit**

Adam Meggido

### Expert Interview transcript:

**Nick Skillicorn:** Hello everyone and welcome to another expert innovating and creativity interview with today's expert Adam Meggido who is an Improviser and facilitator out of London. He is the director and co creator of show stoppers, the improvised musical, Adam it's lovely to have you with us today.

**Adam Meggido:** Hi There

Nick Skillicorn: For people who don't know you or know that much about improvisation, can you give us a background into how you got into the field.

**Adam Meggido:** Yes sure I actually got into the field of improvisation in a very unusual way. My background is main stream theatre, sort of traditional main stream theatre, the idea of improvisation actually horrified me when I was in my twenties, I couldn't understand why anyone would want to do improvisation, it looked to me to be a place where people went to compete to be the funniest or the loudest. I had absolutely no interest in the subject whatsoever. When I was in my thirties, I met the late great Ken Campbell who is an Avanti garde experimental theatre practical, one of the great theatre practicals in British history, extra ordinary guy and he had just come back from Edmonton Alberta Canada where he had just seen a group called dynasty doing a whole lot of improvisation. But we didn't have anything quite like that in great Britain at that time, there was a bit of improvisation going on for sure but there wasn't such a improve scene like there was in Canada or there was in America at that time. Ken was so amazed by this group, he was so impressed by them that he immediately made us all to start improvising and that was the beginning of our investigation into the subject. What I didn't realize is that you can learn improvisation, it's a craft that you learn, like you learn how to play the piano, like you learn how to dance, like you learn computer programming or whatever you can just learn it, it is a craft, but for some reason this hasn't been taught in drama schools in the united kingdom, there wasn't a big tradition, there wasn't a big history of it and so it wasn't something I had access to it and immediately I started learning the craft of it, so many things started to open up and it became a real fascination to me, so I became committed in trying to bring all the elements of improve that I really enjoyed back into main stream theatre with the elements of theatre that I enjoyed. most obviously was an attempt to capture the liveliness of theatre which for me has been dwindling, of course incredible live medium but if you don't use it's liveliness, if you don't address it's liveliness, then it's less effective. I felt the theatre that I was doing at the time and the theatre was less effective that I was doing at that time, that I felt

I was watching at the time, just wasn't addressing that liveliness, it didn't have that element of danger or risk and so the idea of bringing improvisatory element back into theatre excited me and that's really how I got started on the whole thing

**Nick Skillicorn:** And now what you are probably best known for around the London scene is show stopper the improvising musical. There is quite a few improve group in London, it's not up there necessarily with the big hubs in Chicago but there is definitely a strong scene but what differentiates you is you have had quite an extensive run on the actual main stream theatre stages for large productions and not only that it is done in the form of a full musical, so can you tell us how that differs to how improve was done several years ago and how the musical format came around for you and your team

**Adam Meggido:** There's nothing particularly new about making up music on the spur of the moment, that's been around for centuries, So there isn't anything particularly new about show stopper the improvised musical, the reason I think show stopper has become successful is that really it's a fantastic group of people who decided to put in a huge amount of time into working out how to get better at this particular very niche set which is improvising an entire musical. For me it was kind of I guess it was inevitable that I should end up doing this, I was raised in a household of musical theatre, my parents were both dancers and they spent all their life in musical theatre. From the age of six to seven when I was watching Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire and West Side Story basically I got over those first twenty years of my life, I was raised in a house which had musical on the constant play and I loved musical and I loved music and it was inevitable that I get involved into it. Like I said when I got a chance to cross improve back into main stream music theatre then it was just an obvious one for me because I think it was the combination of all the particular skills set that I have been interested in and of course I found that other people have been interested in those things as well and a number of them improvised musicals all over the world. With show stopper when I started working I just wanted it not to look like an improve show so much as look and feel like a musical, it just happened that everything was being made up on the spot, the stories, the characters, the songs, the lyrics, everything. It's really how those elements are being put together that I think makes it unique.

**Nick Skillicorn:** One thing that I would like to pick your brains on now before we get into more details on how you do improvisation especially in the musical format is, taking it back to the idea of creativity and the idea behind improvisation at its most fundamental level is preparing a piece of art if you call it that, without any historical context, without anything coming before it and coming spontaneously out of the moment, can you give us an insight into how you think about creativity both when you are on the stage and whether or not is different when you are doing other creative work.

**Adam Meggido:** I do a lot of work in teaching, acting directing theatre and teaching improvisation. In the last ten years, I have done increasing amount of work teaching improvisation to actors and training but also people who are doing improve for improve sake rather than actors who are going to go act in the profession. I think the thing that crops up a lot is there are some people who think that they are not imaginative or they are less imaginative than other people, I have never found this to be true, it's simply a question of what facilitates your imagination flowing or what facilitates your creativity, I have never found anyone who is uncreative and who doesn't have the ability to create, I

think everyone has that and I think possibly as an equal capacity, it's just a question of putting in a situation that is conducive for it to flow, I think I use that word flow quite a lot when I am teaching as well, because so much of it comes from relaxation, just allowing yourself to be in the moment, to be present and just to be connected to the people around you and allow things to happen, a lot of it feels like you are forcing things to happen. When you work through improvisation, audiences who watch improvisers often say I don't know how you do that, I don't know how you can be so quick and so funny, actually if you are trying to be quick and funny, that's often a pressure certainly for people who are in the beginning when they start working on improvisation, a lot of the time we are trying to encourage them not to try to be funny or interesting but just allow what is to actually flow. I think a lot of improvisation links to creativity is about relaxation being present and working with what is rather than trying to create stuffs that isn't.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Yea I remember when I was teaching improve and doing a workshop on improvisation, quite often you see the people who have this idea of a punch line that they want to fit into the scene somehow and they are holding onto it waiting for the perfect moment and they get very frustrated when they realize the moment is not coming, is that something that you think people just need to let go of or is there a way that they can sort of get beyond that and learn the skill behind improve like you mentioned at the beginning.

**Adam Meggido:** Well I think it depends on what kind of improvisation you are doing because of course Improvisation is a huge term, a really broad term and I think a lot of people when they say improve, they tend to think of improvised comedy but there's a lot more than that, improve comedy is very popular worldwide really, it's been done all over the world but there are other forms of improvisation, well you have improvisation dancing and in music and you can even have improvised explosive device so it's a huge subject. So when we are talking about improvisation first I think it's worth reminding us, we are talking about actually breadth and range of possibility.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Can you take us back to something you mentioned at the beginning which is your upbringing and you mentioned that both of your parents were dancers and you grew up with the concept of musicals all around you, a lot of people don't have that artistic support necessarily when they are growing up and do you feel that you had a unique insight to expressing yourself where a lot of people nowadays are told throughout school that creativity is not necessarily that important, it's more about getting the grades right and getting the correct answer all the time and add to something fun you can do after studying your real subject

**Adam Meggido:** Yes that's another huge one there, another big subject but first my father was hugely against me doing anything creative at all, wanted me to go into something he viewed as uncreative which he considered to be science which of course is actually a very creative area, in many ways I didn't have the encouragement that some people might think or might assume but sometimes you can be creative not just because it's been cultivated, for example in your background but also you might end up being creative in spite of your background. In other words you might come from a background where your creativity is effectively being suppressed but it finds an outlet and it has to come out somewhere

**Nick Skillicorn:** Lets go back then into how you approach people to getting their creativity more, if you take someone that is not an improviser and you take him into some exercise to unleash that

ability to generate ideas, can you take us through some of the training exercises or things that you find really help people unleash their improvisation ability.

**Adam Meggido:** Yes absolutely. I have noticed, it doesn't really matter where I go in the world, it seems to be prevalent in all human beings irrespective of culture or nationality, there is an immediate habit, I think it is to shut things down, to close things down or keep things at a guarded distance. This of course socially is incredibly useful. For a minute, I want to suggest that anyone has to eliminate that from their personality. But in improvisation, we want to immediately work with what is we want to immediately work with agreement. So when I first start working with people, resistance comes up, resistance, negativity, and negation come up and often a lot. and it's really rather than telling people that is wrong it's really about trying to help the student discover why that is a habitual process and what it is costing them by being a habitual process, in other words what is available for them if they start to release that and start to actually engage with another person or with another person's ideas, because just to try to create in a vacuum simply bewilders the student or the participant. Its like I don't know if you have had this experience when you are at school the teacher in English says to you just write an essay and you say about what, they say about anything just write an essay and the blank page suddenly becomes dizzying and actually one become paralyzed because they don't know quite where to start. But if you have three or four ideas, these ideas triggers other ideas and actually before long you are writing, so it's not about giving someone an infinite choice, it's about encouraging the person, the student or the participant to take the obvious circle and connect the choice and trust that if it is emotionally connected, it is interesting. Brecht said that there is nothing so interesting than watching a get a man trying to get a knot out of his shoe laces. In other words just watching human beings engage in simple truthful behavior can be incredibly compelling. People often talk about people watching, sitting in a cafe, spending an hour drinking a cup of tea and just watching people getting by and watching people's behavior. Truthful human behavior is fascinating really on any level whether it's simple, when it's truthful and when it's connected. Often it's very difficult to trust that is enough, so what happens is we start leaping outside of the moment and coming up with all sort of ideas and trying to fill the space with so called creativity rather than trusting a creative process is actually already happening and it's already unfolding, It's just allowing yourself really to be a channel for it. I use that word quite a lot when I am teaching as well. It's like it is already happening, something is already in progress and you are just a vessel, you are just a channel for it to go through rather than a front foot, very conscious, brain driven aggressive form of creativity, does that make sense?

**Nick Skillicorn:** Its does, it's quite interesting because what you are talking about there it hacks back to how the old Greeks and Romans use to think of creativity in the sense that they had this great concept of muses and demons as they called them who where were the ideas came from and the artist who are creating pieces of art or poetry or scientific discoveries, they didn't feel like the idea actually stemmed from them, it was coming through some unknowable subconscious or in that case they thought external thoughts, what it sounds like you are describing there is if you are in the moment and you just let something happen naturally, you don't need to think through every process and every word you say before it comes out of your mouth, it just going to naturally happen.

**Adam Meggido:** Yes I mean anything that I had done that I consider, anything that I have done creatively as an artist whether it's in writing for theatre or composing music which is another thing I do or improvising, any of those things when they are happening and they are happening to what I

feel is a high degree of competence. It's happening because I feel like I am channeling it not because I am consciously creating it; I think a lot of improvisation is based around this disparity between the conscious and the unconscious mind. I think a lot of art is based about this disparity between conscious and the unconscious mind and both are always working on everything. So whenever you are in a scene which is being improvised, your unconscious is doing lots of stuff, you are just not necessarily aware of it and your conscious brain is also figuring out stuff to do and I think often we sit in an intuitive zone between the sort of a push pull between the conscious and the unconscious mind.

**Nick Skillicorn:** If I can take what we discussed there which is taking someone new to improvisation and getting them into a more creative level, let's take that a step further and talk about people who are naturally now better trained and more experienced in improvisation and putting them into a new context like the musical context of show stopper, you said it took a while to get the team together to figure out how to do this properly, So could you describe whether or not there were any challenges when you first had the idea of practicing improvisation in this context or figuring out what works and what didn't before you thought okay now we have got this to a level where it is ready to go out there or did it just happen over the course of a weekend

**Adam Meggido:** No it took about seven or eight years actually, I think we have been very lucky in that the group that we assembled, me and Dylan who were both working with Ken Campbell at the time when we came up with this idea, Dylan knew some people and I knew some people and we just put those people together and we were just very fortunate that there was a natural alchemy and I think sometimes it is just a kind of alchemy you just can't often explain. Some people just work together really well and some people don't and there was a good match in our group. At the end of the first year we felt we could do this just that none of us could actually had the skill set to do it. So it's like not just that you are exploring terrain and drawing a map, it's like you are actually creating the terrain as well as the map at the same time. Del Costa the American Improviser use to talk about an improvised scene being like building the plane while it's in mid air or while it's in mid flight. So It's a very time consuming process, it takes so long to hone a craft to make it look like it's actually a finished product which was always the game with show stopper and I think we were very lucky in show stopper in that over those seven years when we didn't know how to improvise the musical, the show was still entertaining because what you saw if you can see it in those years, you saw a bunch of naive fools trying to put on the musical and the naivety was rather charming and the aspirations was so ridiculous that it actually didn't work and even when it didn't work there was still something to enjoy. It's a bit like a tightrope walk where you don't want to see someone just easily walk across the tight rope, you want to see them wobble, you want to sense some danger to see if they really might fall at anytime. It goes back to what I was saying at the very beginning about this idea of danger being part life and danger being part of the life. In show stopping, the idea that we are improvising the music at any time, that danger is exciting and at the same time we don't want it to fall apart because when we put it on the west end, we had to know that it was over consistent quality so that you would always be able to get monies from west end price tickets. So you couldn't go and see a show that was going to fall on bottom and so it was a really interesting fusion of different crafts and different skills and it was constantly being revised and as an example in the very beginning, we had to improvise, well we still do improvise complete stories, we didn't know how to improvise a story at the beginning without a story becoming completely insane and going off the

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rails. So we started looking at different story structures as any writer would, writer needs to understand what is tragic form or a classical tragic form and what if shake spearing tragic form, what is a romantic comedy, what is a heroic journey and if you look at the really good story tellers, among these I mentioned companies like Pixar who do really fantastic story structure work and then you start to get an understanding of how stories are made likewise you look at songs and you start writing them down, well there is a verse, there is a chorus I need to know that, I need to know what the difference is between the verse and the chorus, I need to know the songs before the 1960's had a different format and a different structure which we call AABA, you have a theme you repeat it and then there's another letter that is different and then you go back to your theme. So it's impossible to actually improvise effectively unless you start to have an understanding of this particular forms, it wasn't that we would prepare in advance which form we are going to do, we would never know which form we are going to do but we had to have an understanding of form in other to recognize when we were in the middle of it. So we would be ten minutes into a story , we had to as a group go ok, I think this is a romantic comedy, this feels like we are in a romantic comedy, lets continue along the lines of a romantics comedy. Of course sometimes you have a situation where say four of the actors feel it's a romantic comedy but one or two of the actors feel it's a different kind of genre and basically the audience watching that process of a group of people coming together but not by communicating about it through explanation, they are communicating about it through the doing of it.

**Nick Skillicorn:** I think that hacks back to something that people who don't have that much experience in improvisation don't necessarily realize, a lot of people as you said, they look at a show and they ask how do you do it like I could never do something like that, much like improvisation in music in the form of Jazz, there is a lot of practice and training that goes on to build the base level of skills on which you can then build an improvisation like in Jazz you need to know timing, 3,4 times versus 4,4 time scales, which notes work together in harmonies, which instrument should be playing together, when is your turn to take a back seat and let the others take the full front and that's something that it takes years to master

**Adam Meggido:** Yes I think that freedom is really an understanding of different forms and structures and the ability to build them spontaneously recognize when you are in them and the ability to adjust that form from within. The freedom is not just doing anything.

**Nick Skillicorn:** So taking this then from creativity to the concept of innovation, if you are working with a company and I know that show stopper group they do work with corporations to enhance their ability to come up with ideas, what sort of challenges do you find corporations are facing and how do you do improvisation training techniques and facilitation to help them get over those challenges

**Adam Meggido:** All Improvisation is fundamentally about working in agreement and finding agreement immediately or certainly as quickly as possible and a lot of the time, in the corporate world, people are guarded about their own ideas, they have ownership of their own ideas, they don't necessarily want to yield on their own ideas. In improvisation again it is this point about channeling, there is something already going on, we are just trying to relax and channel it rather than distance ourselves from a group think consciously about what is it that I am going to do and then impose it on the group, so we found that all the groups that we have worked with, whether

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they are in the corporate world or not thrive from their idea of shared ownership and sharing ideas and working with each other's ideas and that's letting go of Wales ideas as well. So that whatever is naturally there seems to come up

**Nick Skillicorn:** We are coming to the end of the interview, it's been wonderful having you here but what I like to ask all of the experts during the summit, is if you are going to leave the viewers and listeners one tip, one actionable piece of insight of something they can try out either this afternoon or this week on how to get more value out of their ideas, what will that be

**Adam Meggido:** Firstly I just want to say something about the word expert because there is a really good friend of mine again in the dynasty troupe in Edmonton Alberta call Jeff Aslem, who once said to me and I have never forgotten this about improvisation, it's not possible to be an expert in this form. I think it's worth pointing that out because it's such a huge topic, one always feels like a complete novice and in fact when you start working on improvisation, you think that anything is possible and suddenly you feel very compressed and shut down and you suddenly realize how big a subject it is and then you start to grow again and start to relax and get back in touch with your natural impulses and your natural instincts. So it's a huge and constantly changing form and I think the fact that one is not an expert in it is the exciting part of it. No one can ever become an expert and no one can ever master it. In terms of the tip, I would probably suggest saying yes to something that you would have said no to and see what happens.

**Nick Skillicorn:** Lovely, so it's a concept of yes and from improve and it's something that some of the other guys have talked about as well and Adam it's been wonderful having you here and we are going to have links to all of your resources and trainings and show information on the screen and why don't you just remind everyone quickly about where those links are going to take them

**Adam Meggido:** Here's the show stopper's website the showstoppers.org which tells you all about the show and its history and where you can see it because it tours, it was in the UK and overseas as well and then the theatre company that I run is called extemporary theatre, extemporary meaning out of the moment, so it's all about recapturing the liveliness of theatre really playing the strengths of the most live of all mediums

**Nick Skillicorn:** Perfect, it's been wonderful having you here and I look forward to seeing your next show soon.

**Adam Meggido:** Thanks a lot, thank you.