

THE HAROLD: A REVOLUTIONARY FORM THAT CHANGED
IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE & AMERICAN COMEDY

A Dissertation
Presented to
The Faculty of the Graduate School
At the University of Missouri

In Partial Fulfillment
Of the Requirements for the Degree
Doctor of Philosophy

By
MATT FOTIS
Dr. M. Heather Carver, Dissertation Supervisor
MAY 2012

© Copyright by Matt Fotis 2012

All Rights Reserved

The undersigned, appointed by the dean of the Graduate School,
have examined the dissertation entitled
THE HAROLD: A REVOLUTIONARY FORM THAT CHANGED
IMPROVISATIONAL THEATRE & AMERICAN COMEDY

Presented by Matt Fotis

A candidate for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

And hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

Professor M. Heather Carver

Professor David Crespy

Professor Cheryl Black

Professor Cornelius Eady

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would have never happened without the help, support, and encouragement of numerous people. First and foremost I want to thank my committee—Heather Carver, David Crespy, Cheryl Black, and Cornelius Eady—for their guidance, questions, epiphanies, and good humor, without which I would not be writing this thank you. I want to thank Ann Haugo, John Poole, and Liz Mullenix for first beginning this journey with me. Of course many thanks go out to Charna Halpern, Ted Flicker, and all the generous improvisers who agreed to be interviewed for this project, as well as the countless improvisers who simply took the time to informally discuss improv with me. I would be nowhere without the teachers that taught me how to improvise and the students who continue to teach me.

My beautiful wife, whom I first got to know through improvisation, thank you for your love, support, and patience...and for usually laughing at my jokes...and for telling me when I'm not funny. My kids, who cannot yet read, thanks for taking your naps on a regular schedule so that I could write this, and sacrificing some Daddy time so I could see shows and talk to improvisers. My parents, who exemplify the support your partner ethos at the heart of the Harold, thank you for supporting me in every way. My in-laws, thank you for your support...and for letting us stay with you during the summer that I laid the groundwork for this project...and for staying with us whenever I had to go out of town to work on this. And my brother Mike, thanks....I guess.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	ii
ABSTRACT.....	vi
CHAPTERS	
1. INTRODUCTION.....	1
Method	
Literature Review	
Chapter Organization	
2. BEFORE THE HAROLD: HOW DID WE GET HERE?.....	35
Commedia dell'arte	
Viola Spolin	
The Compass Players	
The St. Louis Compass Players	
The Second City	
3. THE TRAINING WHEELS HAROLD.....	75
The Nascent Harold—The Committee	
ImprovOlympics	
ImprovOlympic and The Early Harold	
The Independents	

The Family	
The Harold Moves Beyond iO	
4. THE FLEXIBLE HAROLD.....	127
A Home & A Book	
Unrest in the Ranks	
Frank Booth & Jane	
The Harold After Close	
TJ & Dave	
Experimentation in the New Millennium	
The Reckoning Perform a Harold	
The Harold at 25	
The iO Training Center & The Harold	
5. POST HAROLD: REACTIONS, TRANSFORMATIONS, & COMBINATIONS.....	172
The Annoyance Theatre	
Upright Citizens Brigade	
Improvised Shakespeare Company	
Octavarius	
6. IMPROV BEYOND THE THEATRE: THE HAROLD'S INFLUENCE ON TELEVISION & FILM.....	234
The Harold and Dramatic Writing	
The Harold and The Writer	
Improv and Television	

30 Rock and The Harold

Stephen Colbert, Brecht, and Improv

Improv on Film

Conclusion

BIBLIOGRAPHY.....	282
VITA.....	303

ABSTRACT

The Harold is widely regarded as the foundation of long form scenic style improv. First developed in the late 1960's by the San Francisco group The Committee, workshopped by Del Close in the 1970's, and transformed into a repeatable structure by Close and Charna Halpern at ImprovOlympic (now iO) in the 1980's, the Harold reinvented the possibilities of what could be done with improv on stage. Using the form's core principles—yes-and, make active choices, and support your partner—the Harold has become one of the most important and influential forms of performance. The comic philosophy of the Harold has ushered in an era of comedy marked by support, trust, and collaborative creativity.

Despite its vast influence on contemporary performance the Harold has been largely ignored by the scholarly community and thusly pushed to the margins. Therefore, this study will tell the story of the Harold, beginning with the development of improvisational theatre and the tensions and evolutions that led to the Harold's creation at iO, up to its use in contemporary comedic filmmaking. I will be tracking the form's historical development by analyzing its deployment by the many as of yet undocumented house teams, as well as exploring the many ways that it has been used both within iO and in the greater improv community. Furthermore, I will be examining the ways in which the Harold has helped transform American comedy by reshaping it to follow the principles and philosophy of the Harold.

CHAPTER I—INTRODUCTION

“Life is a slow Harold.”¹—Del Close

The first time somebody asked me about improvisational theatre I had no idea what they were talking about. And like many others, once I started training and performing improv I suddenly understood its fundamental relationship to theatre and creativity. Now the shoe is on the other foot and over the past fifteen years most of the people I talk to about improvisational theatre have no idea what I’m talking about, including people that make theatre for a living. Because most people are unfamiliar with the history and practice of improvisational theatre they tend to place it on the fringes, where it has been “percolating near the edge of being the next big thing for years.”² Its ostensibly never ending “percolation,” however, may stem from the misunderstanding of scholars, practitioners, and audience members about the art form. Many artists and scholars still only recognize improv as a rehearsal technique or character building tool and not as a legitimate performative art. Even within the improv community there is tension about what exactly is *true* improvisation: is it the games of short form, the scenic style of long form, or sketch comedy derived from improv? In part because of its muddled meaning, everything from mainstream commercial theatre to the avant-garde has had an uneasy and sometimes unacknowledged relationship with improv. Yet when we examine the philosophical tenets of improvisational theatre it quickly becomes

¹ Charna Halpern, *Art by Committee* (Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 2005), 126.

² Pat Craig, “Improv is a Great Way to Enjoy Raw Theatre,” *Contra Costa Times*, 27 August 2004, 42.

apparent that improv is not at the fringe of theatre, it is at the very heart of theatrical practice, pedagogy, and theory.

I didn't grow up in the theatre—I thought I would be teaching high school history and coaching baseball by now. My first real exposure to theatre was through improv as an undergraduate student. Its main theoretical concepts—support your partner, agreement, yes-and, make active rather than passive choices, collaboration, etc.—shape and permeate the way that I view, teach, and practice theatre. Yet it wasn't until I began to formally study theatre that I realized two things: 1) the core principles of improvisational theatre form the bedrock of theatre training and practice in virtually any setting and can be applied to nearly any creative project; and 2) the general ignorance about improvisational theatre results in it being pushed to the margins. Despite all evidence to the contrary, many see it as something done for fun, or to make silly jokes, but not something central to “real” theatre.

After I had formally trained at iO (formerly ImprovOlympic) and The Brave New Workshop and been performing improv in Chicago and Minneapolis I went back to school to get my Master's. While there I began coaching and performing with the campus improv troupe. When I first arrived many members of the troupe were dismayed because the school's most venerated acting teacher was urging them to quit improv because all it did “was teach bad habits.” He suggested that they'd be better served spending their time “focusing on real acting.” Luckily those students stayed in the group and during my two years at the school the eight members of the group were consistently cast in leading roles during the university's mainstage season over the hundreds of other students who were only focused on “real acting.” They have all gone on to successful performance careers in

Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles. How was it that other people didn't see what I was seeing? Why weren't they making the connection that being in a group that preaches ensemble, collaboration, and trust was making the students better actors and artists?

I wish that the erroneous assumptions about improvisation were limited to this one example, but for the past fifteen years I have routinely fought the same battles that improvisation is not a silly side-show, but that its principles are fundamental to creating art. I routinely find myself making the argument that training in a form entirely dependent on collaboration and creativity is central to an art based on collaboration and creativity. Training in the creation of theatre helps students and artists develop the ability to think creatively and theatrically—to deeply understand the creative process, storytelling, and performance. It helps them become better listeners who are more understanding and supportive ensemble members. It not only makes them better spontaneous performers, but it also allows them to be better prepared to interpret and interact with scripted drama. Yes, improv can be painful to watch at times. I've seen and been in more failed Harolds than I care to admit. Yet its principles have been fundamental to my artistic career (and personal life), and the times I've seen or participated in a Harold that has worked have been transcendent. And I'm not alone. Tina Fey says that “improvisation as a way of working [makes] sense to me. I love the idea of two actors on stage with nothing—no costumes, no sets, no dialogue—who make up something together that is then completely real to everyone in the room. The rules of improvisation appealed to me not only as a way of creating comedy, but as a worldview. Studying improvisation literally changed my life.”³ Countless improvisers speak to the

³ Tina Fey, *Bossypants* (New York: Reagan Arthur Books, 2011), 82.

power and influence of the Harold, including some of the most influential comedic minds of the twenty-first century.

Therefore, I am studying improvisational theatre to help illuminate why it has been so instrumental in the development of comedy in the twenty-first century so that improv can take its rightful place in the theatrical lexicon. The best way to do that is by studying the Harold, the foundational structure of long form or scenic style improvisation. The form's major concepts—agreement, yes-and, suspend judgment, listening, justification, make active choices, truth in comedy, and support your partner—are fundamental to all forms and styles of improvisational theatre. Furthermore, the Harold has served as the bedrock for Tina Fey and the majority of the most significant comedic performers, writers, and directors of the past quarter-century who are transforming the way we make, view, and interpret comedy. Critics and audiences are beginning to pay serious attention to improv comedy as well, with Rachael Combe summing up opinion when she says that “almost everything I see in theaters or on TV that makes me laugh these days was written, performed, or directed by someone who has a background in improv.”⁴ Understanding the Harold's development, philosophical tenets, and implementation will allow us to understand not only improv but also the ways in which comedy has been reshaped into a system based in collaboration, connections, and trust.

While many popular and influential comic performers have come out of improvisation, training in the Harold specifically, there has been very little scholarly attention given to improv or the Harold. Improvisation is barely a footnote in the three-volume *Cambridge History of American Theatre*. Likewise, Arnold Aronson does not

⁴ Rachael Combe, “Funny Girl: The Power of Improv Comedy,” *Elle Magazine*, January 5, 2012.

mention improvisational theatre in his book *American Avant-Garde Theatre: A History*, even though he defines the American avant-garde theatre as a movement beginning in the 1950s with a “bold spirit of experimentation—a rebellion against the mainstream commercial system and the utter rejection of the *status quo*...it was an approach that rejected beliefs and expectations of traditional audiences and radically altered both the aesthetic and organizational basis upon which performance was created.”⁵ When one looks at the history of contemporary improvisational theatre that began in the 1950s, as both a politically and aesthetically radical alternative to the scripted theatre of the time, the omission is striking. The above quote could easily have been attributed to The Compass Players, the first completely improvisational theatre in the world. The Compass was created as a sort of populist theatre, an alternative to stagnant traditional theatre: “it was a theatre intended for people who had no theatre.”⁶

While there is a glaring hole in improv scholarship, a few scholarly works have focused on improvisation. The first historical study of improvisation, Jeffrey Sweet’s *Something Wonderful Right Away*, is a compilation of interviews with many of the founders and early members of The Compass Players and Second City and has been wildly influential for many improvisers, including iO co-founder Charna Halpern and Annoyance Theatre founder Mick Napier. But because it was written before the Harold came to prominence (it was first published in 1978) it obviously does not include information about the Harold. More recently Jeanne Leep’s *Theatrical Improvisation* focuses on a broad view of the three genres of improvisation, and Amy Seham’s *Whose Improv is it Anyway?* provides a basis for the history of improv by focusing on issues of

⁵ Arnold Aronson, *American Avant-Garde Theatre: a history* (New York: Routledge, 2000), 3.

⁶ Janet Coleman, *The Compass: the improvisational theatre that revolutionized American comedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 304.

race, gender, and power structures in improvisation. While Leep and Seham's books have provided some recent scholarship, improv and the Harold have been largely ignored. The general lack of critical scholarship, as well as the variety of popular viewpoints and assumptions about improvisational theatre (mainly that improv is the same thing as ad-libbing or winging it) has led to the mislabeling of contemporary improvisational theatre as a secondary art form. People continue to overlook improv despite its overwhelming influence on contemporary performance, in particular on ensemble-based comedy onstage and onscreen, with David Patton arguing that "the Harold is perhaps the most important theatrical innovation since the American Musical...the only distinctly American theatrical forms."⁷

Some would argue, however, that since the Harold, improv has been a relatively stagnant form. Prior to the Harold performance improv did not have a set structure leading Deborah Frances-White and others to argue that the Harold's standardization actually stunted performance improv, despite the fact that before the Harold there really was no structure and most improv consisted of disconnected games or rambling loosely connected scenes. Frances-White argues that for the past thirty years:

improvisers have mainly spent their time arguing over which work done between the fifties and seventies is the best, and re-creating it without much progress. Most groups still present some version of...the Harold, rarely deviating...in any significant way. They may find a different way of beginning the Harold...but essentially the form is the same and the quality of the work has not improved from all accounts.⁸

⁷ David Patton, *The Pedagogy and Ethics of Improvisation Using the Harold*, MFA Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007, 8.

⁸ Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 31.

Rob Kozlowski, in celebrating the Harold, remarked that practically all long form improvisation is simply “the Harold with a new coat of paint.”⁹ Israel Savage recently argued that following a structure like the Harold leads to “stereotypes and clichéd scene work,” arguing that it can be akin to an artist using “paint by numbers set.”¹⁰

Therefore in this dissertation I will be exploring how and why the Harold came into being, the ways it evolved (and the ways it hasn’t), and how people are using the Harold both within and outside of the improv community to help legitimize improvisational theatre. Furthermore, the Harold not only transformed improvisational theatre, but it has been highly influential in the development of an ensemble-based comic aesthetic featuring a highly collaborative system of creativity and performance, seen not only in improvisational theatre but in more mainstream entertainments, such as television’s *30 Rock*, and in the improv-based filmmaking found in contemporary cinematic comedies like *Anchorman* and the Oscar-nominated *Bridesmaids*. Studying these developments and their roots in the Harold will allow us to more fully understand how the Harold revolutionized the way that comedy is created and further legitimize improvisation.

But first, what is improv? Contrary to your “funny” Uncle Herb’s definition, improv is not ad-libbing, winging it, or flying by the seat of your pants. According to Charna Halpern and Del Close, the pioneers of the Harold and scenic style or long form improv, “real improvisation is more than just a garnish, thrown like parsley onto a previously prepared stand-up comedy routine... True improvisation is getting on-stage

⁹ Rob Kozlowski, *The Art of Chicago Improv* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002), 69.

¹⁰ Israel Savage, “Is ‘The Harold’ For Improv Cheaters?,” *ImprovisationNews.com*, July 3, 2011.

and performing without any preparation or planning.”¹¹ The most prevalent form of improv performed today is what Amy Seham has classified as Chicago-style improv-comedy that originated in the 1950s with the advent of The Compass Players. Seham defines Chicago-style improv-comedy as “a form of unscripted performance that uses audience suggestions to initiate or shape scenes or plays created spontaneously and cooperatively according to agreed-upon rules or game structures, in the presence of an audience—frequently resulting in comedy.”¹² Or as The Annoyance Theatre founder Mick Napier more simply states “improvisation is getting on stage and making stuff up as you go along.”¹³ While all true, these definitions do not encompass improv’s full range. Simply put, improvisation is a system of creativity, a mindset, that focuses on the cooperation of a group of players to create completely original performances based on set structures and rules that can be performed spontaneously in front of an audience (performance-based) or used as a means for generating material. Despite the raging debate between process and product, improv can exist as *both* a tool for creating *and* as a means of performance. Its implementation in both ways has made the Harold one of the most important forms of contemporary performance.

While it is popular to celebrate the unlimited freedom of improv, in reality like most modes of performance it is usually most effective within set parameters. As Nicolas J. Zaunbrecher argues “limitation in improv is not just a fact—it is essential and valuable.”¹⁴ Much like theatrical innovator Vsevolod Meyerhold felt that putting

¹¹ Charna Halpern, Del Close, Kim “Howard” Johnson, *Truth in Comedy* (Colorado Springs: Meriwether Press, 1994), 13.

¹² Amy Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001) xvii.

¹³ Mick Napier. *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004) 1.

¹⁴ Nicolas J. Zaunbrecher, “The Elements of Improvisation: Structural Tools for Spontaneous Theatre,” *Theatre Topics*, 21, no. 1 (March 2011), 56.

limitations on actors (by giving them very little playing space or highly stylized movement patterns for instance) often times freed them artistically, improv has several set structures that allow players focused freedom (the Harold itself being the prime example). Thusly, improvisational theatre itself can be divided into three main genres: short form, long form, and sketch based improv, or what I call scriptprov. They all share several common theories, such as agreement, yes and, etc. (explored more fully below), but they also have sharp divisions both theoretically and in performance. Developed in part from the theatre games of Viola Spolin and Keith Johnstone, short form improv has become the “pop” version of improv—the most widespread genre of improvisation both onstage and onscreen, and subsequently is thought by many to be the only version of improvisational performance. It is usually shorter in nature and heavily reliant on games and gimmicks to propel the action forward. The television shows *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, *Wild ‘N Out*, and *Drew Carey’s Improv-a-Ganza*, as well as the theatre chain ComedySportz are the most widely known examples of short form improv in America, with Johnstone’s Theatresports chain as the most well-known in Canada and the United Kingdom.

Long form is based on scenes and relationships and more closely resembles a one-act play (or an episode of *Seinfeld*, *30 Rock*, or *The Office*). Long form is often misconstrued as one long scene (read one long boring scene), when in fact long form can actually consist of a collection of very short scenes. iO is the home of the Harold and the premiere long form improv theatre, but places like The Annoyance Theatre, The Playground Theatre, Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre (New York), and The Groundlings (Los Angeles), all also perform long form improv. Scriptprov is written work based on or

derived from improvisation, often referred to as sketch comedy, such as the performance work done at The Second City, Brave New Workshop, The Groundlings, and to an extent on *Saturday Night Live*. Because the Harold has perhaps been the most influential structure, especially on contemporary ensemble-based comedy, this study will focus mainly on long form. As we shall see, however, all three genres of improvisation factor into the creation, evolution, and influence of the Harold. Part of the misunderstanding of improv is the argument that only one of the above genres is *the real* improv, when in fact all three genres are improvisation.

The Harold itself is loosely structured around three divergent story lines that ultimately connect in unexpected ways. It's helpful to think of an episode of *Seinfeld*. Like the television show, in a Harold three disparate stories recur in a three-by-three structure (three scenes each appearing three times) before ultimately converging in the end. The humor comes out of the ways in which the themes, characters, and stories connect and combine, rather than from jokes. From within this framework improvisers could then create spontaneous performances worthy of putting before an audience. In doing so, the Harold gave birth to long form improvisational theatre and sparked a thirty year explosion of improv as a legitimate genre of theatrical performance, leading Rob Kozlowski to assert that the Harold was "the most important theatrical movement in Chicago in thirty years."¹⁵ If we do not understand the evolution of the Harold, we cannot understand the evolution of improvisational theatre, or its vast influence on contemporary ensemble-based comedy. Mike Meyers, Chris Farley, Amy Poehler, Tina Fey, Adam McKay, and many other contemporary comedians started in Harold-based improvisation and continue to employ the style, philosophy, and aesthetic of the Harold in their current

¹⁵ Kozlowski, 24.

work. Therefore studying the Harold is extremely important not only in terms of improvisational theatre, but also in understanding the shift to ensemble-based comedy.

There are several basic rules or theories for performing improv in the iO style and to properly execute a Harold. A brief glimpse at Close's eleven rules for performing a Harold helps illuminate his improv philosophy:

1. You are all supporting actors.
2. Always check your impulses.
3. Never enter a scene unless you are needed.
4. Save your fellow actor, don't worry about the piece.
5. Your prime responsibility is to support.
6. Work at the top of your brains at all times.
7. Never underestimate or condescend to your audience.
8. No jokes (unless it is tipped in front that it is a joke).
9. Trust...trust your fellow actors to support you; trust them to come through if you lay something heavy on them; trust yourself.
10. Avoid judging what is going down except in terms of whether it needs help (either by entering or cutting), what can best follow, or how you can support it imaginatively if your support is called for.
11. LISTEN!¹⁶

These ideas are vital to understanding why the form is central to theatrical practice as well as the ways in which it has influenced and reshaped the way comedy is made. Let's take a closer look at some of the Harold's underlying ideological tenets to better understand Close's rules and how the form works.

Agreement

According to iO agreement is the only unbreakable rule when performing a Harold. Simply put, agreement means that the players on stage all agree to the reality that is being created. If a player says "It's hot on Mars today," everyone agrees that the scene is taking place on Mars. It does not mean that one has to blindly say yes to everything that happens. It means listening to what is happening on stage and agreeing to that reality.

¹⁶ Halpern, *Art by Committee*, 21.

Agreement is between the actors, not necessarily the characters. For instance, if a player pulls out a gun (pantomimed of course) and says “Give me all your money!” an acceptable response is “No, please don’t kill me.” Both actors are still agreeing to the reality of their characters. Likewise, it would also be acceptable to reply with “My money is great and I’d be happy to give it to you, but you’ve got to see my jewelry collection. This way!” The only “wrong” response would be to say “That’s not a gun, it’s your finger,” or to totally ignore the line and go with whatever idea was initially in your head. Agreement is one of the major theoretical differences between stand-up and improv, where often times a stand-up gets laughs by challenging the reality of a situation. If a player does the same thing in improv, as we shall see, the results are disastrous.

Yes-And

The basic scenic building block, yes-and builds upon agreement by not only accepting ideas but also adding to them. The basic concept means saying yes to your partner’s offer and then adding new information to move the scene forward. Accepting and building upon the idea ensures the scene will continue progressing. Saying “no” or failing to add any new information stalls a scene. Players need to accept what is said on stage and go with it. There is no room for judging ideas or waiting for divine inspiration, instead it’s best to take the idea presented and treat it like it’s a fabulous idea and build upon it. Suspending judgment and silencing your inner critic are essential to improv. Players cannot judge their own contributions or those of another and stay present in the scene. The second players start judging they remove themselves from the action of the scene and doom it to fail because they are no longer actively engaged and listening, instead they are thinking about the past or the future. They also are violating the trust that

is essential to an endeavor as risky and vulnerable as improvisation. Saying yes helps build trust, rewards risk taking and keeps the action moving forward. Silencing one's inner critic and shelving one's ego also are sharp differences from stand-up comedy, where often the comic's ego and persona are the foundation for his or her act.

Support Your Partner

Building upon the concept of yes-and is the cardinal rule underpinning iO's philosophy: support your partner. According to iO, it is a player's prime responsibility in a Harold to take care of his or her partner and do everything to make the partner look good, saying that "the best way for an improviser to look good is by making his fellow players look good."¹⁷ This philosophy has been hugely influential and largely responsible for the shift to ensemble-based comedy.¹⁸ Not coincidentally, following the other rules goes a long way toward supporting one's partner. Agreeing to the reality your partner is creating, as well as accepting and building upon their ideas rather than negating and judging them, help create the cohesion and trust that is necessary for a Harold to thrive. Players are jumping into an abyss by performing a Harold, and it tends to be much easier to navigate if everyone is looking out for each other and supporting their teammates' ideas. Halpern and Close are fond of saying that if we treat others like poets, artists, and geniuses, they will be. This support makes improvisers not only successful at iO, but it is at the root of their success as "traditional" actors, writers, and directors.

¹⁷ Halpern, et. al., 37.

¹⁸ I do not claim that there was not ensemble-based comedy prior to the Harold rather that the philosophical shift in producing comedy in an ensemble-based method is due to the Harold, as is the support-your-partner ideological mindset of the current generation of comic performers.

Group Mind

The Harold is a highly collaborative form. Each member of the group needs to be harmoniously working with the others and the best Harold teams are intellectually, physically, and emotionally in-synch with one another. Basically group mind means that all of the players on a Harold team are working toward the same goal by opening their awareness and creating one group mind that encapsulates each individual; it is *e pluribus unum* exemplified. Players use the intelligence of the group and the ideas of the group to create something bigger than the individual members. Achieving a group mind requires setting aside your own ego (and critic) and giving yourself over to the team. Following other's ideas, supporting and building upon them, and doing whatever is required in performance are all part of the group mind, and a one-hundred-and-eighty-degree turn from the solitude of stand-up. Players begin to anticipate what their teammates will say and do because they are connected to one another, and therefore are able to make connections in the piece that didn't seem feasible. In short, it means that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.

Listening & Reincorporation

Everything said on stage is important. If improvisers are accepting ideas and building upon them, it is only natural that listening becomes vital to the process. Improvisers know that anything said on stage can and will be used again later in the Harold. Taking an idea, phrase or something else and repeating it throughout the piece, known as a callback or reincorporation, is at the heart of performing a Harold. The form is about making connections, so listening to what is happening and then using (and

reusing) that information becomes the backbone of the structure. Listening is the root of agreement, yes-and, supporting your partner, and group mind.

Justify

There are no mistakes in improv. Everything that is said is important to the scene because the players work to justify everything that is said. If a player enters a scene carrying a potted plant, it is the responsibility of everyone to justify why that plant is absolutely necessary to the scene. By doing this, everything becomes important and there is no such thing as a throw-away or mistake. The Harold teaches players to embrace mistakes and make them a part of the action—a mistake is only a mistake if it isn't used. Justification also works to support your partner by making his or her ideas valuable by honoring them. By valuing ideas and making them important, players help to turn their teammates into the poets, artists, and geniuses Halpern and Close believe we all can be.

Truth in Comedy

iO espouses that “*The truth is funny,*” arguing that “we’re funniest when we’re just being ourselves. Sitting around relaxing with friends usually inspires far more laughter than a TV sitcom or someone trying to tell jokes.”¹⁹ They urge performers to be sincere, which will cause the audience to be more receptive to them. They argue that “audience members laugh at things they can relate to, but they cannot empathize if the performers are insincere.”²⁰ Ultimately it comes down to the idea that “the only way to do a comedy scene is to play it completely straight.”²¹ The basic premise is that honesty and sincerity generate the richest and most humorous scenes. As The Groundlings founder Gary Austin argues, improvisation is not necessarily comedic, rather it “is simply telling

¹⁹ Halpern, et. al., 15.

²⁰ Halpern, et. al., 23.

²¹ Halpern, et. al., 25.

the truth, our own truth and the truth of the character. The result is often laughs...but funny isn't the task."²²

Slow Comedy

Building upon the concept of truth in comedy is the notion of slow comedy, a complete departure from the rapid fire approach of short form improv and the joke-punch line structure of stand-up comedy. Humor does not come from jokes in a Harold; it comes from connections, honesty, and relationships. Close preached a style of humor called slow comedy that was based on intellectual connections. He wanted players to take their time, to break the joke-based rhythm of comedy and to explore more subtle and intelligent humor. The basic idea is that rather than responding with the first thing that pops into a player's head, which is usually a knee-jerk reaction, an improviser should respond with the third thought that comes. Close believed this was necessary to play to the top of one's intelligence. Performers need time to think, and if performers think "the work will be more intelligent and the show more satisfying."²³ The third thought is the best thought because you've had time to process the situation. As noted in *Truth in Comedy*, "if a player takes the time to consider what the other speaker means, then his response is more intelligent...a more carefully considered response takes a second or two longer, but the wait is well worth it."²⁴

There are several other rules and terms that will arise, but these are at the core of iO's philosophy, and as one can see are all interrelated. Agreeing to the reality of the scene is a great way to support your partner and justify his or her choices. These rules and philosophies form the bedrock for executing the Harold, and are completely applicable to

²² Gary Austin, "Improvational Theatre—It's in the DNA," *ImproviationNews.com*, September 2, 2011.

²³ Charna Halpern, Personal Interview, May 21, 2011.

²⁴ Halpern, et. al., 63.

almost any theatrical endeavor. They have formed the foundation behind which comedy has shifted to a support your partner ensemble-based style. So what does a Harold look like? A traditional iO Harold follows a three-by-three structure suggested by the schema below:

Opening
1A
1B
1C
Group Game
2A
2B
2C
Group Game
3A
3B
3C

A traditional iO Harold begins with an opening where the troupe solicits a suggestion or theme from the audience, usually something rather generic like the theme “color” or a word like “duck.” The audience suggestion is a point of departure, not the main thrust of the Harold. So a suggestion of “duck” would not yield a Harold about ducks. Rather it would yield a Harold inspired by ducks, where the word leads to other associations and connections. The players then do a warm up or opening that can be almost anything from a completely physical exploration to a simple word association. Ideas, attitudes, phrases, characters, and anything else that strikes a performer from the opening is used to explore the various facets of the theme and provide ideas for the improvisers. Its rather mystical qualities make it somewhat daunting for performers, and can be confusing for audiences. Essentially the opening works to: 1) generate material; 2) foster group mind and build connections between the players; and 3) let the audience into the creative process. The opening prompts both the audience and the players on the piece

of which they are about to be a part. Much of the comedy in a Harold is based on connections and callbacks, and many of those initial seeds are planted in the opening. iO and Second City instructor Jessica Rogers describes the opening thusly: “It’s like when you go to a musical and the first thing you hear is the overture. The overture is filled with little pieces of all of the songs. Then when the show actually starts, we get to all of the little pieces as full songs with words and the actors and the scenery. You get all these little snippets that we call back throughout the piece with greater complexity.”²⁵

At some point in the opening, two improvisers step out and begin a scene (1A) inspired by the opening. This is followed by two more scenes (1B, 1C) that also explore the theme but are completely unrelated to 1A or to each other. A group game similar in format to the opener follows, which brings together all of the players to refocus and further explore the theme, and to show the audience how far the show has come from the opening idea and suggestion. The first three scenes (1A, 1B, 1C) return for a second beat (2A, 2B, 2C), but do not necessarily follow a linear or thematic structure. For example, 1A might be about two rich people. 2A, the second beat, might be about those same two rich people at another point in time (this is the Time Dash method), or it might be about the servants that clean their boat, or about corporate greed, or poverty, or any other thematic idea expressed in 1A. 2B and 2C similarly build on ideas, characters, and themes from 1B and 1C. Slight connections can begin to appear in the second beat, but generally any major connections appearing this early are forced by the performers and fall flat. A second group game follows, and then the three scenes return for a final exploration—the third beat (3A, 3B, 3C), in which connections between the scenes begin to emerge, characters begin to inhabit other environments, and the stories begin to come

²⁵ Qtd. in Patton, 35.

together. The final three scenes culminate “in a finale that incorporates the theme and as many elements from the scenes and games as possible.”²⁶ For Close, the ideal Harold would be “fiercely intelligent, terribly funny and containing nothing whatsoever in terms of plot.”²⁷ The Harold’s thematic and collage structure not only relies on connections and callbacks, but also on the audience, who are asked to make their own connections and draw their own conclusions from the piece. As iO improviser Jacob Schneider says, “whatever it means to them [the audience], we leave it to them.”²⁸

So let’s look at a Harold performed by the Improv Mafia. While not an iO team, the group performs a fairly traditional Harold and will help in understanding the form. The audience suggestion was the word “peanut butter.” For the opener the group played the game I Hate, which features a series of quick rants that begin with the initial player saying “I hate peanut butter because...” In our example the initial line was “I hate peanut butter because it sticks to the roof of my mouth.” Players then continue to rant about peanut butter and any other ideas that are brought up by other players, so a player can rant about mouths or anything else that comes up besides peanut butter. For example several of the lines in this I Hate were: “I hate Jimmy Carter.” “You know what I hate about the South is how hot it gets.” “You know what I hate about heat is that I can’t stop sweating.” “You know what I hate about presidents is that they only are in office for four years.” “You know what I hate about four year time blocks...” etc. After a few minutes two improvisers begin a scene (1A) between two peanut farmers complaining about the heat and their crummy jobs working for a peanut magnate. As this scene plays out, two

²⁶ Halpern, et al., 19.

²⁷ Salinsky and Frances-White, 11.

²⁸ Qtd. in Nick Smith, “The Reckoning puts a thespian spin on improv comedy,” *Charleston City Paper*, May 26, 2010.

different improvisers edit the scene and begin a new scene (1B) about an overbearing father and a loser son. A third scene (1C) between two potential lovers on their first date ends the first beat. It is now time for a game, which in this case begins as several of the players come out on stage and begin smacking their lips as if they have peanut butter stuck to the roof of their mouth. The players exchange several lines about the various things that are stuck in their mouths (peanut butter, thumb tacks, Jimmy Carter) and the game quickly ends.

The next scene (2A) is in this case a plot continuation of 1A, except this time we see the peanut magnate dealing with his staff and coping with declining peanut prices. 2B is a plot continuation of 1B, featuring the loser son at school dealing with a pair of school bullies who tease him after he follows his father's advice to write them letters detailing his problems with them and how they make him feel. 2C is a thematic connection to 1C that features a scene between a different pair of lovers that are at the bitter end of their relationship, as opposed to the magical beginning we witnessed in 1C. A second group game features a quick and fun *Jack and the Beanstalk* parody featuring peanuts instead of magic beans and Jimmy Carter instead of Jack. With the beginning of the third beat the scenes begin to intersect, as the peanut magnate from 2A is united with the bitter lover from 2C who develops a form of poisonous peanut butter to give to ex-lovers that ultimately saves the peanut magnates farm; the peanut worker in 1A falls in love with the loser son from 1 and 2B, connecting to the love theme of the C scenes; and the school bullies from 2B end up as future slave drivers on the peanut plantation. The Harold ultimately ends with Jimmy Carter giving parenting lessons to the father from 1B and the peanut magnate from 1A while building houses for Habitat for Humanity with

magic beans that sprout into hot tubs.²⁹ While not the perfect Harold, the above example demonstrates the basic workings of the structure and the ways that comedy is created.

In describing the postmodern qualities of Heiner Müller's *Hamletmachine*, Mark Fortier states that the play is "typically postmodern in its fragmentation, complex irony, overlaying of cultural quotations...and mixing of traditional and current cultural images."³⁰ The above Harold by the Improv Mafia certainly fits Fortier's description, and when one looks at how a Harold functions it becomes clear that its fragmentation, ironic juxtapositions, and cultural satire play a vital role in the Harold's structure and humor. The Harold relies on (and requires) a convergence of realities and perspectives to be successful. As Friedrich Nietzsche postulates "the more perspectives one can gain on the world or any of its phenomena, the richer and deeper will be one's interpretations and knowledge."³¹ In fact it is the union of these supposedly different realities that is the main source of the humor. In the above example, part of the humor comes from the collocation and connections between Habitat for Humanity, President Jimmy Carter, lost love, and a hard labor peanut plantation.

The world of the Harold, therefore, like the postmodern world, is "a hyperreality, a world of self-referential signs," which leads not to an objective or universal reality, but to a very specific and often absurd individual reality.³² For example, if the theme is democracy, a Harold might explore the positive development of democracy, but also the downside of democracy, the disenfranchisement of minority groups, and the US's non-democratic forcefulness in promoting democracy abroad. A group might explore a new

²⁹ Performance by The Improv Mafia, April 12, 2005. Illinois State University, Normal, IL.

³⁰ Mark Fortier, *Theory/Theatre* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 186.

³¹ Qtd. in Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory* (New York: The Guilford Press, 1991), 39.

³² Steinar Kvale, "Themes of Postmodernity," *The Truth About the Truth: De-Confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World*, ed. Walter Truett Anderson (New York: J.P. Tarcher, 1995), 19.

origin story for democracy that rejects the traditional positive ideas revolving around democracy, or present Ancient Greek or American democracy from the viewpoint of the disenfranchised, a democracy that does not look much different from more dictatorial forms of oppressive government. The metanarratives of democracy would be brought forth and then deconstructed through the multiple realities and illogical connections that the Harold encourages improvisers to explore.

Interestingly, while the Harold works to deconstruct, iO and the Harold have also built up their own “truth” and their own guru in Close. Metanarratives about iO, Del Close, and even the Harold itself have heavily influenced the development of long form improvisation. For example, Mick Napier and The Annoyance Theatre (more fully explored in Chapter Five) contested the metanarrative of iO’s improv philosophy and sacrosanct view of the Harold by creating a company that focuses on breaking rules (often those of iO’s like support your partner) and stretching the notions of what can be considered long form improv. The “truth” of iO and the Harold was replaced and subverted with a no-holds-bar approach that acknowledges that anything and everything can be improv and is exemplified by the theatre’s free play mindset.

METHOD

To understand the evolution and influence of the Harold, the story of the Harold’s creation must be told before examining the ways in which it functions and is utilized in improvisational theatre, and the ways that it has influenced American comedy in television and film. To get at the early beginnings of the Harold, Seham and Sweet’s books are useful, supplemented with interviews of improvisational professionals and

improvisers that were instrumental in the development of improvisation like Ted Flicker, leader of the St. Louis Compass. Moving past these early stages, interviews with Charna Halpern and Kim “Howard” Johnson about the evolution of the Harold and their own experiences with the form help more fully tell the story of the Harold’s evolution. Interviews with current students and performers likewise demonstrate the ways in which the Harold is influencing the current generation of performers, as well as illustrating the ways said performers have been influenced by the Harold. In addition to interviews, I attended numerous improv performances at iO, Second City, Upright Citizens Brigade, The Annoyance Theatre, and several other small independent theatres, using material and notes from performances between 2008-2012. Comparing the current performances against the original Harold described in *Truth and Comedy* helps show the development of the form and its vast influence. Finally I have used my own experiences over fifteen years of performing and teaching improvisation and the Harold to help support and illustrate various theories and ideas.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As noted, with improv’s recent boom and the Harold’s recognized influential role in creating that explosion, there is surprisingly little literature available on the Harold or improvisational theatre. Several training manuals aimed at improvisational actors provide a blueprint to perform it, most notably Halpern’s, Close’s, and Kim “Howard” Johnson’s *Truth in Comedy*, which provides a step-by-step guide to performing a traditional Harold but does not provide much in the way of theory or critical analysis. The book is still the most widely used training manual, and is one of the main reasons behind the Harold’s

growing influence. With the publication of *Truth in Comedy* in 1994, improvisers across the world had access to a manual that described long form improv and gave a how-to of performing a Harold. Obviously one can't just pick up a book and then do long form, but the exposure to the ideas helped start a shift from short form improv, which had become popular due to its exposure on the television show *Whose Line is it Anyway?* and the commercial chain short form theatre ComedySportz. With the publication of *Truth in Comedy*, long form improv and the Harold, which had been a mostly Chicago-based art form, was spread to a wider audience, many of whom were realizing for the first time that there was more to improv than short form games.³³

Art by Committee, Charna Halpern's sequel to *Truth in Comedy*, attempts to demonstrate how iO has built upon the Harold over the past twenty years, yet tends to revisit ideas previously published in *Truth in Comedy*, and like its predecessor is more geared toward performers than scholars. The middle of the book features a photo album of past and present iO performers that demonstrates the vast influence improv has had on contemporary comedy (Mike Myers, Chris Farley, Tim Meadows, Amy Poehler, and Tina Fey are some of the many contemporary comedians featured). There is a very brief section dedicated to the history of long form improv and Del Close, but it is geared toward someone with virtually no previous knowledge of improv history or Close. Perhaps the most useful aspect of the book is the DVD that is included, featuring several of iO's most influential improvisational teams, including a Harold performed by The Reckoning. The DVD also has non-Harold performances, including the monologue-based

³³ In 2000 as a member of Monmouth College's Anvilhead Theatre we performed with various other college improv troupes, nearly all of whom performed short form improv. In 2012 as the artistic director of MU Improv we competed in the College Improv Tournament, and only one of the twelve groups in our region performed short form improv.

form The Armando Diaz Theatrical Experience and Hootenanny, and a form based on tag-outs performed by Beer Shark Mice.

Rob Kozlowski's *The Art of Chicago Improv* provides a starting point for a more scholarly investigation of the Harold and other forms, but does not probe deep enough as the purpose of the book is to give an overall view of Chicago improv in broad strokes rather than a thorough examination of the Harold. While it is an excellent resource for improv's history, and provides a foundational building block for this study, Kozlowski's work is now several years old and does not capture improv's transformation over the last decade, including its vast impact on mainstream ensemble-based comedy. Furthermore its focus on Chicago limits the expanding influence of improv on not only improv in other cities, but the Harold's influence in television, film, and comedy.

Two recent biographical studies of Del Close, Jeff Griggs' *Guru* and Kim "Howard" Johnson's *The Funniest One in the Room*, have advanced the conversation, but obviously focus more on Close and his life rather than specifically on the Harold. *Guru* is written as a memoir and tends to focus more on Griggs' relationship with Close. There are still many useful aspects to the book, and Griggs does provide improv lessons, advice, and theories from Close. Johnson's biography is a much more scholarly examination of Close's life and legacy. The book charts Close's life, and is in many ways framed around the evolution of Close's ideas about improvisation and the Harold. Since Close is often cited as the father of long form improv and is the co-creator and artistic force behind the Harold, these books will provide an insight into the creation of the Harold. Since Close is also one of the most celebrated improv teachers, the detailing of his artistic vision and

pedagogical philosophy found within these books will be helpful in understanding the evolution and influence of the form.

In recent years there has been a surge in improv training manuals. Dan Diggles's *Improv for Actors*, Liz Allen and Jimmy Carrane's *Improvising Better*, Michael Gellman and Mary Scruggs' *Process*, and Carol Hazenfield's *Acting on Impulse* each have slightly different audiences, but are all geared toward improvisational performance, providing both basic and advanced tips for becoming a better improviser. Tom Smith's *The Other Blocking* is an example of a basic text aimed at both beginning level improv teachers and performers. Perhaps the most useful in terms of pedagogy and application to this study are Annoyance Theatre co-founder Mick Napier's *Improvise: Scene from the Outside In* and Theatresports founder Keith Johnstone's classic *Impro*. While these books are highly influential and written by some of the most prominent figures in contemporary improv, they are aimed at the professional improviser. These texts are mostly beneficial in helping to illustrate the ways in which improv functions by outlining the games and structures prevalent in improv, and to help illustrate some of the varying improvisational performance theories. For instance, iO espouses that an improviser's main duty is to support his or her partner. Napier and the Annoyance Theatre argue that an improviser's main duty is to take care of him or herself first. Napier believes that by taking care of one's own character, point of view, etc., a performer will give his or her partner everything needed for a successful scene. This philosophical difference will be explored in more detail in Chapter Five, but does provide one example of a performance theory created as a reaction to the Harold.

Several books have tried to bridge the gap between training manual and scholarly analysis. Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White's *The Improv Handbook* is the most successful of these books. Between games and player advice, Salinsky and White provide short critical essays throughout on topics such as women in improv, as well as including an appendix featuring interviews with several improv luminaries. Anne Libera's *The Second City: Almanac of Improvisation* balances history and practice, providing both an in-depth look at the development of Second City and a training approach to improv and sketch writing. These books demonstrate the growing interest of practitioners in the history and theory of improvisation.

While these texts are a beginning there is still a serious void in theatrical scholarship that has directly contributed to the greater misunderstanding of the art form. There are many training manuals, performance reviews, and newspaper and magazine articles about improv, but when one looks to scholarly works there is a glaring hole. By scholarly work, I am referring to a book or article that has been written by someone outside of the professional world of improvisational theatre who is applying critical and theoretical ideas to the art of improv rather than providing a training manual or a personal narration. Jeanne Leep's *Theatrical Improvisation* helps place the Harold in its proper context within improvisational theatre, but is more concerned with providing an overview of the main genres of improvisation. Amy Seham's *Whose Improv is it Anyway?* is primarily concerned with issues of race and gender in improvisation. Sadly, Leep and Seham's books stand alone as the only scholarly works about improvisational theatre.

Seham's book, an updated and revised version of her 1997 dissertation "Chicago-Style Improv Comedy: Race and Gender, Rhetoric and Practice," focuses on the role of

race and gender in improv, and the ways in which women and minorities have had to struggle to achieve equality in the heavily white and male dominated art form. She explores the structure of improv in performance and in process to determine the ways in which women and minorities are subjugated, and also the ways in which they have been able to break through to achieve equality. She also gives a history of the development of improv in Chicago and a brief summary, through her exploration of the work of minority and women's improv groups, of improv that is taking shape outside of Second City, and to a lesser extent iO's, realm of influence. The book's goal, however, is to explore the role of race and gender in improvisational theatre. So while it is very enlightening about the power structures of improvisational theatre, it does not explore the Harold very in-depth.

Leep's book is an excellent survey of improvisational theatre, offering the first thorough "comparison of styles, forms, histories, and companies."³⁴ Leep aims to clarify our understanding of improvisational theatre by analyzing performance improv in each of its three main genres: short form, long form, and sketch. While this work will only briefly explore short form improvisation, Leep provides a succinct overview of the genre and its three variations: team competitive format (ComedySportz and Theatresports), individual competitive format (*Whose Line*), and the team noncompetitive format (River City Improv). Leep likewise devotes a chapter to long form improv, which includes a brief section on iO and the Harold. Finally, she investigates sketch-based improv. After providing a concise history of Second City, she outlines the different types of sketch performance styles, along with the different types of sketches themselves.

³⁴ Jeanne Leep, *Theatrical Improvisation: Short Form, Long Form, and Sketch-Based Improv* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4.

While veteran improvisers and teachers probably won't find many groundbreaking ideas, the book is an outstanding guide through the improvisational forest for those with a basic background and understanding. One will find here a much deeper theoretical and historical scope than training manuals such as Smith's *The Other Blocking* or *Truth in Comedy*. Most importantly *Theatrical Improvisation* provides an excellent and broad base from which scholars can further build and explore the field of improvisational theatre from a more theoretical perspective.

David Alfred Charles's 2003 dissertation *The Novelty of Improvisation: Towards a Genre of Embodied Spontaneity*, examines improvisation by seeking to understand its unique features, functions and potentials, while freeing it from the heavy shadow of its scripted counterpart. To this end, Charles frames his study around the theories of literary critic Mikhail Bakhtin. Through the application of Bakhtin's concepts of the chronotope, prosaics, polyphony, and the carnivalesque, and his overarching schema of the genre as a way of seeing and experiencing the world, improvisation is revealed to be similar to Bakhtin's preferred model, the modern novel. By using Bakhtin's theories as his methodology the "novelty" of embodied spontaneity is uncovered. This heightened understanding of improv is enriched through a detailed consideration of a diverse field of spontaneous movements that span numerous regions, periods, and socio-political contexts. In addition to more widely recognized theatrical movements, such as the Roman mime, Italian *commedia dell'arte*, Augusto Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed, Viola Spolin's Theatre Games, and Keith Johnstone's Theatresports, the inclusion of lesser known (and marginal) practices, such as Japanese renga, Nigerian Apidan, and Jacob Levy Moreno's psychodrama, further elucidates and complicates improvisation's generic

qualities. Charles explores improvisation in a new and “novel” way, favoring to study not improvisational theatre per se, but all forms of spontaneous performance. Rather than framing improv in a theatrical light, Charles follows a methodological structure aligned with Bakhtin’s four concepts of the novel.

While Seham and Leep’s books remain the only published scholarly work dealing directly with improvisational theatre, a few other books deal with the history of improvisation. Janet Coleman’s *The Compass: The Improvisational Theatre That Revolutionized American Comedy* provides a chronology of The Compass Players and their pivotal role in the creation of contemporary improv. Several oral histories or memoirs have been written about improv theaters like Bernard Sahlins’s *Days and Nights at The Second City*, and Sweet’s aforementioned oral history of The Second City and The Compass Players in *Something Wonderful Right Away*—a book that laid the groundwork for Coleman’s *The Compass*. While these books provide valuable insight into the inner workings of these famous improv theatres and groups, often by the very people that were involved, these works are often written either before the Harold or pay it little attention. Nevertheless, these books not only provide a necessary bedrock upon which the Harold was built, but also provide the beginning point of contemporary improvisation and help demonstrate how the Harold changed improvisational theatre.

The popular press also plays an important role in this analysis. In the last ten to fifteen years there has been a surge in newspaper and magazine articles thanks in part to the popularity of the television show *Whose Line is it Anyway?* Many newspaper or magazine articles, like Dylan Hicks’ article in the Minneapolis *City Pages*, “Crying In Our Free Beer (And Occasionally Laughing),” focus on the author’s quest to try and

figure out just what improv is, or to measure the improv they are seeing against what they may have seen on *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, or at Second City. The rapidly increasing quantity of these “improv quest” articles illustrates the necessity of a scholarly analysis and demonstrates the cloud of uncertainty around improvisational theatre. Outside of the *Chicago Reader*, which has been reviewing improv since the early 1980s and has been invaluable to this project, newspapers have also begun to sparingly review improvisational theatre performances. These reviews mainly consist of scripted shows that were based in improv or developed from improv, but the Chicago papers and critics Albert Williams, Jack Helbig, Rob Kozlowski, and Anthony Adler in particular have written and reviewed strictly improvised performances, providing context and historical analysis of a variety of improvisational performances.

Similarly, there are several recent books that focus on improv as a lifestyle, philosophy, or spiritual belief system. Keith Sawyer’s “The Improvisational Performance of Everyday Life,” Katie Goodman’s *Improvisation for the Spirit*, Patricia Madson’s *Improv Wisdom: Don’t Prepare, Just Show Up*, and Jason Chin’s *Long Form Improvisation and the Art of Zen* all point to the popularity of the improv mindset. David Patton’s MFA Thesis “The Pedagogy and Ethics of Improvisation Using the Harold” argues that the rules and philosophy of the Harold not only work for improvisation, but can be followed to live an ethical life. These authors argue that the improvisational ideas of openness, acceptance, and staying in the moment not only lead to greater creativity, but also to a more complete and fulfilling life. We often tend to follow scripts in life that limit us and set us down the same path, which inevitably leads us to the same results. By utilizing improvisation and improvisational theories, we can open up our lives to new

experiences and find different results. Improv concepts like paying attention to your surroundings, saying yes, making the unexpected choice, and opening your awareness are explored not only as means to improve improvisational performance, but to improve one's life. John Sweeney has built upon these ideas and applied the Brave New Workshop's creative process to the business community. Sweeney explains how improvisation can unlock creativity and lead to a more productive and satisfying working life in *Innovation at the Speed of Laughter*. These sources point to the Harold's vast influence beyond performance, as a lifestyle, business model, philosophy, and world view.

CHAPTER ORGANIZATION

Chapter Two "Before The Harold" explores the history and development of improvisational theatre before the Harold. I trace the development of contemporary improv from its roots in *commedia dell'arte*, to Viola Spolin, to the Chicago Compass, to the oft-overlooked but hugely influential St. Louis Compass, and the Second City to understand what came before the Harold to properly analyze the impact of the Harold. In Chapter Three "The Training Wheels Harold," I look at the specific development of how and why the Harold came into being and chart the evolution of the Harold through the many currently undocumented house teams that experimented and expanded on the Harold leading up to The Family in the early 1990s, a team that unlocked the Harold and moved it in a totally new direction. Chapter Four "The Flexible Harold" looks at the advancement of the form after The Family, as well as the Harold's current role at iO, including its central role in iO's training center.

Chapter Five “Post Harold” focuses on several groups and theaters that have reacted to, transformed, or combined elements of the Harold in their work. I begin with The Annoyance Theatre, which in many ways was created as the antithesis to iO and the metanarrative of “the Harold.” By juxtaposing their philosophy and performances against iO we can illuminate how improvisation outside of iO has been influenced by the Harold. I also look at the Upright Citizens Brigade, which was formed by iO alumni and uses the Harold as its foundation, but marries the Harold with a more Annoyance-style aesthetic. Within iO, I look at The Improvised Shakespeare Company, which mixes the Bard and improv into a two-act improvised play that mixes high and low art and challenges Shakespeare’s cultural positioning. Building on this investigation, I conclude the chapter by analyzing the independent improv group Octavarius, which is emblematic of both the current independent improv movement as well as the cross-pollination of improv over the last decade.

My conclusion, Chapter Six “Improv Beyond Theatre: The Harold’s Influence on Television and Film,” begins to explore the Harold’s vast impact outside of traditional improvisational theatre. One of the keys to understanding how the Harold and improvisation have evolved is to look beyond traditional notions of improvisational theatre. Harold-trained writers and actors have become a staple of contemporary television and film, and this chapter explores the ways that the Harold and improv have helped to shape and direct the ensemble-based comic aesthetic, by first by analyzing how *30 Rock* uses the Harold, and then by briefly examining the burgeoning field of improv-based filmmaking utilized by Adam McKay, Judd Apatow, and others. I finally work to tie together the various threads from the earlier chapters, and to demonstrate the ways in

which the Harold has transformed improvisational theatre from a games-based system of play into a philosophical system of thinking that not only revolutionized improvisational theatre, but transformed American comedy.

CHAPTER II—BEFORE THE HAROLD: HOW DID WE GET HERE?

“After all, the end is in the beginning.”³⁵—Mike Meyers

Before looking at the future of improvisational theatre, we must first look to its past. The Harold is the result of a long chain of events and ideologies, as well as nearly twenty years of experimentation by Del Close and others. To understand how the Harold transformed improvisational theatre and influenced American comedy, we must first understand what came before the Harold. In this chapter I provide a brief overview of the history of improvisational theatre leading up to Charna Halpern and Del Close’s union in 1983 at iO, focusing on *commedia dell’arte*, Viola Spolin, the Chicago and St. Louis Compass Players, and the Second City.

COMMEDIA DELL’ARTE

From Ancient Rome to modern day Chicago, improvisational theatre has taken on many forms and undergone numerous changes and incarnations. Some scholars link Greek and Roman mimes to the beginnings of improvisational theatre, but the most direct ancestor of improvisational theatre comes from the Italian Renaissance and the *commedia dell’arte*. Unfortunately the origin of contemporary improvisation is not quite as simple as saying that improv started with the *commedia dell’arte* and continues today as many

³⁵ Mike Meyers, “Foreword,” *Truth In Comedy*, 1.

improv manuals have implied. Since *commedia dell'arte* is the main root of contemporary improv, however, it provides a good starting point.

The first signs of *commedia dell'arte*, and of formal improvisational theatre, appear in southern Italy as early as the third century BCE with the Atellan Farce. The Atellan Farce featured a troupe of actors that toured the countryside performing improvised farces that dealt with domestic or family problems, or poked fun at historical or mythological figures, and were most often presented after the performance of a tragic play for the upper class. Much like the later *commedia dell'arte*, the Atellan Farce relied heavily on stock characters and situations, as well as broad physical slapstick and burlesque humor. With the growing popularity of the Atellan Farce, around the first century BCE, Roman authors began to write down the most successful and popular farces and began turning them into scripted plays. Subsequently, the Atellan Farce faded away as a popular form of improvised theatre. Despite its popular downfall, the idea of the Atellan Farce was preserved by wandering mimes and street performers up until the Middle Ages.

The Atellan Farce had a profound influence on the development of Roman comedy, which can be seen in the plays of Plautus and Terrence, who in turn were heavily influential in the development of *commedia dell'arte*. While their plays were obviously not improvised, they drew heavily on the Atellan Farce and as James Fisher argues: “[t]he similarities between the Plautine and Terentian stock characters and the masks of *commedia*” point to the former’s influence on *commedia*.³⁶ While the Atellan Farce and the plays of Plautus and Terrence had a profound impact on *commedia*, there

³⁶ James Fisher, *The Theatre of Yesterday and Tomorrow: Commedia dell'arte on the modern stage* (Lewiston: E Mellen Press, 1992), 4-5.

remains no single source or fountain head for *commedia*. Some scholars posit that *commedia dell'arte* was brought to Italy by Byzantine performers when Constantinople fell in 1453. Still others argue that it sprang up from the *commedia erudita* or “learned drama,” which were scripted plays, often in Latin and taken from the plays of Plautus and Terrence, and which were performed at court or in the academies. Since *commedia dell'arte* and *commedia erudita* were contemporary forms it seems unlikely that *commedia erudita* was instrumental in the creation of *commedia dell'arte*, rather *commedia dell'arte* can be seen in many ways as a reaction against *commedia erudita*.

Whatever its exact origins may be, with the Italian Renaissance and the rebirth of Italian drama, *commedia dell'arte* emerged in Italy around 1550 and thrived from 1570-1650, eventually branching out to most of Europe before virtually disappearing in the eighteenth century. *Commedia* troupes consisted of approximately six to ten performers that traveled from town to town, festival to festival performing improvised scenarios. These scenarios, or *burla*, or *scenarii*—the general plot for any given performance—were written by members of the company and usually consisted of a basic plot outline that was posted backstage, but contained no dialogue. During the performance the actors invented the words and actions to get from plot point to plot point as they went along. This simple formula, later known as a scenario play, would become a staple of improvised comedy of the late twentieth and early twenty-first century, and provide a blueprint for The Compass Players to follow in the 1950s.

The improvisation, however, was not exactly spontaneous or original. Much of *commedia dell'arte*'s success came from its reliance on popular *burla* that would be performed time and again, and on the stock characters that grew to inhabit *commedia*

dell'arte performances. Roles such as Pantalone, the miserly, greedy, egotistical old man; Dottore, the scholarly fool who is always meddling in his neighbors' affairs; Il Capitano, the cowardly, braggart soldier; the innamorati, the young lovers; and of course Arlechino or Harlequin, the comic servant, came to define *commedia* performance, and is one of the forms greatest legacies in modern comedy and improvisation. Many improvisers and teams have set forms that they perform, whether a Harold, LaRonde, Bat, etc; and many have specific characters, gimmicks, or scenarios that they revisit. That is not to say that modern improv is recycled, but for instance, the popular Minneapolis group Ferrari McSpeedy has at least one overbearing father versus nerdy-artsy son scene in nearly every show. In fact, it is these very scenes that draw in some audience members. Similarly, in *commedia* scenarios Pantalone and Arlechino always would have a prototypical master-servant scene or game in a scenario. This has been a staple of comedy before and since. Improv teacher and interactive theatre pioneer Jeff Wirth actually uses a master-servant game to help teach the concept of justification, where the servant must justify why every task set out for him is both enjoyable and necessary. This exercise has found its way into numerous scenes with an overbearing character bossing around a servant, and with the servant creating comedy by pointing out the foibles and ignorance of the master. As the above Ferrari McSpeedy example demonstrates, modern improvisers also have their own stock characters. In the Improvised Shakespeare Company at iO, for example, Andy Carey almost always plays a form of Harlequin in performance.

Furthermore, a *commedia* actor was aided by the fact that he or she typically only played one character throughout his or her career.³⁷ Most importantly, however, a *commedia* performer was reliant on the practice of employing standard lazzi. Lazzi are similar to what we would now call bits, and consisted of any independent, comic, and repeatable activity that guaranteed laughs for its participants. As Mel Gordon argues, while “the lazzi were frequently thought of as occurring spontaneously or off-the-cuff, most were rigorously rehearsed and their insertion in performance sometimes preplanned.”³⁸ Eric Weitz in *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* describes a sketch as simply a single lazzi bit that lasts as long as the bit can sustain laughter. The Dead Parrot sketch from *Monty Python* is a good example, as John Cleese reaches for a string of euphemisms to describe the dead parrot he has been duped into buying, while the shopkeeper refuses to acknowledge the crooked sale. The lazzi is based on delay, protraction, and extension.³⁹ Vaudeville was almost exclusively made up of bits or lazzi, as was the silent film era, with Charlie Chaplin making a career out of set bits. Likewise Lucille Ball made lazzi an integral part of *I Love Lucy*. John Belushi’s samurai character—who often found himself in situations totally inappropriate for a samurai (such as a delicatessen) but nonetheless perfectly executed his tasks; Chris Farley’s overweight figure skating character who also happened to be a beautiful and graceful skater; and Mike Meyers’s Austin Powers, among many others, are all based on lazzi. Therefore, through the use of stock characters and situations, and through the implementation of

³⁷ Fisher, 2.

³⁸ Mel Gordon, *Lazzi: the comic routines of Commedia dell’arte* (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983), 5.

³⁹ Eric Weitz, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 108.

rehearsed lazzi, *commedia* actors were able to effectively control and manipulate their improvisation.

While improv scenes are not centered on lazzi, they certainly play a large part in improvisation. Instead of calling it lazzi or bits, iO and *Truth in Comedy* call it finding the game of the scene. Performers in a Harold are encouraged to try and discover patterns within scenes and then to exploit them. For instance, a common game is called “One-Upping,” where each player takes a turn trying to one-up the other’s previous statement. It might have to do with who is more depressed, or who had the harder day, or who is a better spouse. These games are fundamental to iO’s philosophy and one of the ways that improvisers generate laughs, and as we shall see is central to the Upright Citizens Brigade version of the Harold. Generally a game is started by identifying the first unusual thing in a scene and then heightening it, or discovering the pattern of the scene, or identifying what the conflict is between the two characters and then heightening that. Not to beat *Monty Python* into the ground, but an excellent example of the game of a scene is the Room for an Argument sketch. “Is this the room for an argument?” “I already told you.” “No, you didn’t.” “Yes I did.” And so on.

The reliance on stock characters and lazzi points to another characteristic of *commedia* that has been passed down: character over plot. As Close once told a class that was struggling making scenes work “stop thinking about plot and start thinking more about relationship.”⁴⁰ *Commedia* scenarios were not scripted for a reason; because they wanted to give freedom to the actors. That means that the actor and his or her character were valued more than the plot of the piece. In many ways *commedia* troupes would perform the same set of scenarios that all pretty much resembled one another: two young

⁴⁰Q td. in Jeff Griggs, *Guru* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005), 186.

lovers can't get together because of a miserly old man who thinks it better that the young woman marry one of his associates (an ignorant doctor or a braggart soldier), and through the help of servants the lovers outwit the old man and marry in the end. Audiences came to see the stock characters, the lazzi, and the local and topical references; not necessarily the plot. Today we don't go to romantic comedies because of the plot, we often go to see our favorite actors. At iO the Harold is taught as a thematic piece where the relationship between characters supersedes any concerns with plot. In fact, a Harold can be perfectly executed without any sort of plot at all.

Within these set parameters the average *commedia* performer had a great deal of freedom, much more so than his or her contemporaries. For example, since all of the performer's dialogue was improvised if the audience was responsive he might stay onstage and extend his bit. If the audience was cold, he would merely do what the plot required. Not only does this demonstrate the greater freedom of *commedia dell'arte*, but it is also one of the first instances of an actor as more than just a performer, a device that the contemporary improviser fully utilizes. In *Truth In Comedy*, Halpern and Close dedicate an entire chapter to the different roles that an improviser must play in a Harold—director (what scenes to present next, rhythm, and of course staging), designer (players often become scenery or sound effects), editor (when to cut scenes), and of course writer. It is partly through *commedia dell'arte* that the actor becomes a more vital and important member of the artistic process, an essential member of the creative team rather than just a medium for recitation. Contemporary improv has embraced the “actor as everything” ethos, requiring improvisers to do more than just act but also direct, write, and design. This inverted Craigian control has become one of the most attractive features

of improv for performers. Shaun Landry, one of the founders of the influential improv group Oui Be Negroes,⁴¹ echoes this idea, saying that improv “is the purist form of theatre from the actor’s perspective. We are the playwright, directors, choreographer, and scene designer. It is a true form of creative expression.”⁴²

Commedia dell’arte created an entirely new brand of theatre reliant on the radical notion of improvised dialogue that ultimately transformed the comic theatre. *Commedia dell’arte*’s influence on modern theatre, however, runs far deeper and broader than its link to improvisational theatre. Many of the stock characters developed in *commedia* found their way into the plays of such famous playwrights as Molière (who for a short time actually shared a theatre with a *commedia* troupe in Paris), Bernard Shaw, and William Shakespeare. Physical comics such as Charlie Chaplin, The Marx Brothers, The Three Stooges, Lucille Ball, and Chevy Chase owe *commedia dell’arte* a debt of gratitude. Even the famous routines of Abbott and Costello harken to the *lazzi* of *commedia dell’arte*.

Commedia dell’arte entertained a continent and influenced comic theatre in every nation. Unfortunately, with *commedia*’s popularity waning, in part because Carlo Goldoni and others began writing down successful scenarios and publishing them as plays (*The Servant of Two Masters* being the most notable example), it eventually faded from mainstream culture in the mid-eighteenth century, and with it so too did formal improvisational theatre for nearly two hundred years. Despite *commedia*’s mainstream disappearance, its influence remained strong. As with the Atellan Farce, *commedia* troupes continued touring the European countryside, further spreading and sustaining

⁴¹ Originally founded in Chicago in 1994, the group relocated to San Francisco in 2000, and finally to Los Angeles in 2009.

⁴² Shaun Landry, Personal Interview, November 13, 2004.

improvisation. In fact, nearly every person that birthed contemporary improvisational theatre was acutely aware of *commedia dell'arte*, freely borrowing its ideas and structures. In creating The Compass Players in Chicago in the 1950s, David Shepherd's stated intention was to create an updated version of the *commedia dell'arte*, "a popular theatre which, working improvisationally from scenarios, would deal in comic terms with present day society."⁴³

VIOLA SPOLIN

With the downfall of *commedia dell'arte* improvisational theatre was on the verge of disappearing from popular culture until it was unintentionally brought back to life in the early twentieth century by Viola Spolin, whose theatre games inadvertently revolutionized the American theatre and reformulated the way we look at comedy. While improvisational theatre fell from the mainstream from 1750-1920, it kept a pulse. As noted, *commedia* troupes continued playing throughout Europe. In America, comic forms such as minstrelsy paved the way for vaudeville and later radio comedy, all of which had a profound impact on improv and comedy's evolution. Even playwrights like August Strindberg saw improv's latent possibilities and utilized it within their scripts. For example, rather than fully scripting the monologues in his play *Miss Julie* (1888), Strindberg left the details up to the actor. According to Strindberg, "a talented actor who is absorbed in the situation and mood of the play can probably improvise better than the author, who cannot calculate in advance just how much needs to be said, or for how long,

⁴³ Jeffery Sweet, *Something Wonderful Right Away*, (New York: Avon Books, 1978), xvi.

before the theatrical illusion is broken.”⁴⁴ An innovator and forerunner of several twentieth-century artistic movements, Strindberg noted that, “As we know, some Italian theatres have returned to improvisation, producing actors who are creative in their own right, although in accordance with the author’s intentions. This could really be a step forward or a fertile, new form of art that may well deserve the name *creative*.”⁴⁵ While his name didn’t stick, his hypothesis turned out to be prophetic thanks to the Depression, the New Deal, and the work of Viola Spolin.

Spolin never set out to be involved in the theatre; rather she started as a social worker in settlement houses. It was through her training as a settlement worker in the 1920s with Northwestern University sociologist Neva L. Boyd at Group Work School in Chicago that Spolin developed an unheard of approach to the theatre that was based in the “constructive potential of play.”⁴⁶ Boyd believed that play was essential to the human spirit, and that play taught vital life skills such as social adaptability, ethics, mental and emotional control, the ability to adjust to changing circumstances, and imagination. According to Spolin, Boyd’s teachings provided “an extraordinary training in the use of games, story-telling, folk dance and dramatics as tools for stimulating creative expression in both children and adults, through self discovery and personal experiencing.”⁴⁷ Spolin took her experience with Boyd and put it into practice when she found herself as drama supervisor for the Works Progress Administration’s Recreation Project in Chicago (1939-1941).

⁴⁴ August Strindberg, *Miss Julie and Other Plays*, Trans. Michael Robinson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 65.

⁴⁵ Strindberg, 65.

⁴⁶ Sweet, xvii.

⁴⁷ Bruce Bebb, “Improv: Where did you come from and what are you doing in my living room?” *Hollywood Reporter*, 26 January 1988.

The objective of the project was to help inner-city immigrant children and women assimilate and adjust to their new surroundings. Due to the myriad of cultural obstacles that faced Spolin, she quickly realized that to be effective she would need to create a system of theatre training that could cross the cultural and language barriers within the WPA Project. She needed to teach communication without relying on language. She did this by simply playing games. The games followed her credo that “Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise.”⁴⁸ According to Spolin the presentation of the exercises as games was essential because:

‘If you put someone onstage...and tell him to ‘act,’ he will feel inhibited and self-conscious, but if you transform the situation into a game, the actor, in concentrating his energies on playing the game, will lose his self-consciousness and perform naturally and spontaneously’...Rather than telling the performer specifically how to behave, Spolin tried to set up circumstances in which he would arrive at the right choice himself.⁴⁹

The experiment grew and Spolin saw the potential for the games. Spolin noted that the Recreation Project “provided the opportunity for my first direct experiments in teaching drama, from which developed a non-verbal, non-psychological approach.”⁵⁰ Part of Spolin’s task was to equip others to be teacher/directors in their own neighborhoods, many of whom had little or no theatrical background, so creating a system of training and play without the burden of “acting” was imperative. She needed to teach non-theatre people how to act and direct, and she did this by changing the theatrical vocabulary. Although she acknowledges the influence of Stanislavski, she was developing an entirely new system of performing and thinking about theatre and performance.

⁴⁸ Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theatre, 3rd Edition* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1999), 1.

⁴⁹ Qtd. in Sweet, xvii.

⁵⁰ Spolin, xlvii.

Over time the games became a way to train actors for formal theatre. Each game presented a problem or objective that distilled a complicated theatrical convention or technique. The games focused on physicality, spontaneity, intuition, transformation, imagination, and audience participation. Spolin says, “the idea is to hurtle you into the present time, which is something other than clock time. You are not waiting for. You are in waiting. . . The outcome of the present time is as yet unknown, as yet an undiscovered probability.”⁵¹ Spolin’s games were designed to make play the catalyst for creativity, self expression, and self awareness. An example is the Mirror Image game, where two actors simply mirror each other’s movements. This simple game, which is a staple of most movement and improv introductory classes, is, according to her son and Compass Players and Second City co-creator Paul Sills, “perfect for developing an ensemble unity.”⁵² The game Contact was developed in response to two actors doing a scene that required a high level of physical intimacy, but the young actors were uncomfortable touching. So Spolin created a game where before saying a line each actor had to touch the other, thereby breaking down the physical (and mental) boundaries between the two actors and the problem was solved. According to Spolin, the theatre games that would revolutionize improvisational theatre came about out of necessity: “I didn’t sit at home and dream them up. When I had a problem [directing], I just made up a game. When another problem came up, I just made up a new game.”⁵³

Through her work with games, Spolin was able to get the most reclusive of young teens to make proper acting choices and feel at home on stage. The performances and

⁵¹ Donna McCrohan, *The Second City: A Backstage History of Comedy’s Hottest Troupe* (New York: Perigee, 1987), 44.

⁵² Qtd. in Richard Christiansen, *A Theatre of Our Own: A History and a Memoir of 1,001 Nights in Chicago* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 99.

⁵³ Qtd. in Kozlowski, 3.

plays that came from the WPA were noteworthy, including in 1939 when Spolin first asked for audience suggestions to guide her group's improvisation—the first recorded incident of audience inspired improvisation in American theatre. While these performances are worth mentioning, Spolin's more significant contribution is her system of games. What Spolin created at the WPA and later with the Young Actors Company in Hollywood was a base of theatre games, collectively known later as the "Theatre Games" system of actor training, and published in 1963's *Improvisation for the Theatre*. This system, which was heavily reliant on improvisation, transformed complicated dramatic techniques and conventions into a series of simple games designed to help actor's creativity and prevent self-consciousness. Furthermore, Spolin transformed the way improvisation worked by involving the audience and creating the concept of group mind. Bud Tillman, Studs Terkel, and earlier vaudeville stars had improvised, but they confined and masked their improvisation. Spolin put the emphasis on the ensemble and put the process on stage, allowing the audience into the experience of creation and spontaneity. Spolin, and later The Compass Players, used improvisation as a means of performance and as a way to generate material rather than simply using it as a tool to get through a radio or television show.

Spolin's role in creating improvisational theatre, however, went beyond the WPA and her theatre games. In 1955, her son Paul Sills and the young east coast aristocrat David Shepherd adapted these games to an idea they had, partly inspired by Bertolt Brecht, for a politically and socially relevant form of cabaret theater. This revolutionary new theatre, a theatre that would monumentally impact the future course of a city and the

entirety of American theatre, would never have gotten off the ground without the help of Viola Spolin.

THE COMPASS PLAYERS

Sills and Shepherd's idea turned into The Compass Players, the first fully improvisational theatre in the world, and started what author Amy Seham deems the first wave of improv.⁵⁴ Founded by a group of young bohemian artists at the University of Chicago during the school's age of atomic development, The Compass Players set out to "report on their times, seven or eight times a week, with no set script and no fixed lines...The intentions of The Compass Players...were serious. They did not plan to be funny or change the course of comedy with their improvisation. But that is what happened."⁵⁵ The Compass Players, often only mentioned as the precursor to The Second City, is perhaps the most influential improvisational theatre in the world and laid the groundwork for contemporary improvisational theatre. Without the work of The Compass Players it is quite difficult to picture the current style and thriving state of contemporary improvisational theatre.

The Compass Players did not just appear in Chicago by chance. It took the right combination of people in the right situation in the right place. The right people involved Spolin, Sills, and Shepherd, and the right place was Chicago, which was a natural fit for a new brand of comedy. It is a city with a rich comic and improvisational tradition, rooted in a more realistic acting style and humor. The city's first theatre, the Chicago Theatre opened in 1837 and featured a new play each night because "Chicago audiences weren't

⁵⁴ Seham, xix.

⁵⁵ Janet Coleman, *The Compass: the improvisational theatre that revolutionized American comedy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), preface.

patient enough to have it any other way.”⁵⁶ Chicago even named their annual theatre awards after Joseph Jefferson, one of the great American comedic actors of all time, best known for his turn as the gravedigger in *Hamlet* and as Rip Van Winkle. The Marx Brothers worked in vaudeville in Chicago from 1910-1920, where they had the freedom to develop their act and experiment. Never fans of plots or scripts, they often went into the audience to enliven their shows. Chicago was instrumental in the development of their comic aesthetic and more natural style of comedy, providing the time, space, and atmosphere to experiment, fail, and flourish that New York did not.

The rise of radio comedy in Chicago likewise influenced the city’s comic aesthetic, favoring a much more conversational tone and humor based in relationships and character than the vaudeville-influenced style based on physicality and broad humor. Likewise, radio was a form reliant on improvisation and spontaneity. Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, two white men who had been performing minstrelsy and vaudeville found their voice on Chicago radio as Amos ‘n Andy. While their shows were highly racist, they also were incredibly influential and heavily reliant on improvisation. Their scripts were often finished only moments before airtime and rarely rehearsed, with Correll and Gosden favoring the spontaneity of live performance. Elizabeth McLeod notes that “Correll and Gosden created an intimate, understated acting style that differed sharply from the broad manner of stage actors—a technique requiring careful modulation of the voice, especially in the portrayal of multiple characters.”⁵⁷

⁵⁶ Margaret Hicks, *Chicago Comedy: A Fairly Serious History* (Charleston, SC: The History Press, 2011), 20.

⁵⁷ Elizabeth McLeod, *Original Amos ‘n’ Andy: Freeman Gosden, Charles Correll and the 1928-1943 Radio Serial* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009).

In 1947 *Kukla, Fran, and Ollie* again put Chicago comedy on the map, this time through television, and once again improvisation fueled the show. Burr Tillstrom played all the characters on the show, and his partner Fran Bailey usually had a rough idea of what they would talk about on the show but most of their dialogue was improvised. As Margaret Hicks notes, the style of comedy was also different, as “Fran gently prodded and practiced a slower pace of comedy with a big payoff.”⁵⁸ Dave Garroway likewise capitalized on television by using improvisation on *Garroway at Large*. Doing away with studio audiences, Garroway spoke directly to the camera and like Tillstrom and Bailey, he often had no set script. Studs Terkel similarly used improvisation and a more naturalistic Chicago acting style on his show *Studs’ Place*, a drama about a greasy spoon diner in Chicago. Terkel said of the process that “we never had a script. Charlie [Andrews] and I would do the plot...Bit by bit, out of the actors would come the lines; the dialogue had to be from them, the words were the actors’ own.”⁵⁹ The show was cancelled in 1951, however, because the network thought Terkel might be a communist, which leads us to the right situation, a school that was affectionately dubbed “Red U.”

The University of Chicago has always been known as an experimental and forward thinking place, and that was certainly the case under Chancellor Robert Maynard Hutchins (1931-1951). Chancellor Hutchins developed what was referred to as the Hutchinson Plan or the “Chicago Experiment.” Hutchins was inspired by the medieval university of Saint Thomas Aquinas, and sought to expose students to the wonders of learning. He eliminated an age requirement for admission, so anyone who could pass the entrance exam was invited to attend whether they were twelve or one hundred. Hutchins

⁵⁸ Hicks, 55.

⁵⁹ Studs Terkel, *Touch and Go: A Memoir* (New York: The New Press, 2007), 121.

felt that higher education had become too specialized, which was resulting in “a trivialization of our lives.”⁶⁰ His plan focused on an acquisition of knowledge rather than a specialization for a career. All University of Chicago students read the same great books, from Plato to Max Weber. Class was hardly a requirement, and most students were able to accelerate their studies and graduate in two years. Through his radical plan, Hutchins hoped to create a body of intellectuals who would seek “enlightenment through a common body of ideas and information...by sharing the divine revelations of knowledge.”⁶¹ ⁶² It was from this intellectual atmosphere that the roots of The Compass Players were laid and under this academic climate that many of the initial players were trained.

In one of the many ironies of improvisational theatre, the university that gave birth to The Compass Players and improvisational theatre had no formal drama program. So Paul Sills, Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Severn Darden, and Sheldon Patinkin founded the University Theatre. After the founders’ graduation, the University Theatre evolved into The Playwright’s Theatre Club, which is important in the formation of The Compass Players for several reasons. Foremost among these is that it proved that the group could found and run a legitimate professional theatre. It also forged the group’s political identity, which was heavily influenced by Bertolt Brecht, introduced the actors to the improvisational teachings of Viola Spolin, garnered critical acclaim for several of its members, and significantly brought together Paul Sills and David Shepherd.

⁶⁰ Robert Hutchins, *The Conflict of Education in a Democratic Society* (New York: Harper, 1953), 19.

⁶¹ Qtd. in Kozlowski, 10.

⁶² While the school espoused what could be called a socialist viewpoint, it remained financially prohibitive and in this very important way elitist.

In 1955, before Compass was even a concept, The Playwright's Theatre Club was gaining momentum in part due to the work and drive of the brilliant and radical young stage director Paul Sills, who was heading up the theatre's ambitious production schedule (they sought to produce at least one new play a month). At the same time, David Shepherd was hitchhiking his way west from New York City fresh off a European trip studying cabaret theatre and with a \$10,000 inheritance in his pocket.⁶³ Shepherd's original dream was to create a socialist utopia by opening a cabaret theatre in a small Midwestern town where anyone could get on stage at any time and perform. Shepherd initially went to Gary, Indiana, to set up his populist cabaret theatre. Upon his arrival Shepherd met with members of Gary's Communist Party, who told him that he was in the wrong place because people there "just wanted to go home, screw their wives, and watch TV."⁶⁴ Shepherd began looking for another small Midwestern town to house his theatre, but when none seemed interested or fitting Shepherd took his dream to the largest Midwestern town, Chicago, and dramatically redirected the city's theatrical path.

Shepherd and Sills were not a likely pairing, but it was from this unlikely combination of personalities, with Sills bridging the gap between the idealism of Shepherd and the teachings of Spolin, that The Compass was born. Shepherd had grown up in a wealthy east coast family and was dedicated to the idea of a populist working class theatre for regular people. The theatre was, first and foremost for David Shepherd, a vehicle toward social change and action. He didn't possess the greatest sense of humor and wasn't interested in creating a comic theatre. For him, the dream was a highly charged political theatre. Sills, on the other hand, was born into theatre and had been

⁶³ Coleman, 42.

⁶⁴ Qtd. in Christiansen, 100.

exposed to Spolin's techniques since childhood. He was much more concerned with artistic aesthetics than with the plight of the working man. Their varying worldviews and experiences would eventually lead to one of the major tensions of *The Compass Players*; while Shepherd was committed to social change, Sills' first commitment was to art. Before their differences led them down different paths—Sills to *Second City* and Shepherd to a helping hand in *ImprovOlympics*—they shared a common goal: to create a new kind of theatre.

In the beginning they were joined by their shared affinity for Brecht. They both sought to create a relaxed and accessible cabaret theatre full of contemplative spectators, as Brecht says, “smoking and watching,” hoping to create “a theatre full of experts, just as one has sporting arenas full of experts.”⁶⁵ Thanks to the Hutchins Plan a theatre full of experts was waiting for this new theatre to emerge, but the theatre's exact shape was still being formulated and the battle over Brechtian theory just beginning. For Sills Brechtian theory was always more of an artistic and aesthetic choice; for Shepherd it was a political ideology. Sills' artistic and aesthetic application of Brechtian theory at The Playwright's Theatre Club was earning him critical acclaim, especially for his production of *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*. But Shepherd was growing weary of The Playwright's Theatre Club, and continued advocating a populist theatre. Shepherd despised his creation, writing in his journal that “In a year and a half, I have helped build a miserable self-centered arts club which talks over the heads of its bourgeois members at the same time it licks their feet for patronage.”⁶⁶ Luckily for Shepherd, and for the future of improvisational theatre, The Playwright's Theatre Club was beginning to collapse due to

⁶⁵ Bertolt Brecht, *Brecht on Theatre*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (New York: Hill & Wang, 1964, 1992), 44.

⁶⁶ Qtd. in Christiansen, 104.

a myriad of factors including a grueling production calendar, financial insecurity, a perceived dangerous and radical left-wing agenda, and administrative naïveté which included the continual failure to secure the proper permits.

Shepherd saw the opportunity that the imminent collapse would provide, and very much wanted to create a working class theatre out of the rubble of The Playwright's Theatre Club. Shepherd knew that his new theatre would need a different atmosphere and feel than The Playwright's Theatre Club, knowing that a working class audience could not connect to a middle class play or theater. What Shepherd ultimately sought to create was a theatre that was a mixture of the popular entertainments of the *commedia dell'arte*, with the political ambition of a Brechtian cabaret. He wanted actors to comment on the social and political issues of the day. He wanted Chicago plays for Chicagoans. And he wanted them fast.

The whole concept of scenario plays came about because Shepherd wanted plays faster than writers could write them. So he suggested that they just use outlines and the scenario play was reborn. Most importantly, Shepherd wanted them to be politically charged and socially relevant to the working class audience he hoped would patronize his new theatre, but did not know any more than anyone else what these new scenario plays would look like. Shepherd approached numerous people and asked them to write a scenario play, Roger Bowen among them. According to Bowen, "I said [to Shepherd], 'What's a scenario play?' He said, 'We won't know until we've done it.'"⁶⁷ The first produced scenario play was Bowen's *Enterprise*, directed by Shepherd. It was produced, along with Shepherd's own less successful scenario play *An Exam Play*, at The Reynolds Club as an afterpiece to two regularly staged plays on May 14, 1955. *Enterprise* was well

⁶⁷ Qtd. in Coleman, 86.

received by the audience, which included a few future financial backers for The Compass, and one of its future stars, Elaine May. Yet Shepherd still had to convince Sills to join the nascent theatre. A crude audio tape of the performance was played to Sills. According to Bowen, Sills responded with “I don’t know why they’re laughing...But they’re laughing, so it must be good.”⁶⁸ Sills, who was unemployed after the closing of The Playwright’s Theatre Club, had finally decided to join The Compass.

Shepherd and Sills got their group of actors together, and Viola Spolin was brought in to whip the company into shape. She, along with Sills, ran a month of intense improv workshops to train the new actors. After the training intensive, Spolin went back to California and Sills took over control of the workshops. One of the many sad ironies of The Compass is that Spolin, who developed the company’s acting technique, and quite possibly without whom The Compass would not have existed, never saw them perform. With a company of “trained” actors, Shepherd set out to find a location.

What he found was bar owner Freddie Wranovics, owner of the popular campus bar Jimmy’s. Wranovics was interested in opening a new bar and Shepherd convinced him that The Compass would help bring in the crowds. The small off-campus space was converted into a ninety seat cabaret. The Compass opened on July 5, 1955, with *The Game of Hurt*, written and directed by Paul Sills. The successful opening also marked the beginning of an outpouring of creative ideas. The group produced a new scenario every week, rehearsing through the day and performing nights to packed and enthusiastic houses. Besides the written scenarios, the group also began performing a form called Living News, which was a derivative of the Living Newspaper plays of the Federal Theatre Project. On top of this, because the bar owners wanted a longer show so they

⁶⁸ Qtd. in Coleman, 90.

could sell more drinks, the group added a half hour of audience inspired scenes, the most successful of which would later be written and repeated, a technique that Sills would use to make Second City famous.

A typical performance by The Compass Players was described in a 1955 issue of *Chicago Magazine*, as, “sometimes uncomfortably realistic, other times spontaneously witty...in dialog, the only taboo is cliché...The entertainment is fast-moving and intermittent, but because it is largely impromptu it is never twice the same.”⁶⁹ The improvisations were, however, very different from contemporary improvisations. Suggestions would be solicited and the actors would meet backstage for a few minutes to plot out the action. Scenes were also much longer and meandering, a problem that the St. Louis branch of The Compass would later address. The audiences, mostly University of Chicago students or associates of the University or the highly eclectic Hyde Park neighborhood, began filling the tiny space to capacity every night. Very quickly a nightly overflow line began building out front, and performances began to run into the early morning hours. The Compass Players were off to a highly successful start, but things didn’t stay rosy for long.

The group’s popularity, and Wranovics disillusionment with the bar profits that The Compass brought in, prompted Shepherd to move the group to a second location in November of 1955. The Dock, a Hyde Park nightclub became the new home of The Compass, with a one hundred and forty seat cabaret. This move marked the beginning of the end for The Compass Players. Sills left on a Fulbright to England, and took wife and Compass actress Barbara Harris with him. There was also a change in the production process and material. The arduous schedule of the initial Compass began to weigh on the

⁶⁹ Qtd. in Sweet, xxv.

players, and the scenario play began to fade from the group's repertoire. Instead, the group turned toward more Living News bits and more improvised scenes. These improvised scenes, however, were not always improvised as the group began to revisit scenes to hone and perfect them into scripted works. Mike Nichols and Elaine May began to have great success with their "set improv," developing a unique rapport and repertoire that would later make them famous. Fairly quickly performances were comprised of a Living News, a showcase of perfected improvised scenes, some Nicholas and May, and a late night improv set.

The final move of the Compass Players proved to be the last move of the Chicago troupe. The group left Hyde Park in the spring of 1956 in favor of the Argo Off-Beat Room on the north side of Chicago. The space could accommodate nearly two hundred and fifty people, but lacked the intimacy and cabaret qualities of previous spaces. The audiences also began to change. The old University of Chicago audience, hip to many of the group's jokes and style, gave way to a more affluent and upper class north side audience. Coupled with the growing number of professional actors in the group, The Compass at the Argo Off-Beat Room barely resembled the workers theatre that Shepherd had imagined. More people wanted to see the scripted routines of Nichols & May than the politically charged improvised scenes about poor working conditions.

The Compass Players closed down their Chicago operation on a bitterly cold January evening in 1957, without David Shepherd; "in fact, not one of the players on stage that night had been present when the Compass opened, not one who could remember that it had been one of Chicago's hottest nights."⁷⁰ While the Chicago operation was being shut down, Shepherd was in the midst of trying to establish Compass

⁷⁰ Coleman, 203.

Players in various cities throughout the United States, including New York and St. Louis. The New York troupe had difficulty from the start and never really became a realized entity, but the St. Louis troupe performing at the Crystal Palace and led by Ted Flicker became wildly successful and influential in the future of improvisational theatre.

THE ST. LOUIS COMPASS PLAYERS

Most scholarly attention has been devoted to the Chicago Compass Players. While their influence and innovation cannot be overestimated, in terms of the development of the Harold and long form improvisational theatre, the St. Louis branch was probably more influential. In many ways the Chicago branch laid the groundwork for Second City, while the St. Louis branch laid the groundwork for iO. While Close is often cited as the father of long form improv, Flicker's role in the creation of improv for performance is often overlooked, yet his innovations in St. Louis established the rules and set the course for performance improvisation. As he once told a struggling contemporary improv group in Los Angeles after attending a rather poor performance, "I'm your grandfather. You better come to my house and I'll teach you some things that Elaine and I invented."⁷¹ The St. Louis branch's success stemmed from new improv techniques introduced by Flicker, and featured the talents of a young (and strange) improviser named Del Close, a former fire-eating circus performer who took his experiences from St. Louis under Flicker and would go on to revolutionize improvisational theatre through his work with The Committee and at iO.

Before he came to St. Louis, Flicker was working in New York trying to establish the People's Theatre. Outraged at the high ticket prices for Broadway shows, Flicker

⁷¹ Ted Flicker, Personal Interview, May 18, 2011.

wanted to start a theatre “with a \$2.50 top price and \$.50 for the second balcony.”⁷² Not unlike Shepherd he wanted to create a theatre for regular people. He started raising the money, but the one thing he really needed was an agreement with the stage-hands union. In order to keep costs down Flicker was willing to “hire the stage-hands we needed but I couldn’t take all of those extra guys. I remember going to a union meeting and they laughed at me.”⁷³ With his theatre stalled, he decided to follow up on the phone calls that he was getting from his good friend and Chicago Compass performer Severn Darden. Flicker went to see the Chicago Compass perform and “didn’t like a lot of what they were doing, but I saw great potential...Nobody at the Chicago Compass had it all together about improvisation. I thought the show was terrible. They all had street clothes on, smoking on stage...I knew that improvisation had great potential, but I saw that they were doing it wrong.”⁷⁴ With the money he’d raised trying to start the People’s Theatre, he thought he’d bring the Compass to New York.

Instead he ended up bringing it to St. Louis. The Landesman family was trying to bring a branch to St. Louis at the same time Flicker and Shepherd were trying to set up the New York branch. Flicker recalls that Walter Landesman thought “I was a phony trying to steal the theatre. So I said ‘You bring the Compass to St. Louis and I’ll go to New York’...and he said, ‘Oh no, you’re coming with me.’ So I went to St. Louis.”⁷⁵ The St. Louis Compass did not receive the same training from Viola Spolin and featured several members who never saw the Chicago branch perform (although Flicker quickly hired Chicago standouts Nichols and May), but they had the benefit of learning from the

⁷² Flicker Interview.

⁷³ Flicker Interview.

⁷⁴ Flicker Interview.

⁷⁵ Flicker Interview.

former's mistakes. One of the first changes Flicker made was to professionalize the company, by including formal costumes and banning smoking on stage. Another of the main changes implemented by the St. Louis branch was to more fully integrate the audience. Flicker put the spotlight on improvisation as a process by framing the show around audience-suggested scenes.

As Stephen Kercher notes in *Revel with a Cause: liberal satire in postwar America*, in a far cry from Shepherd's workers' theatre, Flicker and the St. Louis branch decided to "concentrate their satiric attacks on male-female relationships, marriage and other middle-class American institutions."⁷⁶ Flicker wanted to distress, shock, and rebel against the middle class suburban audiences that came to see them. Scenes such as "Magicless Marriage," "Adultery," and "For the Love of Sex" set the tone at the St. Louis branch, which often featured scenes of masculine frustration and rage, a trait all too common in contemporary improvisation. An advertisement designed by Flicker sums up their philosophy: "Frankly, friend, if you are afraid of taking a good look into what you really are...you probably wouldn't like Compass Theatre."⁷⁷ This deconstruction of societal metanarratives has become a hallmark of improvisational theatre.

Flicker sought to create improvised scenes that were as tightly constructed as the scripted ones. Flicker advocated a "louder, faster, funnier" approach than their Chicago counterparts. The meandering and lengthy improvised scenes of Chicago were turned into short, powerful, focused scenes in St. Louis. Playful and poignant, the scenes were presented in a sort of carnivalesque manner, with Flicker acting as the ringmaster. Flicker realized that if improv was to succeed as an art form it needed to transform itself. When

⁷⁶ Stephen E. Kercher, *Revel with a Cause: liberal satire in postwar America* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 132.

⁷⁷ Kercher, 132.

David Shepherd finally saw a show at the St. Louis Compass, with the actors dressed in almost businesslike attire, the audience comprised of the middle class, and a complete lack of cigarette butts on the floor, he told Flicker ““You’ve turned it into entertainment. You’ve ruined my dream.””⁷⁸ While Shepherd’s dream was never realized in St Louis, the company made improv a viable form of entertainment in and of itself, something that the Chicago company could not do, and something that Paul Sills’ soon-to-be Second City theatre in Chicago did not think was possible.

Perhaps the greatest legacy of the St. Louis troupe grew out of the need to transform the art form. The so called Westminster Place Kitchen Rules, developed by Elaine May, Ted Flicker, and to a lesser extent Del Close and the other members of the St. Louis troupe, were a group of guidelines set up to achieve a more consistently successful improvised scene. All of the improvisers were living together in Fred Landesman’s mansion, and according to Flicker, “Elaine and I used to meet for breakfast every morning and pretty soon we figured out that we could make rules for improvising.”⁷⁹ Gathering in the kitchen of the Crystal Palace after shows for two weeks, the improvisers began putting together a list of rules or guidelines that seemed to apply to successful scenes and seemed to be lacking in less successful scenes; “we talked in the morning, applied the concepts to rehearsal in the afternoons, and kept what worked in the shows in the evenings.”⁸⁰

The three main rules that they came up with, which are still followed today, include 1) agreeing to the reality that is brought to the stage; 2) making an active rather than passive choice; and 3) in “an improvisation, where there are no lines, or given

⁷⁸ Qtd. in Coleman, 220.

⁷⁹ Flicker Interview.

⁸⁰ Flicker Interview.

actions, or dramaturgical ‘spine’ to set a character in motion, *you* are your character... All characterization or ‘acting’ comes from an exaggerated or intensified rendition of yourself called by another name.”⁸¹ Flicker recalls a scene in Chicago between Darden and Shelley Berman where Darden came onstage with an imaginary bunny in his hands and said, “I’ve got my bunny.” Berman went for the cheap laugh and said, “What bunny?” The audience laughed but the scene was killed. According to Flicker, “from that I learned that the minute you deny another actor’s reality, you destroy his ability to participate in a scene. You ruin him.”⁸² The rules also demonstrate improv’s postmodern tendencies. The concept of making an unexpected choice and challenging societal norms forms the foundation of making active choices (Close remarked that May often urged him to make “the unexpected choice”). Furthermore, the blurred line between the person and the performer highlights one of the unique features of improvisational performance: you are your character.

The idea of the über improviser harkens back to *commedia* and was codified by the St. Louis Compass Players. Because the improviser is so heavily dependent upon personal experiences, improv is heavily reliant on the performer, more so than any other theatrical genre. Walter Truett Anderson described the postmodern artist as someone who “base[s] their self-concepts on lifestyle.”⁸³ The idea of an improviser who culls his or her own life experience and lifestyle as a basis for art is very prevalent in improvisation; in fact it is almost a necessity for an improviser and a habit that is encouraged by most instructors. While all the material that an improviser uses does not need to be

⁸¹ Coleman, 225-26.

⁸² Flicker Interview.

⁸³ Walter Truett Anderson, “Four Different Ways to be Absolutely Right,” *The Truth About the Truth: De-Confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World* (New York: J.P. Tarcher, 1995), 115.

autobiographical, a great majority of it nevertheless stems from an autobiographical source. Almost all improv training manuals stress personal experience as one means of generating improv, because as improv instructor Susan Messing says, “all you have in a scene is you.”⁸⁴ Carol Hazenfield argues in *Acting on Impulse* that “to play truthfully on stage, you must follow your instincts as fully as possible. And those instincts are inextricably entwined with your *self*—your personality, your body, your family, and [any] little bits of every experience you ever had...Not until you can reveal your own inner life can you hope to create fictional characters with dimension and depth.”⁸⁵ New York City improviser Ben Hauck echoes the idea, saying that he pulls a majority of his material, characters, and emotions from his own life.⁸⁶ Brave New Workshop Artistic Director Caleb McEwen argues that “Every time you improvise, you’re offering up a glimpse of your innermost psyche, and the audience is a participant in the revelation.”⁸⁷

Like Lee Strasberg’s emotional recall technique in stage acting, however, there is obviously a danger in culling one’s own life for material. Constantly putting your experiences and emotions on stage and routinely exposing yourself and your vulnerabilities night in and night out can be quite emotionally draining and mentally unhealthy. In light of this danger, and to avoid the trap of using improv as a form of therapy, not only is personal experience stressed as a means for generating material but so too is a breadth of knowledge. Most instructors and manuals stress that an improviser must be a highly intelligent person to effectively function in the world of improv, not only to deepen one’s own pool of ideas, but also to be able to swim in a partner’s pool. In

⁸⁴ Susan Messing, “Level 3 Improv Class” ImprovOlympic, July 19, 2001.

⁸⁵ Carol Hazenfield, *Acting on Impulse* (Berkeley: Coventry Creek Press, 2002), 17.

⁸⁶ Ben Huack, Personal Interview, December 1, 2004.

⁸⁷ Caleb McEwen, Personal Interview, January 5, 2005.

light of this, San Francisco improviser Paul Killam said that he attempts to “continually educate myself in history, science, politics, psychology, art and anything that piques my curiosity and inspires me...Oh, lord. Without trying to sound too pretentious: everything.”⁸⁸ Improv instructor Jim DeSimone of Minneapolis’s The Collective urges improvisers to “read a book...Every improviser can always know more. Read something, learn something. Later on you’ll use it. And it will come out of nowhere and it will make you feel good.”⁸⁹ Consequently, with so much dependent upon an improviser’s personal experience, knowledge, and actions, the blurring of the lines between art and everyday life, performer and character, can actually be seen as an inevitable postmodern step in improv’s evolution rather than simply a “radical” idea.

Flicker was adamant about establishing a reality and sense of truth in the scene, and this is achieved from bringing a personal truth to the scene. This concept is something that Close would echo in *Truth in Comedy*, arguing that improvisers need to play to the top of their intelligence. Close also held fast to establishing a truthful reality, saying that “you can’t go out until you’ve been solidly in. You can’t put yourself in some magical sci-fi event unless it is rooted solidly in reality. By doing that the actors were always able to connect.”⁹⁰ Part of establishing a reality was by justifying. The two actors on stage are responsible for building a reality together, and justification goes a long way toward building that reality and moving the action of the scene forward. If Darden has a bunny in his hands, it is Berman’s job to justify why Darden *must* have that bunny, which will both establish the reality of the scene and move the scene forward. By justifying they will establish what the scene is about.

⁸⁸ Paul Killam, Personal Interview, November 19, 2004.

⁸⁹ Jim DeSimone, “J-improv.” December 2, 2004.

⁹⁰ Flicker Interview.

Listening and logic were also drilled into the St. Louis performers. Improvisers needed to actively listen to everything on stage and they needed to have logical responses. Many comedians of the era, and even today, are performers and don't listen, which is why stand-up comics such as Berman often aren't very good improvisers. Logical scenes didn't mean that scenes couldn't go off in strange directions (after all Close was a member), but everything needed to be rooted in a grounded reality and truth, the improvisers needed to be able to trace the logical steps that led to the strange reality. Building from Spolin, Flicker and May insisted that every scene consist of a character, location, and circumstance. What and why is this happening? Who is it happening to? And Why are we there? "When actors paid attention to that," said Flicker, "we rarely had a failure."⁹¹

If the St. Louis Compass did nothing else, it would be notable for introducing Del Close. Flicker, along with Nichols and May, were instrumental in teaching Close how to improvise. Flicker noted that "he taught me how to eat fire. I taught him how to improvise....He was damned good at it...He was weird, but he was good, kooky at times, but it was always good because it was based in reality."⁹² Close would take the training he received in St. Louis and build upon it over the next twenty-five years as he continued to create his new brand of improvisation using the Harold. Two of iO's own unofficial rules can be seen in the bunny scene example between Darden and Berman: agreement and support your partner. Improvisers must agree to the reality of the situation, and according to iO, it is their prime responsibility to take care of their partner and do everything in their power to make their partner look good, saying that "the best way for

⁹¹ Flicker Interview.

⁹² Flicker Interview.

an improviser to look good is by making his fellow players look good.”⁹³ From this brief example we can see the influence that Flicker, May, and the St. Louis Compass had on Close, and conversely on contemporary improvisational theatre. While Close would later revolutionize improvisation with the Harold, it was Flicker, May, and the St. Louis Compass who made improv possible as a public performance.

The St. Louis Compass disbanded before it really got going, in part because of its success, and in part like the Chicago company because of personality clashes. Despite its short life, the St. Louis branch alumni went on to great success. Nichols and May went on to fame as a comic duo, while Flicker went on to found a repertory theatre at the Crystal Palace, where he wrote and directed *The Nervous Set* (featuring Del Close). He took the show to Broadway where it was a flop, but it put Flicker back in New York where he would go on to found the influential company The Premise before going on to successful film and sculpting careers.

The Compass Players in Chicago and then St. Louis barely lasted two years, but their impact is still being felt in contemporary improv. The Compass Players revolutionized theatre in Chicago and turned the city from a second rate New York into the improv capital of the world. In conjunction with the St. Louis branch they transformed the way comedy worked by making the process of improvisation the main attraction, validating it as a viable means of performance while revolutionizing American comedy. Before Compass social satire was non-existent. Before World War II comedy was much more situational, and any political or satirical points were usually made to poke fun. While Vaudeville influenced nearly every comedian of the early 20th century and stressed the idea of the performer, broad physical humor, and the joke-punch-line

⁹³ Halpern, et. al., 37.

structure; improv influenced nearly every comedian of the latter half of the century and stressed the collective and humor not based on bits or jokes, but on intellectual connections, character, and relationships. What the Compass did, both in Chicago and St. Louis, was to create comedy based on political beliefs, and comedy that was genuinely angry about society. The Compass, according to Kozlowski, “helped American comedy achieve a sense of social importance.”⁹⁴ There had always been improvisation in the theatre, but nobody had made improvisation the main attraction; nobody had let the audience see the secret to the magic trick. If that wasn’t enough, the Compass also spawned the most successful and influential comic theatre of the 20th century.

THE SECOND CITY

Founded by Paul Sills, Bernard Sahlins, and Howard Alk, The Second City opened its doors on December 16, 1959, on North Wells Street in Chicago in what had been a Chinese laundry with *Excelsior and Other Outcries*, featuring Alk, Roger Bowen, Severn Darden, Andrew Duncan, Barbara Troobnick, and Mina Kolb. They built upon the ideas Sills and other explored with the Compass, ultimately developing a system of sketch comedy derived from improvisation. They wanted to reuse the Compass name, but Shepherd decided he didn’t want to be involved and therefore didn’t allow them to use the name, so Sills decided to turn the tables on A.J. Liebling’s insulting reference to Chicago as the “second city,” and changed the reference forever when he employed it as the name for his satirical theatre.

They not only modified the Compass name, they also altered the scenario play format. Instead of using a plot outline to create plays, the Second City began writing

⁹⁴ Kozlowski, 8.

down successful sketches and compiling them into what are known as sketch revues. According to Second City producer Bernard Sahlins a revue is “a stage presentation that uses short scenes of varying lengths. Add music and songs and think of it as generally comical and topical by nature.”⁹⁵ The basic format for a Second City revue is a combination between a play and a collage of scenes. Usually existing in two acts and running between ninety minutes and two hours, the revue is made up of several types of scenes: blackouts, parodies, songs, relating scenes, satires, and improvised games. In a traditional revue there is no plot or narrative tying everything together, although as we shall see with the introduction of the Harold and long form techniques Second City revues began to use more connecting fibers, with 2011’s *South Side of Heaven* more closely resembling a play than a traditional revue. A revue is based on irony and satire, often taking pointed jabs at social, political, and cultural norms by turning mainstream ideas about religion, race, politics, and culture on their head. This reliance on popular culture and topical references demonstrates the intertextuality of sketch comedy and improvisation, often shaping new meanings about the “texts” of culture through sketch comedy. Behind this comic mindset, Second City fully ushered in the era of social satire begun by the Compass Players.

For example, *Red Scare* (2004) is not only a satirical riff calling upon the McCarthy Era of the 1950s, but also plays upon the sharp cultural and political divide leading up to the 2004 presidential election. The humor stems from ironic situations and postmodern combinations. For example, a sketch about African American Day in Boise, Idaho only has two people show up. Likewise, *Hamlet* and *Romeo & Juliet* are retold with each heroine having a gay best friend to talk them out of suicide. Similarly *South*

⁹⁵ Bernard Sahlins, *Days and Nights at the Second City* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 115.

Side of Heaven (2011), which has been lauded as one of the most important revues of the last fifteen years because of its structural innovations (it is essentially a play) as well as its deeper and darker subject matter, deconstructs the incongruities of Chicago life in the 21st century and posits that modern life has made human beings miserable. The revue deals explicitly with race and the north/south divide of the city. This split is brilliantly executed in a scene between African-American White Sox fans and white Cubs fans, with the racial tensions of Obama-era America played out through baseball allegiances. The sketch takes the typical text of baseball and the feud between Cubs and Sox fans, and shapes its meaning by layering it with the harsh racial divide of the city, where baseball symbolizes great racial, cultural, and economic divides. Another scene features a TSA security agent revealing intimate details about various audience members, both from listening to their pre-show chatter and through quick Google searches, revealing the amount of information that is available about each of us in the internet age, and juxtaposing it against the outrage over TSA airport scans that “rob us of our privacy.” These sketches illustrate Second City’s comic philosophy utilizing ironic juxtaposition, intertextuality, the blending of high and low, and a fragmented and constructed reality.

Behind this new type of socially relevant and subversive comedy Second City was immediately successful, so much so that the theatre had to quickly move to a larger space on Wells Street to accommodate the growing crowds. Second City’s timing was immaculate—not just their comedic timing. There was possibly no better time in the history of the United States to open a politically satirical theatre than the 1960s. There was political deceit with President Lyndon Johnson mired in scandal and speculation, a shocking string of assassinations, an unpopular war, growing political unrest, and never

before seen social activism. All of these activities made the 1960s ripe for satire. Second City's biting social and political commentary was a smash hit with Chicago audiences and beyond, hitting Broadway in 1961 with *From the Second City*, which went to London the following year.

Upon its vast success, the theatre began attracting throngs of young comedians looking to make it onto the Second City stage. Seeing the opportunity for an ever present talent pool Second City began training improvisers. The first improv workshops were held in 1960, were then refined over the next decade, and in 1971 Jo Forsberg founded The Players Workshop, which was the unofficial school for the theatre until 1985 when The Second City Training Center opened under the leadership of Martin de Maat. Second City would become the Harvard of improv schools, seen as *the* place to go to study improv, but always espousing the paradoxical message of being an improv theatre that did scripted work. Furthermore, The Player's Workshop improv training was based in games, and not intended for strictly improvised performances. Even today Second City's training is structured to initially stress improv, and then as the improviser starts to attain a certain skill level the training shifts its focus to creating written material from improv. While there is certainly nothing wrong with this approach, it is the misnomer of labeling the theatre an "improv theatre" that has muddied the art form by creating expectations of improv that do not jibe with the other genres of performance improv. Regardless of their method—the résumés of their graduates and the sheer number of famous alumni, unparalleled by any training school, certainly attests to the theatre's results—Second City has gone on to train thousands of young actors and comedians in improv, many of whom would go on to found their own groups and theatres over the course of the late 1970s and

80s, some as a reaction against Second City and some as carbon copies of Second City, generating a boom in the quantity of improvisational theatre being produced.

Second City's second contribution to improv's greater exposure was also a derivative of the Chicago theatre's success. A touring company was created in 1967 that performed "Best of Second City" shows across North America, and Second City satellites were also founded in Toronto, Detroit, Las Vegas, Los Angeles, and many other cities (most flourished but a few did not). The most important of these satellites was the Toronto branch, which opened in 1973. The Toronto Second City featured among its cast Dan Akyroyd, Eugene Levy, John Candy, and Gilda Radner. The troupe, under the auspices of Second City Toronto owner Andrew Alexander, who would later take over the Chicago branch with Len Stuart in 1985 when Bernie Sahlins left the theatre, would also launch the successful and influential television show *SCTV* in 1976 on the heels of another revolutionary comedic television show. In 1975, the Toronto and Chicago branches became, and continue to be, the talent foundation for *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*), a show that would change the face of American comedy to look an awful lot like Second City's. Aside from its role as a talent pipeline for *SNL*, Second City continues to this day to be the most abundant source of new comedic talent in North America.

Second City's impact on improv is so vast that it is difficult to overestimate the importance of the Second City, which would vault improvisational theatre, ironically through scripted sketch comedy, into the spotlight of American comedy. With satellite theatres across the country and thousands of improvisers passing through its doors and training center, Second City would espouse the title of improv theatre while producing written sketch comedy revues, a paradox that perhaps is one of the root causes of

improv's seemingly never ending percolation "near the edge of being the next big thing." This paradox is illustrated in the ideology of famed Second City producer Bernard Sahlins who "viewed improvisation as audience-worthy only after extensive scripting and polishing," and yet continued to market Second City "as an improv theatre."⁹⁶ Under Sills, and later Sahlins and others, Second City would achieve great success, using improv to create scripted shows, yet never allowing improv as the theatre's main attraction despite their claim to be the home of improvisation. Improv is performed after the scripted shows, often free of charge and functions as both a means for generating new ideas and as a testing ground for material for the next show.

Let's quickly look at the Second City model for generating material to better understand how they use improvisation. The scenes and sketches are not created by writers alone at their desks, rather, as with almost all revue theatre, the actors themselves both as a company and individually devise and create the material. One of the main ways in which the actors devise material is through improvised scenes, games, and workshops. The Second City usually begins the writing process for their next production during their current show. The first step usually involves a brainstorming session, taking ideas and themes and improvising a series of scenes. They then take the best or most promising scenes and re-improvise them, taking and making specific notes. Usually if the scene is still promising it is written out in a sort of combination of transcription and traditional dramatic writing. The scene is then analyzed as a written script to make sure that it works and has a basic dramatic structure. Jokes, references, and other bits are often added during this phase.

⁹⁶ Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*, 81.

The next phase then involves performance. After the performance of the mainstage revue, the players will usually perform an improvised set based on audience suggestions. The improv works on several levels. It is a chance for the players to improvise with one another and keep their creative juices flowing. It also serves as an incubator for ideas or scenes explored in that afternoon's rehearsal. Successful improvised scenes can then begin the process of revision the next day, often times using improvisation. The improv set also serves as a testing ground for more polished scenes that have already gone through the aforementioned process. If a mainstage revue has been running for a long enough time (long enough for the critics to be gone), instead of presenting the scripted scenes during the improv act, they will actually insert the new scenes into the current revue. Either way, the idea is to test the sketch or scene in front of an audience. The scene is then revisited again, and is revised and/or re-improvised based on the performance. At this point if the scene is still deemed worthy, it is put into the next show.⁹⁷

As one can see improv plays a vital role in creating material at Second City, but it only plays a role. While Second City put improvisational theatre on the map, the improvised product they were touting was not exactly improv, or at least not the only type of improv. Sketch revues may start in improvisation, but as the above demonstrates the shows are highly refined by the time they are put before an audience. The throngs of people that have seen Second City leave the theatre with an unrealistic and skewed perspective on improvisation, one that has worked to delegitimize other forms of improv. As we shall see, Close and others tried to incorporate more long form improvisation into

⁹⁷ Anne Libera, *The Second City Almanac of Improvisation*, (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2004), 141.

Second City's process and mainstage, ultimately making significant inroads in the mid-1990s after a very painful and unpopular shift in leadership when Andrew Alexander hired Kelly Leonard as associate producer, essentially replacing Joyce Sloan who had been the producer for over thirty years. Yet Second City has held fast to the view that improv is best used as a tool. It was this very point (and process) that spurred one of the great debates of improvisational theatre, and one that would forever change the landscape of the form.

CHAPTER III—THE TRAINING WHEELS HAROLD

“Fall, then figure out what to do on the way down.”⁹⁸—Del Close

Second City producer Bernie Sahlins vehemently argues that improv is only a tool, a means to an end. Using improv to generate ideas and later refine sketches has worked for the Second City for over fifty years. They see improvisation as the process by which the product is created. For Sahlins improv is a “technique, a stage tool like mime or fencing.”⁹⁹ Close disagreed, asserting that improv “was indeed an art form, deserving to be elevated to presentational status.” The Second City model manifested Sahlins’s view that improvisation was primarily a tool or technique and that improv “elevated to a form of presentation failed most of the time, that any scene could benefit from editing, concision, and shaping.”¹⁰⁰ This stubborn viewpoint fueled the Harold and actually helped form iO’s ideology. Replacing the concept of a finished, complete, and unchanging text with a fluid work-in-progress style of performance forms the ideological bedrock upon which the Harold and iO were built—in other words the process became the product. In this chapter I will be exploring the development of the Harold at iO by first looking at how it came into existence, and then by exploring the evolution of the traditional Harold through its implementation by iO’s house teams (and a few key groups outside of iO) from its inception until it was totally revolutionized by the Family in the early 1990s, a stage that Halpern has referred to as “the training wheels Harold.”

⁹⁸ “Del Close,” *IMDB.com*, <http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0167081/bio#quotes>, March 25, 2012.

⁹⁹ Sahlins, 48.

¹⁰⁰ Sahlins, 48.

THE NASCENT HAROLD—THE COMMITTEE

The Harold and iO didn't come together quickly or easily. It would take Close nearly twenty years to mold the Harold into a repeatable and reliable form. The structure came about as Close was looking to expand his work with theme-based types of long form improv that emerged while he was with the St. Louis Compass Players. Upon his relocation to San Francisco in the early 1960's after his first of several partings with Second City, Close's Second City colleague Alan Myerson¹⁰¹ hired him to work with The Committee.¹⁰² Close, along with Myerson, and others in the group began working to explore and develop a new form of improv based on themes. For The Committee, the Harold initially began as a means to get the entire group onstage improvising at the same time. As Close notes, part of the driving force behind the Harold was unity, "I wanted to do a show where we could create *art by committee*."¹⁰³

Founded by Alan Myerson and Jessica Myerson in 1963, The Committee was primarily a sketch comedy theatre like Second City (many of the members had previously worked at Second City), but with a more overt political agenda. More importantly, unlike Second City they more fully embraced the performance possibilities of improvisation. Before Close had arrived, The Committee had been experimenting with long form improv under Myerson's direction, first in 1965 with *Fear, Guilt, and Impotence Collage*. According to Johnson, it was "a compendium of sketches and improvisations, a slide show, primitive audiovisual material, as well as low-technology extras like a slide

¹⁰¹ Close and Myerson had a contentious relationship at Second City, stemming from disputes over everything from national politics to office politics.

¹⁰² The Committee is one group, but had theater spaces in San Francisco (home base), Los Angeles, New York, and London.

¹⁰³ Halpern, *Art by Committee*, 7.

projector and a tape recorder. The company performed an act-long piece, highly adventurous at the time.”¹⁰⁴ Aside from set pieces and forms, the company had been experimenting with performing very long twenty to twenty-five minute improvised scenes. The group was making money with their sketch comedy and other offerings, but they wanted to explore something that had never been done before: long form improvisation.

The Harold’s creation was an example of the group mind in action, independently reached by three different members of The Committee. According to Myerson, the first Harold “was simultaneously developed by a class he was teaching at San Francisco State, a Committee workshop in games taught by Del, and a third class, a musical workshop with selected members of the company headed by pianist Allaudin (Bill) Mathieu.”¹⁰⁵ Independently the three men had all hit upon the same concept: “an interweaving of scenes that returned, made references to one another, and sometimes directly crossed over. The games served to heighten and crystallize previously introduced ideas, playing in counterpoint to the other characters.”¹⁰⁶ As would become the Harold’s trademark, the form proved that the whole was greater than the sum of its parts. As the three men discussed their work, they set about codifying the form during workshops. When they finally hit upon the nascent form, which was a loose collection of “interweaving” scenes rather than a firm structure, Close exclaimed “We’ve invented a new form of theater! This is amazing! This is the future! We’ve got to have a name for it.” Mathieu, in a very ironic and sarcastic way suggested, “Well, Harold’s a nice name.”¹⁰⁷ The group all

¹⁰⁴ Kim “Howard” Johnson, *The Funniest One in the Room* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008), 133.

¹⁰⁵ Johnson, 134.

¹⁰⁶ Johnson, 134.

¹⁰⁷ Qtd. in Johnson, 134.

laughed and they quickly adopted the name, although over time Close would grow annoyed at the name's trivial nature. While they continued working in sketch comedy (which paid the bills), the company quickly began performing Harolds, offering them as a second act after their scripted shows.

While it would later be attributed to Close, the original Harold was collaboratively created by The Committee. As Kim “Howard” Johnson notes in *The Funniest One in the Room*, “Del would never lay claim to creating and developing the Harold by himself. But when his actors and his other students came to assume that it was all his creation, he was not always quick to set the record straight.”¹⁰⁸ While he would become “the guru,” at the time he was simply a member of a creative ensemble exploring the possibilities of improv. While the Harold was created by The Committee, it is safe to say that without Del Close the Harold probably would have also died with The Committee. His decades of work with the form molded it into the structure that transformed comedy, so while it was not his sole creation, he is largely responsible for its maturation.

For example, while The Committee did perform the first Harold in 1967, it was very free-flowing and collage like—a mash up of semi-connected scenes that reflected the free-love mindset of San Francisco in the late 1960s, rather than the more rigid three-by-three structure of later Harolds (that perhaps more accurately reflected the mindset of the 1980s). Rather than a set structure Close, Myerson, and The Committee envisioned it as a sonata form. Characters and themes would be established and then return numerous times throughout the performance. Scenes would begin to work together, with different characters appearing in different combinations. Themes and patterns would begin to

¹⁰⁸ Johnson, 133.

emerge and an entire piece would almost mystically appear before the audience's eyes. While that same basic philosophy still underpins the Harold, there was really no structure. Instead early Harold's tended to consist of a collage of twenty-to-thirty scenes or other bits that when put together represented, at least ideally, a cohesive viewpoint about a particular topic or theme, but often was just a mess of scenes.

Yet even in its most nascent form the Harold was unlike anything done with performance-based improvisation. Before the Harold most improv consisted of short games, monologues, bits, or independent scenes and featured only certain players for each scene. What The Committee did was perform connected scenes utilizing the entire ensemble throughout, in the process creating the nascent Harold and long form improv. Close then took the nascent Harold and spent the rest of his life perfecting it (again with the help of others), turning it into the revolutionary structure that would transform improvisational theatre and American comedy.

For a variety of factors Close left The Committee¹⁰⁹ and returned to Chicago and Second City in 1970, bringing the Harold with him. While his formal job was as Second City's resident director, he continued working on the Harold. Independently he set up a free, open-to-all workshop at the Kingston Mines Company Store, the cafe attached to the Kingston Mines Theatre Company on Lincoln Avenue. Close then set up weekly performances and after a few months hand-picked a dozen of his best students and moved to the Body Politic for bi-weekly workshops and Sunday night performances. He named

¹⁰⁹ The Committee disbanded in 1972, and in San Francisco the group Improvisation Inc. continued to perform the Harold. In 1976, Michael Bossier and John Elk, two former members of Improvisation Inc., formed Spaghetti Jam, performing short form improv and Harolds until 1983 in San Francisco's famous Old Spaghetti Factory. Former Committee member Gary Austin would go on to found the wildly influential sketch comedy and improv group The Groundlings in Los Angeles in 1974, using an improv-as-a-tool process. The Groundlings has been one of the most influential comedy theatres of the past thirty years, and is still in existence today.

the new company the Chicago Extension Improv Company, a tip of the cap to the work he was doing in San Francisco with The Committee. But Close still had no real firm structure for the Harold. An early player, Tim Kazurinsky, who studied the Harold with Close at Second City, recalls, “when it was really humming, [scenes] would all mesh, and make a statement that was more of a tableau. Everything that you had done to that point was synthesized in that final scene or conglomeration of scenes. What had washed over the audience was a really fascinating 20- or 30-scene barrage about this topic.”¹¹⁰ When it worked, the effect was akin to a wave of images, ideas, and themes pouring over the audience and culminating in a striking thematic collage. When it didn’t, it was a long and jumbled mess that made little sense.

While the form was making strides and taking some shape, it was still much too inconsistent and often failed. Further complicating the matter, just when the Chicago Extension Improv Company was beginning to put the pieces together Close left Chicago in 1972 to perform in a Story Theatre production for Paul Sills at the Mark Taper Forum in Los Angeles. In Close’s absence the Chicago Extension Improv Company abandoned the Harold and began to explore scenario plays based on dreams in a form called Dream Theatre, a form they continued performing at the Body Politic for the next five years. When Close came back to Chicago in 1973, he was practically back at square one.

Close returned to the Second City as resident director. He held the position until 1982, with a number of interludes that had to do with his substance abuse, outside artistic opportunities, personal artistic issues, or usually some sort of combination of the three such as his short stint in the early 1980s as the “House Metaphysician” at *SNL*. During his on-again-off-again nine year stint he began to work with John Belushi, Bill Murray,

¹¹⁰ Halpern, et. al., 21.

John Candy, Don Depollo, George Wendt, Audrey Neenan, Shelly Long, and others. For over ten years both within and outside of Second City Close tinkered with the form in workshops, but never found a way to make it work in a reliable or repeatable way. It was beginning to look like Sahlins might be right.

Yet Sahlins's own theatre was beginning to show some cracks in the foundation. The Second City that Close returned to had started to lose some of its luster. By the late 1970s and early 1980s many began to feel that Second City had lost its way. They believed that Second City was more interested in catering to the growing number of tourists that were flooding the theatre with safe and sure fire revues. While the theatre wasn't quite the revolutionary place it had been, it was hardly safe. In part a victim of its own success, Second City was over a decade old and couldn't be expected to totally reinvent comedy a second time. Yet that's what many critics seemed to want. Anthony Adler summed up the somewhat unfair critical reception of Second City at their thirtieth anniversary in 1989, writing that "the typical *Reader* review of any current Second City show starts out talking about the great old shows of legend—the ones nobody could actually have seen...The review then explains why the current show is a complete pathetic betrayal of everything those old shows stood for."¹¹¹ The criticism wasn't totally unjustified, however, and wasn't just coming from the outside. As resident director Close repeatedly tried to incorporate long form improv and the Harold into the process to help recharge the theatre but was stymied.

Close wasn't the only one frustrated. In 1982 the theatre opened a space in Piper's Alley adjoining the mainstage theatre for Paul Sills Story Theatre to hold workshops and productions. When Sills left, the Practical Theatre took over the space, made up of

¹¹¹ Anthony Adler, "Second City E.T.C. Company," *Chicago Reader*, June 28, 1990.

Northwestern grads Julia Louis-Dreyfus, Brad Hall, Paul Barrosse, Rush Pearson, and Gary Kroger among others. In 1982 they moved to the Piper's Alley space with *The Golden 50th Anniversary Jubilee*, a collection of the group's best sketches and songs, performed by Hall, Kroeger, Dreyfus, and Barrosse, and directed by Sheldon Patinkin. Second City alum and *SNL* cast member Tim Kazurinsky saw the show, and quickly brought *SNL* producers Dick Ebersol and Bob Tischler to see it. In what was becoming a growing trend for Chicago comics, Tischler and Ebersol loved it and hired Hall, Kroeger, and Dreyfus as performers and Barrosse as a writer for *SNL*.¹¹² While the group rebuilt, Second City took over the space to present "best of" shows with The Touring Company, with Don DePollo as director. DePollo wanted to add new material to the revue, but was denied. Undeterred, when Sahlins was out of town, DePollo and his cast wrote the original revue *Cows on Ice*, which opened to rave reviews and led to the creation of Second City's second stage, the innovative and edgier Second City e.t.c., which would help introduce structural and formatting changes to the mainstage, including a more prominent role for improvisation.

Just as structural innovations were being introduced, however, Close left Second City in 1983 because his working relationship with Sahlins had come to a head. Close believed that the solution to Second City's perceived staleness was improvisation. According to Close, if Second City wanted to evolve it must accept the idea that improv could be put in front of an audience without any trappings. Sahlins didn't think that Second City needed to change, and he was growing weary of Close's personal faults. Sahlins had the crazy notion that Close should do things like stay for the entire rehearsal

¹¹² Paul Barrosse, "The Practical Theatre Company," presented at the *Chicago Theatre Capital of America: Past. Present. Future*. Conference at Columbia College Chicago, May 21, 2011.

process of the show he was directing and attempt to stay sober. Close walked out of rehearsal during several productions leaving Sahlins to bring the show to fruition. The disagreement over improv at Second City and their deteriorating working relationship festered to the point where the two could no longer work together, and Close was fired (almost) once and for all from the famed comedy theatre.

IMPROVOLYMPICS

After a decade of trying to infuse Second City with improv, a theatre was created that would change Close's life and create a new form of improvisation. Founded in 1981 by David Shepherd, his second attempt at a populist theatre, ImprovOlympics sought to make improv the product. In 1978, three years before ImprovOlympics became a reality Shepherd said, "The problem with Compass was I lost track of the fact that what I was trying to do was based on the audience, not the performers."¹¹³ Therefore, in his second attempt Shepherd wanted the focus to be on the audience, and one of the ways he sought to do this was through a competitive format called The Improvisational Olympiad. In his new populist theatre, two teams of improvisers would compete in a series of ten distinct improv games with the audience picking the winner at the end of the night. In 1981 Jo Forsberg hired Shepherd at The Players Workshop to teach a selection of students his idea of competitive improv.

Charna Halpern, who had briefly trained at Players Workshop and formed the improv group Standard Deviation, knew that she wanted a shot to run the theatre. Halpern had read about Shepherd's experiments with the competitive format, as well as the

¹¹³ Qtd. in Sweet, 9.

history of The Compass Players and Second City in Sweet's *Something Wonderful Right Away*. She knew that she wanted to get involved, in part because at the time there was nowhere for groups like Standard Deviation to play. If you weren't on the Second City mainstage, you weren't performing. While putting together ImprovOlympics Shepherd was also directing a play called *The Jonah Complex*. Eager to meet Shepherd, Halpern auditioned for the show and was cast as God. During rehearsals she convinced Shepherd to let her help him start his new theatre in Chicago and ImprovOlympics was born.

The competitive format featured both professional and amateur performers. Each performance, initially held at Players Workshop, would feature one professional team made up of improvisers with previous experience or training, and a team of amateurs with no improv experience like The God Squad, which was a team of rabbis, a group of psychologists called The Freudian Slippers, and a troupe of lawyers called The Court Jesters. As became Shepherd's legacy, he quickly grew disenchanted with the project. Jonathan Pitts, co-producer of the Chicago Improv Festival and member of one of the early professional groups Stone Soup, explained why Shepherd left: "Of course, the thing worked and so David Shepherd hated it."¹¹⁴ So before the theatre really got off the ground Halpern, who herself was growing weary of the theatre's format, was left to find a new partner. As chance would have it Second City had just again parted ways with its resident director.

While Close kept tinkering with the Harold through workshops, it was not until he teamed up with Halpern and ImprovOlympic in 1983 that the current Harold was born. Halpern knew that improv had more to offer, and like everyone in Chicago had heard the legends about Del Close. Thinking he'd make an ideal partner, she approached Close

¹¹⁴ Qtd. in Kozlowski, 25.

about helping her at ImprovOlympic, but he was skeptical of the format, and of Halpern. The two had met the previous Halloween when Close was doing an invocation. Halpern felt that it was dangerous to invoke demons without protecting those in attendance (Close countered that he had protected the entire building). The two had a brief and unpleasant encounter, and Halpern figured that was that. Halpern continued to be bored by her own theatre, commenting that “if I saw one more gibberish translation, I was going to puke.”¹¹⁵ As luck would have it a few months later Close was having coffee at CrossCurrents, the space on Belmont and Wilton where ImprovOlympic was then performing. Halpern figured she’d give Close one more shot and asked him if he’d be willing to teach a class for her. Convinced that Close didn’t remember her from Halloween, Halpern offered Close \$200 and some pot telling him he could teach whatever he wanted. He replied, “Can I invoke demons?”¹¹⁶ The consummate improviser, Close had remembered their first encounter. She told him he could do whatever he wanted. Close accepted and taught a class that night. Halpern was sold. She says, “I took a year at Player’s Workshop and thought I knew everything. Then when I got to [Del], I thought, ‘Oh my God! I know nothing!’”¹¹⁷

She took Close out for coffee that night, and again told him that she was looking for something more out of improv: “I said, ‘There’s got to be more than this.’ He answered me, and this has got to be my favorite answer ever, he said, ‘Maybe you’re not such a twit after all.’”¹¹⁸ He mentioned that he had a form that he’d been working on for years, and told her that if she closed her “little game theater,” then he would come teach

¹¹⁵ Halpern, *Art by Committee*, 104.

¹¹⁶ Halpern, *Art by Committee*, 104.

¹¹⁷ Qtd. in Patton, 22.

¹¹⁸ Halpern, Personal Interview.

at ImprovOlympic.¹¹⁹ Unlike Shepherd and Sills, Halpern and Close proved to be the perfect odd couple. She was a sharp businesswoman and he was a disheveled artistic genius. Achy Obejas described the pair in the *Chicago Tribune*, perfectly summing up their differences, noting that Halpern “is frequently peppy, always tastefully put together,” while Close is “iconoclastic, sloppy, devastatingly dry, and—at least when they met—completely alienated from normalcy to the point that he refused to have a phone for fear of threatening public officials in a moment of rage. He was, frankly, nuts.”¹²⁰ The pair suited each other well, the strengths of one perfectly complementing the other. Halpern brought a tireless work ethic and business acumen to the theatre and provided Close with the administrative oversight he needed without the personal baggage he had with Sahlins. Close brought the artistic credentials to validate the theatre.

Through his workshops Close had come closer to developing an independent long form structure capable of producing a somewhat reliable means for performance, but there was still something missing. While at times brilliant, the form remained too inconsistent. When Close showed Halpern the Harold, which she said was “a little too large and chaotic for the stage,” she suggested adding her own game Time Dash to the structure.¹²¹ Time Dash is a game that incorporates a three part scene where situations occur and are seen during various spans of time. Along with the insertion of a few other short games and structures and after nearly a year of workshops the ImprovOlympic Harold was born. Halpern’s added structure gave the Harold a guide map, adding consistency by providing a sort of configuration that could be replicated as opposed to the almost pure chance structure of the early Harold. ImprovOlympic reopened in 1984

¹¹⁹ Hicks, 85.

¹²⁰ Achy Obejas, “Comedy Guru Charna Halpern Carries On,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 3, 2001.

¹²¹ Halpern, et. al., 3.

totally rebranded and armed with the Harold, sparking what Playground Theatre co-founder Rob Kozlowski has deemed the ImprovOlympic Revolution, saying “when it came to people’s perceptions of what improv could be, ImprovOlympic changed everything.”¹²²

IMPROVOLYMPIC AND THE EARLY HAROLD

Prior to the Harold, improv consisted mainly of games or unconnected short scenes. As noted, Close envisioned an improvisational sonata where characters, themes, and situations would reappear. Over the course of the performance patterns would emerge and be re-incorporated. Eventually, the disparate parts would give the appearance of a whole piece greater than the sum of its parts. The building of patterns, connecting themes, and reincorporation of ideas and characters pulled the unrelated parts of the Harold into a unified piece. Close also wanted to change the rhythm and timing of comedy with the Harold. His idea was slow comedy. He wanted players to take their time, to break the joke based rhythm of comedy. He explained in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune*:

Even when the jokes are different the timing is the same...It is always one...two...joke...repeat. The laughter is a knee-jerk reaction and the comedians, who since the ‘50s have been perceived as these sort of whimsical wimp types, go through the motions. The comedy needs some depth and more wit. We got to think about slowing our comedy down by maybe a factor of eight. What we found was we were getting a different type of laugh...We are mining an area of comedy that has never been mined before.¹²³

¹²² Kozlowski, 24.

¹²³ Qtd. in David Prescott, “Slowdown Takes Improv One Step Beyond,” *Chicago Tribune*, September 28, 1984.

Behind the concept of slower, more intelligent humor, the Harold made its debut on October 1, 1984 in *The ImprovOlympic Presents Harold*.

Within the year teams were regularly performing the Harold competitively for paying audiences. A typical early ImprovOlympic performance would feature a short form game such as Musical Option or Freeze, two Harold performances (sometimes with a game in-between), and then another short form game such as Dream, Nightmare, or Freeze to close the evening. Because ImprovOlympic was still so small, they often competed against other groups like the Improv Institute.¹²⁴ In a review of an early Harold show featuring Baron's Barracudas, Rick Kogan captured the appeal of the Harold, saying that "no two 'Harolds' ever will be the same. Teams will change, the games will alter. And therein lies one reason why this is and will remain among the most exciting and adventurous games in town."¹²⁵ Audiences judged the performance based on four categories: theme, structure, intelligence, and teamwork. Aside from helping to structure a particular performance, for several years these Harold competitions helped define the performance roster for the theatre. Teams would essentially compete to stay active, with less successful teams being cut and the most successful teams achieving house team status, a distinction given to the best Harold team.

Competing against the Improv Institute and others was ImprovOlympic's first house team Baron's Barracudas. Much like George Washington laid the foundation for what was expected of future presidents simply by being the first to do it, Baron's Barracudas were "improv pioneers," helping define what the Harold was and how a team

¹²⁴ Founded in 1984 the Improv Institute was also exploring scenic style long form improv. The group would change its name to Zeitgeist Institute to Zeitgeist Theatre, which then eventually became Noble Fool Theatre. In 1994 they created the highly successful improv based show *Flanagan's Wake*.

¹²⁵ Rick Kogan, "Competing for Laughs, 'Harold' Fills House," *Chicago Tribune*, August 16, 1985.

played it.¹²⁶ Even with the Time Dash addition Close and Halpern didn't yet have a completely set formula for the Harold. For example, through their experimentations Baron's Barracudas helped transform the loose collection of scenes into the three-by-three scenic structure. According to Baron's Barracudas' Kim Howard Johnson, "we were like lab rats for Del and Charna."¹²⁷ The group gathered in a bar and sometimes they performed and sometimes they rehearsed and sometimes they listened to Close. Johnson went on to say "we didn't know what we were doing...there was just a feeling, we knew we were doing *something*."¹²⁸ Once they started to get the Harold, they made it easier for the next teams because there was something to reference.

The importance of setting the form and providing a tangible example of how to perform a Harold cannot be overstated. Long form improv in particular can be difficult to master, and like almost any other pursuit being able to see an example often shortens the learning curve. In my own experience with MU Improv, a long form improv group I founded at the University of Missouri based on the iO model, I've seen firsthand the power of an example. Working with a group that had virtually no improv experience, it took the first group about eighteen months to fully understand long form and the Harold. While they had videos to watch (thanks to *Art by Committee* and TJ & Dave's *Trust Us This is All Made Up*), and we went to shows in Kansas City, they really had no tangible reference about how to perform long form and the Harold. The second year group, however, was able to watch what the first years were doing on a regular basis, so they were performing Harolds in about six months. By the third year, the incoming students were expecting to perform Harolds right away, and within a month had the basic concepts

¹²⁶ Halpern, Personal Interview.

¹²⁷ Kim Howard Johnson, Personal Interview, May 21, 2011.

¹²⁸ Johnson, Personal Interview.

down. Similarly, within ImprovOlympic teams began to pick up the Harold more quickly once they saw what it was supposed to look like, which helped ImprovOlympic broaden its operations.

Once the Harold started to work ImprovOlympic quickly opened a training center to teach the form. Prior to ImprovOlympic, the only established training center was Jo Forsberg's Player's Workshop. Most of her training was based in Spolin's games, and like everything else ImprovOlympic changed the system by offering training in long form scenic-based improv. In the beginning every student trained with Close right away, but he quickly tired of teaching the basics and put Halpern in charge of the throngs of new students looking to learn from "the guru." He wanted them to be conversant in the form by the time he got them in class. The other big decision that helped ImprovOlympic attract students and build its brand was stage time. Second City only had its mainstage and newly formed e.t.c second stage, which at most allowed for a total of a dozen or so performance spots. Halpern and Close gave their students stage time by putting them on Harold teams such as Baron's Barracudas, Apocalypso, and Pigwings. ImprovOlympic quickly became a place where performers went to learn—and perform—improvisation. In the early days of the theatre performers remained essentially perpetual students, taking classes from Close one weeknight and performing on the weekends.

While many credit their success to the "guru," Close's no-nonsense style in the classroom turned some people off. He would rip students to shreds after going for a cheap joke, often times kicking students out of class or out of the program on a moment's notice. During a workshop at the University of Wisconsin, for example, a young man denied the reality of the scene and went for a quick joke. Close stopped the scene and

confronted the young man, who said he thought his move “would be funny.” Close destroyed him, in the process revealing both his brash teaching style and his comic philosophy, saying:

That is the last time I ever want to hear that phrase again. Don’t ever tell me that you did something because you thought it would be funny. Long-form improvisation isn’t about jokes and the cheap laughs. It’s about people exploring and discovering situations and relationships. Humor will occur when our discovery is completely honest and ambiguous. Forget about the jokes and the bits and allow yourself to work with your scene partner so that the two of you can construct a relationship that is grounded and honest and real.¹²⁹

It was not uncommon for Close to issue immediate refunds to students that resisted his advice, often doing it in front of the entire class, and sometimes doing it when a student hadn’t yet paid.

Women especially felt that Close was unfair to them, and complaints about his misogynistic ways began piling up. Tina Fey, one of Close’s most famous students, remarked that:

I don’t think Del liked anybody...Del didn’t like bad improvisers of a very specific sort, which was soft, timid, cute—which probably, more bad women improvisers fell into that category. Whereas bad male improvisers fall into the category of never shutting up and entering every scene, trying to be funny, so maybe that irritated him less.¹³⁰

Nevertheless, Close’s students began compiling more and more impressive resumes, including being cast by Second City and later *SNL*, which attracted even more students.

While the Harold was the theatre’s flagship, ImprovOlympic’s first major success was 1987’s *Honor Finnegan Versus the Brain of the Galaxy*, ironically a scripted collaboration between Close and Baron’s Barracudas that ushered in a long line of what came to be called “shows,” which were ultimately housed in the Del Close Theatre once

¹²⁹ Qtd. in Griggs, 185.

¹³⁰ Qtd. in Hicks, 89.

ImprovOlympic found a permanent space. These performances were anything other than a Harold, sometimes scripted and sometimes not, that over time came to influence and be influenced by the Harold. For example, *Honor Finnegan* was a late night B-movie done with intelligence and demonstrates Close's core belief of playing to the top of one's (and the audiences') intelligence. The basic plot follows Honor Finnegan, the actual name of one of the women in the show, as she tries to save the world from destruction at the hands of the Brain of the Galaxy, who will destroy the planet unless humans can provide a representative who can prove that human beings are not the scum of the Earth. Pointing to its intertextuality, Dina Spinrad called it "a tantalizing mixture of sci-fi horror clichés and biting, insightful, and very funny social commentary...it is a potpourri of popular culture that spares no one."¹³¹ *Honor Finnegan* is an excellent example of the way that improv deconstructs societal norms. The show essentially unmask the trappings of civilized society by exploring the horrible things human beings are capable of, and it does it by mixing high and low comedy. Smart comedy was something that was readily apparent at ImprovOlympic, even in something as seemingly silly as *Honor Finnegan*.

Baron's Barracudas, however, had reached their apex with *Honor Finnegan*. At the time there was nowhere for ImprovOlympic teams to go once they had achieved success. Teams were perpetually students in the early days, and there was no real way for them to become professionals. While "shows" were just beginning they weren't yet a part of the theatre's regular repertoire, so teams could continue to perform straight Harolds and endlessly take classes, or they dissolved. By the end of 1987 the group had succumbed to the latter, a fate dubbed the student ceiling. After Baron's Barracudas

¹³¹ Diana Spinrad, "Honor Finnegan Versus the Brain of the Galaxy," *Chicago Reader*, April 16, 1987.

dissolved, Grime and Punishment momentarily filled the void as the next house team at ImprovOlympic, a team featuring Mick Napier, Dave Razowsky, and Tim Meadows.

With a few years under its belt and new performers flooding ImprovOlympic, new teams were constantly forming. Halpern was in charge of creating new teams from the training center, often reshuffling players and teams every few weeks trying to find the right combination of players and teams. While Baron's Barracudas reached their apex, newer teams found the Harold trickier to tame. Two of the new teams competing in 1987 were Floyd's Toothbrush, featuring Noah Gregoropolous, Madeline Long, Andy Dick, and others, and Faust & Ten. In his review of the 1986-87 Harold Tournament, Albert Williams said that Halpern and Close define the Harold as "that sublimely ridiculous moment of inspired perfection when all the strands of the different subgroups' skits suddenly come together," yet according to Williams, that "didn't happen convincingly in either team's performance." Part of what makes the Harold work, however, is that it lets the audience into the process, and as Williams continues,

rather than being unsatisfying, the effect was to draw those in the audience into the process; they can see what is happening, what might be happening, what doesn't happen, and what might happen next time. In that way, the Harold can be addictive: the performers are witty and talented, and their process stirs audience involvement that's more stimulating and far less passive than the usual comedy couch-potato syndrome.¹³²

Even when it wasn't firing on all cylinders the Harold was still appealing because it made the process the product, drawing the audience in by showing them the mechanics of creation.

The Harold's centrality of process is akin to Neil Harris's idea of operational aesthetics. Harris argues that pleasure is derived not solely from a machine's output, but

¹³² Albert Williams, "ImprovOlympic," *Chicago Reader*, December 1986.

also in understanding how a machine works. Harris first used the idea of operational aesthetics to describe P.T. Barnum's stunts and hoaxes. According to Harris, the audience enjoys the performance not based on what will happen, but because of *how* it happened.¹³³ Understanding the mechanics of a Harold, therefore, becomes a large component of the performance. Thusly, a large part of ImprovOlympic's philosophy and how the Harold functions concerns revealing "the machinery" of the form, which allows the audience to derive a special co-creative relationship with the piece. The humor doesn't simply arise out of witty dialogue or situations, but out of the ways that the players connect the various threads of the piece together, the way they make the machine work. Audiences flocked to Harold performances to be a part of this operation, fulfilling a need to understand the mechanics of the performance on top of the performance itself. As Jason Mittell argues we watch complex performances "not just to get swept away in a realistic narrative world...but also to watch the gears at work, marveling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics."¹³⁴ By showcasing the process, the Harold fulfilled a need to not just watch entertainment, but to be a part of it by revealing the inner workings of the machine.

Behind a process-oriented philosophy and despite a growing reputation, a budding performance roster, and a blossoming training center featuring the improv guru himself, ImprovOlympic was an itinerant company for over a decade, renting out space in various bars and theatres. ImprovOlympic took up residence at CrossCurrents bar, providing a

¹³³ Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981). Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy," Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, eds. *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 1995, 87-105.

¹³⁴ Jason Mittell, "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television," *The Velvet Light Trap*, 58.1 (2006), 35.

temporary home in the mid-to-late 1980s. They even survived in the space during a management shift from CrossCurrents to a blues club called Cotton Chicago.

ImprovOlympic continued performing at other venues, including the bar At the Tracks about a mile southwest of the Loop. In 1988, for example, two of the most famed early Harold teams, Tequila Mockingbird, featuring Rachel Dratch, Dave Koechner, Noah Gregoropoulos, Jimmy Carrane, and Kevin Dorff, and Fish Shtick, featuring Chris Farley, Brian McCann, Ian Gomez, and James Grace, performed in a competitive Harold show. Fish Shtick was declared “the clear winner with a fast-paced, surrealistically funny set in which comic abandon was guided by keen theatrical discipline.”¹³⁵ While Tequila Mockingbird lost, Albert Williams noted that they were “far better—wittier, more intelligent, and more honest—than 95 percent of the other improv comedy around town right now.”¹³⁶ In describing the style of performance, Williams notes that while the groups are presenting comic performances, “obvious gags and easy jokes are played down in favor of a richer, more subtle style of humor. In short, though At the Tracks is certainly a bar, one doesn’t get the impression that the performers are there to sell you drinks...rather, they are there to show you the process of improvisational comedy.”¹³⁷ Close’s idea of making the process the product was starting to win over critics, audiences, and performers alike. It also points to the beginnings of a paradigm shift in the way comedy was created and consumed, paving the way for the Harold-infused style of ensemble-based comedy that would dominate the early 21st century.

Though riding a wave of success, with Williams noting that ImprovOlympic is “always interesting, usually funny, frequently brilliant,” they hit a speed bump in 1988

¹³⁵ Albert Williams, “Comic Abandon,” *Chicago Reader*, August 25, 1988.

¹³⁶ Williams, “Comic Abandon.”

¹³⁷ Williams, “Comic Abandon.”

when Budd Friedman, the owner of the New York stand-up club The Improv, threatened to sue Halpern and Close over the name ImprovOlympic, claiming he had copyrighted and trademarked the word improvisation. Close and Halpern (and many others) were appalled by the threats, with Close saying that Friedman, who was opening a Chicago Improv stand-up comedy club, was trying to get rid of competition, and that ImprovOlympic didn't have the money to fight Friedman and his lawyers because "we're doing it right. I'm pursuing improvisation as an art form."¹³⁸ The suit eventually went away, but another legal suit was filed by the U.S. Olympic Committee, who feared that the theatre would be confused with one of the largest sporting events in the world. After over a decade of back and forth the Olympic Committee caused ImprovOlympic to eventually change its name to iO. Fresh off the 1988 scuffle with Friedman, ImprovOlympic faced a much more serious challenge in 1989 when their semi-permanent home Cotton Chicago (which had been CrossCurrents) closed down, causing a temporary hiatus and leaving the future of the company in doubt.

With ImprovOlympic homeless, the timing seemed to be right for Close to bring long form and the Harold to Second City. Sketch comedy was starting to become a bit of a bore at the hallowed theatre on Wells Street. Their 1988 revue *Kuwait Until Dark; or, Bright Lights, Night Baseball*, received mixed reviews, with the *Chicago Reader* noting that:

I guess I'm hungry for something spicier. Even when it's good, this is cafeteria food. What happened to Second City's reputation for cut-and-slash satire? Are they consciously appealing to an upscale audience by hanging back and pulling their punches? Is this the gentrification of Second City? Have they become, God forbid, an institution?¹³⁹

¹³⁸ Michael Miner, "Annals of Crime: Chicagoans Steal 'Improv'!; Self-Made Media Critic," *Chicago Reader*, June 23, 1988.

¹³⁹ Tom Boeker, "Kuwait Until Dark; or, Bright Lights, Night Baseball," *Chicago Reader*, June 9, 1988.

During ImprovOlympic's hiatus, Close was asked back to the theatre, now under the leadership of Andrew Alexander, and directed 1989's *The Gods Must Be Lazy*. He promptly fired the cast and brought in several ImprovOlympic performers, including Chris Farley and Tim Meadows. He again tried to implement many of the improvisational techniques he had been using, but the mixture of the cast, not all of whom were familiar with the Harold, as well as Close's own inability to happily marry long form and sketch led to a flop, "an unholy mixture of the Second City of the 80s (toothless satire, lowbrow wit, shallow commentary on current events) with the hip, mildly nihilistic comedy of another, now long-gone Second City."¹⁴⁰ Close couldn't successfully marry long form, the Harold, and the sketch revue, again failing to find the proper form or shape, with Helbig noting that "Second City has been in decline for a long, long time now, and it may be too much to ask Close to show immediate results."¹⁴¹ He couldn't, but the show helped pave the way for others who would. Close never worked at Second City again.

Meanwhile Halpern was working relentlessly to find a new home for ImprovOlympic, and in 1990 she secured a space in the basement of Papa Milano's on Lincoln Avenue. The basement had one hundred and fifty seat capacity and according to Halpern provided "the perfect ambience for improvisation."¹⁴² The move also marked the end of the competitive format, with Harold teams presenting their work without the gimmick of a tournament. The competitive aspect hadn't left the company yet, because the same year ImprovOlympic launched The Southern Comfort Team Comedy Challenge. Halpern and Close held workshops and regional tournaments in six cities, and

¹⁴⁰ Jack Helbig, "The Gods Must Be Lazy, or, There's More to Life Than Death," *Chicago Reader*, March 23, 1989.

¹⁴¹ Helbig, "The Gods Must Be Lazy, or, There's More to Life Than Death."

¹⁴² Rick Kogan, "Playing the Adventurous Improv Tune," *Chicago Tribune*, 10 June 1990.

the event was hosted by ImprovOlympic veteran Mike Meyers. The tournament helped spread long form improv, the Harold, and ImprovOlympic to a wider audience.

Back at Papa Milano's, while performances were no longer overtly competitive, a team's performance still determined their stage time and longevity. Blue Velveeta is a perfect example. At the time Blue Velveeta was put together, they were actually called D Team. In the early years, teams were only given names once Halpern decided to keep them on the roster after having proven themselves onstage during competitions. In the interim, they were simply A Team, B Team, etc. This particular incarnation of D Team got really good really quickly, climbed the ladder and became Blue Velveeta. One of ImprovOlympic's most legendary teams, they took over as house team and went on to win the aforementioned Southern Comfort Team Comedy Challenge. Widely regarded as the second great Harold team after Baron's Barracudas, Blue Velveeta featured Brian McCann, Kevin Dorff, Susan Messing, Jay Leggett, Mitch Rouse, Brendan Sullivan, and Tom Booker, and was initially coached by Mick Napier. They performed standard Harolds and are considered by many to be the best traditional three-by-three Harold team ever. They didn't really deviate from the form, but what Blue Velveeta was showing everyone was that a perfectly executed Harold was possible...and beautiful.

Blue Velveeta, however, had a rather contentious split from ImprovOlympic. Feeling like they had hit the same ceiling that led to Baron's Barracudas end, several members of Blue Velveeta struck out on their own as The Comedy Underground featuring Blue Velveeta. Leaving as ImprovOlympic's top team was tough enough for Halpern to swallow, but they also took the space at Papa Milano's, essentially pushing ImprovOlympic out the door. Close was less than pleased with the way the group

abandoned Halpern, saying “Isn’t it wonderful that we gave them something they loved so much that they were willing to stab us in the back for it?”¹⁴³ Blue Velveeta’s experiment eventually backfired and the group imploded. But their departure left ImprovOlympic facing homelessness and an uncertain future yet again.

THE INDEPENDENTS

Meanwhile outside of ImprovOlympic and Second City, more and more independent groups were starting to appear. Many of the new groups were created in part due to ImprovOlympic’s own success, and the growing number of students graduating from their training program. Others were formed in opposition to ImprovOlympic. In 1987, two theatres opened in Chicago that challenged ImprovOlympic’s improvisational philosophy: Metraform and ComedySportz. More fully explored in the next chapter, Mick Napier and other Indiana University alums founded Metraform, which after a bottle of tequila and some soul searching was renamed The Annoyance Theatre. Founded on the concept of play, totally uncensored stage time, and a complete disregard for improv rules, The Annoyance established itself as the alternative to Second City and ImprovOlympic, and over the next twenty-five years became the third titan in improvisational theatre. It is important to note, however, that there was never any animosity between ImprovOlympic and The Annoyance. In fact, Metraform’s first production, *Splatter Theatre*, was performed in the upstairs space at CrossCurrents while ImprovOlympic performed downstairs. Many teachers and performers would float between the two theatres as well, yet as we shall see The Annoyance’s disregard for rules led to a distinct ideological

¹⁴³ Qtd. in Johnson, 318.

difference and performance aesthetic than ImprovOlympic, which would eventually begin to make its way into ImprovOlympic's system.

Founded in 1984 in Milwaukee, Wisconsin, ComedySportz was the antithesis to Close's notions of slow comedy. Based on Keith Johnstone's *Improv* and adapted from his Theatresports format, ComedySportz is the prototypical short form theatre. Performing a similar format to the original ImprovOlympics only much faster and using a sports theme to heighten the competition, ComedySportz's main goal is to generate as many laughs as possible in as short a time as possible. It is accessible, easily understandable, and family friendly. The format consists of two teams of act-letes competing in a series of eight to twelve independent games (adapted from Johnstone and Spolin) that all exploit a particular gimmick or handle, and is similar in style to *Whose Line is it Anyway?*. In direct conflict with Close's slow comedy, ComedySportz and most short form improv performs at a break-neck pace and encourages as many jokes, bits, and gags as possible: a laugh is a laugh and the more the merrier.

The speed of play has a major impact on the type of comedy that short form produces. The tempo of the games helps to stress the ephemeral nature of short form; the games happen in three minutes and then are gone—no connections, no callback. They are designed to present a series of quick fragmented realities, or what Jameson calls “a series of perpetual presents.”¹⁴⁴ The rate of play also shapes the content of the comedy. The speed makes for a more energetic and intense performance, but as Seham notes in *Whose Improv is It Anyway?* it “erases shadings and subtleties in representation much the way

¹⁴⁴ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” *Modern Drama: plays/criticism/theory*, Ed. W.B. Worthen (Cambridge: Heinle & Heinle: 2002), 1138.

sports does.”¹⁴⁵ She points to sociologist N. Offen, who explains that “sports is a world speeded up and a world of absolutes. There is good and bad, black and white, right and wrong. It’s not gray and tentative like the real world. It is hyperlife under glass.”¹⁴⁶ As the sports theme suggests then, short form tends to create broad humor utilizing stereotypes, cultural notions and beliefs, and by telling the expected joke, in other words it tends to reinforce the dominant culture. While this causes many to question the artistic merit of short form, it has made the form increasingly popular to a mass audience. The conservative nature of short form and ComedySportz represents the overt tension in short form between modernity and postmodernity. The commodification of the form and the ComedySportz technique and aesthetic that reinforce dominant values are in juxtaposition to iO’s more postmodern performance style that is highly dependent upon fractured realities, multiple truths, and a collage approach to creation.

A good way to understand the different type of humor and audience can be seen in the atmosphere of short form theaters and marketing at ComedySportz. The theatre takes special care to craft a specific image, for example:

At the company’s home base in Milwaukee, the ComedySportz experience begins in the parking lot, where a young man in a tutu offers fans ‘Free Ballet Parking.’ While this joke does not serve to further the sports motif, the comical parking attendant pokes fun at ballet as high culture, while offering ComedySportz as popular culture. A sign in the Milwaukee lobby reads, ‘This is Comedy Sports—If you want art, go to a museum.’¹⁴⁷

This too exemplifies the idea that short form is popular entertainment and further blurs lines between high and low—it also helps clarify the intended audience for this show.

While a long form theatre like *The Annoyance* might also have a tutu dancer, that tutu

¹⁴⁵ Seham, 102.

¹⁴⁶ Qtd. in Seham, 102.

¹⁴⁷ Seham, 81-82.

dancer might be trying to sell you crack or proposition you with sex, at ComedySportz the tutu dancer is setting the wacky and fun, and most importantly, safe atmosphere of family entertainment.

The fact that the tutu dancer is a young man dressed in a ballerina outfit is also highly reflective of the conservative ideology of ComedySportz, and further demonstrates the comic differences between short and long form. Whereas the tutu dancer at The Annoyance Theatre might be commenting on gender constructs, the dancer at ComedySportz is working, whether intentionally or not, to reinforce conservative gender roles by using the age old device of a man dressing up as a woman for comedic effect. While the real men are inside dressed in sports uniforms and ready to enter the masculine world of competition, this young man is in the feminine world of ballet, on the outside looking in. The idea of a man in a dress, or in this case a ballerina outfit, reinforces male dominated values because it is suggesting that there is something abnormal about a man that would take on such a weak, i.e. feminine, role. It is such an absurd thought that it becomes funny. Therefore, the tutu dancer works to reinforce the patriarchal system of ComedySportz, a system in which women often feel ostracized and unwelcome.¹⁴⁸ Part of the safe family atmosphere that ComedySportz tries so hard to construct for its audience is to reify conservative cultural values and ideas, to neutralize the threat of any subversive action—the tutu dancer is just one example. Generally appealing to a different demographic, ComedySportz nonetheless challenged the comic philosophy of Close and ImprovOlympic. Furthermore, they helped influence the evolution of the Harold by proving that fast could be as funny as slow.

¹⁴⁸ For a complete analysis please see Amy Seham's *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*.

Similarly, another of the most significant groups in the evolution of ImprovOlympic and the Harold came from outside the company. The Piven Theatre Workshop, which had long been working in improvisation, was the genesis for the group Ed, featuring Miriam Tolan, Carlos Jacott, Stephanie Howard, Lauren Katz, Chris Reed, Chris Hogan, John Lehr, Meredith Zinner, Pete Gardner (Zahradnick), and Melanie Hoopes, and directed by Jim Dennen. Appearing in 1990 they sent shockwaves through the community and helped usher in a new era that shifted the focus of improv from cabaret comedy to legitimate theatre. One of the greatest challenges facing ImprovOlympic, the Harold, and improv in general was the labeling of improv as a cabaret act (a challenge it still faces, but one that was almost overwhelming in 1990). Improv was a blip, something done on the fringes of theatre that in the larger theatrical world didn't matter. Ed was one of the first groups to openly challenge the claim that improv wasn't theatre. Dennen remarked he was "working against the idea of improv as improv...Improv's reputation is as sketch comedy, big laughs, cabaret. But, for me, improv is the very center of theater."¹⁴⁹ Dennen sought to, in Close's words, "rescue improvisation from the notion that it has to be funny in a cabaret sort of way."¹⁵⁰ Out of this mindset, the group created a unique ninety-minute show completely comprised of long form improvisation that looked like a stage play, revolutionized what performance improv could be, and ultimately pushed the Harold in new and deeper directions.

ImprovOlympic had established long form, yet they still relied in part on the more dependable short form games to help bookend their shows and provide steady laughs.

They also regularly performed in bars and at cabarets throughout Chicago and typically

¹⁴⁹ Qtd. in Achy Obejas, "Ed Always Balances on the Edge of Improv," *Chicago Tribune*, January 7, 1994.

¹⁵⁰ Qtd. in Tony Adler, "The 'How' of Funny: Chicago's New Wave of Improvisation Aspires to More than a Punchline," *American Theatre*, December 1993.

each Harold team only performed for about half-an-hour (sometimes longer in the earlier days, but that wasn't always a good thing). Aiming to put improv on equal par with scripted theatre, Ed eschewed the games and simply performed full-length improvised plays, often in more traditional theatrical venues. Furthermore, at the time many ImprovOlympic improvisers were not trained performers, whereas most of the members of Ed were working actors.

Under Dennen, who was a traditional theatre director and later worked with Jazz Freddy, Ed was highly dedicated to the craft, exemplified by their intense rehearsal process. Rather than meeting once a week like most ImprovOlympic teams, where rehearsal was sometimes analogous to a social gathering, Ed met six days a week, four hours a day, rehearsing as though they were working on a production of *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof*.¹⁵¹ Dennen and the cast felt that the same amount of preparation needed for a scripted show was necessary for improv as well. The sheer amount of rehearsal also helped the players get to know one another on a deeper level both personally and professionally, helping lead to more nuanced scene work and a stronger group mind, with Hoopes noting that “we work as a whole unit, as a single organism.”¹⁵² Their work ethic and strong connections translated into performance. Like their successor Jazz Freddy, Ed produced shows comparable to traditional scripted theatre. They were really the first group to present improv as a piece of theatre rather than a comedy show at a bar or

¹⁵¹ Another independent group, The Free Associates, actually began performing improvised literary parodies of Tennessee Williams, most notably in 1991's *Cast on a Hot Tin Roof*. The audiences provided three imaginary characters, each with a burning secret or unrealized dream; a crisis (e.g. repressed homosexuality), a pretext such as a reunion, and a setting in some simmering locale “where you can contract malaria.” The audience also picks two Williams characters and assigns them new occupations, which the cast then incorporates into the show. Along with Ed and the Family they helped push narrative into the forefront and laid the groundwork for future literary groups like The Improvised Shakespeare Company and Outlook of the Poet.

¹⁵² Obejas, “Ed Always Balances on the Edge of Improv.”

cabaret, helping to further legitimize improv as an art form. Without the bar atmosphere, the group was able to avoid some of the comic pitfalls that crop up when performers are wrestling for attention, such as quick jokes, pushing the comedy further toward a humor based in relationships and connections.

Their improv was grounded in relationship-based scene work much like the Harold, but utilized a more narrative style and featured an early incarnation of the tag-out edit. A typical performance featured the audience selecting the two main characters and giving them a relationship. From there the group created a story around the pair. For example, in a December 1990 performance at the Shuman Theatre at Wrigleyside, the leads were tabbed former lovers, and rather than a thematic exploration of ex-lovers a la the Harold, Ed's show revolved around the narrative of the jilted lovers. Rather than a thematic three-by-three non-linear structure, Ed's plots would move forward with each scene building out of the previous scene. A word or situation from one scene would be used to create the next and subsequently the performance tended to follow a particular storyline or character. Rather than getting caught up in cheap jokes or letting the plot overwhelm, Ed based their improvisation in character, which helped to create deeper scenes, more meaningful connections, and "smarter" comedy.¹⁵³

Building upon their improvised performances and technically a follow up to Ed, but featuring members Hoopes, Jacott, Katz, Lehr, and newcomer Michael Ingram, their first major experimental form was a show called The Filmdome, "based on a postmodern premise so complicated I never got it straight."¹⁵⁴ Performed at the Victory Gardens Studio Theatre, the group segmented the stage, with part of it designated the "filmdome."

¹⁵³ Achy Obejas, "Ed," *Chicago Reader*, December 20, 1990.

¹⁵⁴ Jack Helbig, "Dawn Toddy/Dysfunctional Family Night," *Chicago Reader*, November 25, 1993.

When players were inside of it they improvised characters, and when they were outside of it they played fictional actors who played the characters they were improvising inside of the film dome, a comment on fractured and constructed identities and realities. The show was initially panned by the *Chicago Tribune*, but was a hit with audiences and other critics, with Helbig saying they were creating “subtle, funny, intelligent work many playwrights would have given their left disk drives to have written.”¹⁵⁵ Much like their improvised sets, The Film dome challenged the structural rigidity of the Harold, as well as placing narrative ahead of thematic connections. Furthermore, by performing at one of Chicago’s established traditional venues, The Film dome exposed improv to more mainstream audiences and helped legitimize the form.

They followed the Film dome with another experimental show called Dawn Toddy, which featured four actors and two musicians who collaborated to create a one-act improvised play. The improv itself wasn’t all that different from what Ed was already doing, but the form positioned the musicians in a more prominent role. Rather than acting solely as accompanists as was the custom at the time (if music was used at all), the guitarist and violinist in Dawn Toddy worked to help co-create the material, initiate mood changes, and heighten dramatic moments. The use of music as more than cover for awkward moments began to infuse ImprovOlympic performances, including an impressive line of musical Harold teams, and would become one of the defining features of the Second City revue *Piñata Full of Bees*, which was heavily influenced by the Harold and totally reignited and reshaped Second City.

Through their artistic viewpoint and experiments Ed helped begin to transform long form improv into a legitimate art form in the eyes of mainstream audiences. Ed’s

¹⁵⁵ Jack Helbig, “The Film dome,” *Chicago Reader*, September 3, 1992.

professional approach to improv and an actor's preparation made their way through ImprovOlympic's doors and helped raise the bar for the content of subsequent Harolds and the commitment of future players. Ian Roberts of ImprovOlympic team The Victim's Family saw an Ed show and was blown away. He returned to ImprovOlympic the next day and raved about it to Close, who was unimpressed. According to Roberts, "I think it really ticked [Del] off, because none of them were iO people."¹⁵⁶ Despite his seeming nonchalant attitude, Ed lit a fire under Close, and subsequently changed the course of the Harold.

But before Close and ImprovOlympic could evolve the Harold, another outside group emerged, further raising the bar for long form improv. Members of Ed, ImprovOlympic, The Annoyance, Blue Velveeta, and New Crime Productions merged to create the super-group Jazz Freddy in 1992 after a series of workshops at Live Bait Theatre under Pete Gardner. The initial cast featured Susan MacLaughlin, Stephanie Howard, Meredith Zinner, Miriam Tolan, Chris Reed, Jimmy Carrane, Kevin Dorff, Noah Gregoropolous, David Koechner, Pat Finn, Rachel Dratch, Brian Stack, and Gardner, who also served as the initial director but later gave way to Dennen during the group's second run in 1993. Jazz Freddy's experiments with patient, grounded scene work helped refocus the Harold and inspired other improvisers to strive to do the best and deepest possible work on stage...and to take their time. Much like Ed, Jazz Freddy was eschewing the quick fire cabaret style comedy for slower more intelligent work, which was in part due to the change in venue from bar to theatre. For example, in one scene Theresa Mulligan, who joined for the 1993 run, beautifully imitated a goldfish. Rather than rush the scene or try to find a quick joke to play off of Mulligan's imitation, the

¹⁵⁶ Johnson, 331.

group let her play. As Helbig notes, “lesser improvisers would have leapt in, trying to yuck up the scene with awful jokes and worse shtick. Mulligan’s fellow players gave her the space and time to fully develop her marvelous silent scene. I can’t think of any other group...with the esprit de corps to let a fellow performer shine like that.”¹⁵⁷ Jazz Freddy seemed to be fully realizing Close’s dream of slow comedy, only they were doing it outside of his doors.

Bringing the dedication to craft that made Ed thrive was instrumental in the group’s success and its influence. The ImprovOlympic people brought the concept of group mind and a sense of playfulness to the group, while the Ed people brought a professional attitude, excellent acting and listening skills, as well as carrying on the tradition of performing in actual theatrical spaces. Brian Stack said that the “iO people like me benefited a lot from the attitude and focus of the former Ed people.”¹⁵⁸ The combination was improv focused on patient, relationship-based scenes in the mold of slow comedy that were still highly comedic, with Tony Adler saying that “Jazz Freddy offers work that is at once technically advanced and wonderfully funny.”¹⁵⁹

Completely embracing the concept of slow comedy and more about content than any structure or form, Jazz Freddy shows featured a mix of the looser style of Ed with elements of the Harold to create a three act evening of long form improvisation. Jack Helbig said that while Close and others have urged players to work at the top of their intelligence, “Jazz Freddy is the first troupe I’ve seen that consistently heeds this often-

¹⁵⁷ Jack Helbig, “Jazz Freddy,” *Chicago Reader*, April 1, 1993.

¹⁵⁸ Qtd. in Josh Fult, “Brian Stack 3/13/06 Part 2,” *Improv Interviews*, ImprovInterviews.com/2006/11/brian-stack-31306-part-2.html, November 15, 2006.

¹⁵⁹ Tony Adler, “Company Finds Art in Improv,” *Chicago Tribune*, May 11, 1993.

given, seldom-followed advice.”¹⁶⁰ Adler argued that Ed and Jazzy Freddy helped spark “an honest-to-God improv renaissance,” going on to say that “they are taking what many continue to dismiss as nothing more than a set of workshop exercise, or a novel way to write jokes, and turning it into art...Jazz Freddy offers work that is at once technically advanced and wonderfully funny.”¹⁶¹ Yet it was more than just funny people, it was a combination of talented improvisers fully dedicating themselves to improvisation and embracing Close’s concept of slow comedy. Nearly a decade after the Harold became the foundation for long form improv groups were beginning to understand the dedication, skill, and talent that was necessary to execute long form improv, and in the process helped to elevate the form not only for audience members, but also for performers.

In fact, Jazz Freddy never intended to become a performance group. Initially they got together and held workshops to simply become better improvisers and play with one another. They fully dedicated themselves to the art of improv at a time when many improvisers looked at it as a hobby. Members made the group their top priority, turning down other jobs and rearranging schedules around Jazz Freddy rehearsal, something that has rarely occurred in a form that for ninety-nine percent of improvisers doesn’t pay any money. Even today most improvisers that consider themselves professionals have so many other improv obligations and are a member of so many teams that they rarely dedicate themselves to the five nights a week rehearsal schedule that made Ed and Jazz Freddy so special. The dedication was due in part to the realization that the Harold and long form improv required immense skill and training, but also speaks to the great influence and rewards it offers performers. The skills players acquired working on the

¹⁶⁰ Jack Helbig, “Jazz Freddy/Every Speck of Dust That Falls to Earth Really Does Make the Whole Planet Heavier, #3,” *Chicago Reader*, August 6, 1992.

¹⁶¹ Adler, “Company Finds Art in Improv.”

Harold and long form were the very skills they were using in other theatrical outlets, and in the coming years the great success of many of the Ed and Jazz Freddy members in other mediums points to the invaluable training and skill-set that improv provides.

The basic form for Jazz Freddy was similar to the concept of two steps forward one step back and was almost completely comprised of two person scenes. They also introduced the editing technique known as the tag-out, and utilized the emerging edit known as the cross-fade technique. In a tag-out edit, player A and player B are doing a scene. Player C then tags out player A, who exits. Player B stays the same character that they were in the scene with player A, but are taken to a new situation, location, etc. in their scene with player C. For example, Ned (Player A) and Steve (Player B) are two Army buddies in a foxhole. Amy (Player C) then tags-out Steve, who leaves the scene. Amy then initiates a scene with Ned, where she is a nurse at a VA hospital and Ned is being treated for a battlefield injury. The edit keeps the pace of the show quick, with scenes flowing rapidly into one another without the brief lull that usually occurs after a traditional swipe edit where the previous scene is essentially swiped off the stage and another takes its place. The cross-fade edit is simply an improv version of a film cross-fade. While one scene is going on the next starts on a different part of the stage, then the first scene slowly fades out as the new scene begins. The tag-out, and to a lesser extent the cross-fade, would help introduce faster editing techniques to the Harold, as well as a way to loosen the three-by-three structure, for example by using tag-outs to perform two or three scenes in a single 1A.

For the performance itself the cast would be split in half, with one half performing Act 1 and the other Act 2. An initial two person scene would start the show. Then another

player would tag-out one of the two original players and take the remaining character back in time to another event. For example, a husband and wife might be discussing having a child in scene one. In the next scene the husband is taken back in time to his own childhood when his own father told him he was adopted. The next scene would again feature a back in time tag-out, with the fourth scene then featuring a tag-out that moved the action *forward* in time.¹⁶² The remainder of the act was open to exploring the characters, stories, and themes of the first four scenes, and utilized both tag-outs and cross-fades. The second act worked in much the same way but with the other half of the ensemble. The third act featured all of the players, with the characters and stories from the first two acts combining and connecting in interesting and humorous ways, working in much the same way as the third beat of the Harold.

As one can see, the form still relies upon call backs, relationships, time dashes, and a modified three scene structure like a Harold, but was shaped by the group to suit their needs. Much like Ed, for Jazz Freddy it wasn't so much about the structure as it was about content, style, and dedication to craft. While Ed and Jazz Freddy's respective forms helped move the Harold forward, their larger contributions came from 1) their intense rehearsal process focused on the art form; 2) dedication to solid scenework; 3) making long form improv the sole attraction for an entire evening of *theatre*; and 4) positioning their performances as theatre instead of a comedy or cabaret act. Both groups had a profound influence on future ImprovOlympic teams the Family and Frank Booth, with the former totally revolutionizing the Harold and the latter embracing the slow, patient, trust-based approach to scene work. Members of both Ed and Jazz Freddy would go on to numerous other shows and ImprovOlympic teams, including the all improvised Second

¹⁶² The same technique would later be used in the innovative television series *Lost*.

City revue *Lois Kaz* and The Armando Diaz Theatrical Experience and Hootenanny at ImprovOlympic.

THE FAMILY

While small and independent improv groups were pushing the form to new levels, ImprovOlympic was still looking for a permanent home. After the Blue Velveeta—Papa Milano split, ImprovOlympic was on the move again, this time securing a storefront location on Belmont Avenue in 1993, as well as a bar just a few feet away from Wrigley Field called Wrigleyside.¹⁶³ Fearing a return to homelessness, they temporarily performed in both spaces. Featuring ten Harold teams in 1993, and in part inspired by groups like Ed and Jazz Freddy, who “boldly took improv where it had never gone before,” ImprovOlympic’s next big success came from the Family.¹⁶⁴ The Family is the most significant house team in the theatre’s history, with Halpern calling them “the breaking point... The Family broke the structure.”¹⁶⁵ Blue Velveeta leaving turned out to be one of the best things to happen to ImprovOlympic and the Harold.

The Family is still regarded as one of the best improv teams ever assembled. Featuring future stars and improv luminaries Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, Ali Fahrahakian, Miles Stroth, Neil Flynn, and Adam McKay, the Family revolutionized ImprovOlympic. When Blue Velveeta left the theatre to perform independently they created a giant void. Several teams emerged as candidates for the coveted house team slot, including an early incarnation of the Family called The Victim’s Family, and Corky’s Callback, featuring Jon Faverau and Pete Hulne. Originally both Besser and Roberts were actually on

¹⁶³ The group Ed actually built the stage at Wrigleyside for their productions.

¹⁶⁴ Helbig, “Dawn Toddy/Dysfunctional Family Night.”

¹⁶⁵ Halpern, Personal Interview.

Corky's Callback, but McKay convinced Halpern to switch them to The Victim's Family, which virtually eliminated Corky's Callback from house team competition. While the addition strengthened the team, they were soon hit by tragedy when Rick Roman was killed in a car crash. The team changed their name to the Family, and because of the highly emotional and traumatic event became extremely tight knit. At a time when many Harold teams only saw each other for weekly rehearsals and performances and often didn't stay together long because teams were so often reshuffled, cut, or created, the Family was constantly together. They rehearsed harder than other teams, and even when they weren't rehearsing they were together playing games or talking about improv. They became house team and Close began directing them, something he hadn't done since Blue Velveeta.

They were one of the first house teams to really experiment with the form, and along with Close created numerous experimental structures. While it took Close over twenty years to create the three-by-three Harold, in the blink of an eye the Family reshaped and unlocked the Harold's possibilities. Halpern recalled that Close said the Family was like "watching six men fall down the stairs at the same time and land on their feet."¹⁶⁶ Stroth said that the group wasn't "particularly good at doing a classic Harold, in the sense of opening, three scenes, game, three scenes, game, three scenes."¹⁶⁷ He went on to say that essentially their experimentation came out of their inability to do openers or follow the Harold structure: "we didn't like doing openings...we would sort of just do a quick opening, just something totally bizarre that would fall apart." Instead, they

¹⁶⁶ Halpern, Personal Interview.

¹⁶⁷ Qtd. in Josh Fult, "Miles Stroth 11/16/06 Part 1," *Improv Interviews*, ImprovInterviews.com/2006/11/miles-stroth-111606-part-1.html, November 16, 2006.

essentially abandoned the three-by-three structure and turned “it into a big story.”¹⁶⁸

Much like Ed, they began following a more narrative thread than the traditional thematic-based Harold. They also more fully focused on the game of the scene than most ImprovOlympic teams, a philosophy that would be fully embraced and heightened by the Upright Citizens Brigade, which featured many members of the Family. Playing the game of the scene helped lead to faster Harolds, one of the Family’s greatest legacies. They also threw out the 3-by-3 nine scene structure and began following scenic beats in succession with 1A-2A-3A all happening one after the other, or by having a short run of scenes in the middle of a beat, or mixing A, B, and C beats whenever they wanted. They added in additional beats or extra scenes when they felt they were necessary. They utilized unique editing techniques, such as Jazz Freddy’s tag-out, which further sped up the performance. Essentially they demonstrated that the Harold was more of a guideline than a rulebook, showing that the form was malleable and could be suited to meet each team’s needs.

Halpern and Close knew they had something special with the Family. She pointed to their dedication, connection, and speed, saying that:

Through the years they just hit it, then Del and I decided ‘Ok, that’s the training wheels Harold. Now we can get it to the point where we don’t worry about the form anymore.’ We know that now we do a bunch of different scenes. They can take place at different times. It doesn’t have to be in order. It wasn’t 1, 2, 3, game, 1, 2, 3, game, 1, 2, 3. It could be anything.¹⁶⁹

Aside from loosening the structure, the Family was noted for their speed, and their speed was the prime reason they were able to evolve the form.

¹⁶⁸ Stroth, *Improv Interviews*.

¹⁶⁹ Halpern, Personal Interview.

Close had long advocated the idea of slow comedy, and teams like Baron's Barracuda's and Blue Velveeta (and Jazz Freddy) performed at a slower pace, sometimes painstakingly slow. The idea was that a performer should say the third thing that pops into his or her head, because in order to play to the top of one's intelligence performers need time to think, and if performers think "the work will be more intelligent and the show more satisfying."¹⁷⁰ The idea actually runs counter to Theatresports founder and *Impro* author Keith Johnstone, who argues that improvisers should say the first thing that comes into their heads. Johnstone thinks that originality stems from individual's own experiences, and improvisers that search for the "right" response or a clever response end up in trouble, and often come up with less original or humorous ideas. Originality, for Johnstone, is often about voicing our own unique perspectives while at the same time meeting the audience's expectations.¹⁷¹ This philosophy is echoed by ComedySportz, who aim for a more machine-gun approach to comedy, as well as The Annoyance where Napier encourages improvisers to simply "do something."

Close's concept is that your first thought is a knee-jerk reaction, and probably based on a joke. The second thought is a bit better, but still not right. The third thought is the best thought because you've had time to process the situation. As noted in *Truth in Comedy*, "if a player takes the time to consider what the other speaker means, then his response is more intelligent... a more carefully considered response takes a second or two longer, but the wait is well worth it."¹⁷² While many have pitted Close and Johnstone against one another, they actually are after the same idea: an honest reaction.¹⁷³ Close's

¹⁷⁰ Halpern, Personal Interview.

¹⁷¹ Keith Johnstone, *Impro*, (New York: Routledge, 1981), 87-88.

¹⁷² Halpern, et. al., 63.

¹⁷³ For years the only improv book Close recommended to students was *Impro*.

whole idea was that for a trained improviser the first thought that pops into their head should actually be their third thought. Slow comedy didn't mean that the show had to be slow. It simply meant that performers had to carefully consider their responses. If a performer could do slow fast, if they could process those three thoughts quickly then they could go as fast as their mind allowed them. What set the Family apart and revolutionized the form was that Close finally found a team that could go really slow really fast. They were able to take off the training wheels so to speak, because they could see the form and structure of each performance unfolding more quickly than other teams, and therefore could adjust on the fly. They didn't need the three-by-three structure to keep the action moving forward or provide a safety net; they were fast enough and talented enough to adjust as the show progressed.

The Family's first formal experiment came in 1993 with the critically acclaimed improvised show *Three Mad Rituals*, which was a ninety-minute three-act production featuring two new forms—a Deconstruction and a Movie—as well as a Harold. Inspired by the now defunct Ed, the show was the Family's version of a completely long form based improvised performance. The content and forms actually grew out of the group's own experiments with the Harold. As noted, a typical Family Harold hardly followed the three-by-three structure and incorporated many of the elements of the Deconstruction (such as a run of scenes all based on an original scene) and the Movie (such as a narrative through line, narrated stage directions, and quick cuts). According to Stroth, “in *Three Mad Rituals*, we basically took everything out of our Harold that we were doing and separated it into two other forms.”¹⁷⁴ The Family demonstrated that the Harold was more

¹⁷⁴ Stroth, *Improv Interviews*.

than a rigid structure. The result was two new forms that pushed the Harold in new directions.

The Deconstruction, perhaps the most obvious postmodern of all improv forms, takes one scene as its base and then mines it for material with a succession of scenes that make connections to the original scene based on character, plot, behaviors, relationships, phrases, or ideas. In a Deconstruction, improvisers are literally aiming to complicate a theme or idea, to peel away the layers and analyze it from a variety of lenses. The form's goal is to create a fragmented reality with no single viewpoint dominating, and often work to complicate ideas and debate about the issues of the day. The initial scene is a two person scene that is a sort of anti-Harold scene. It is much longer than the traditional Harold scene and requires extraordinary amounts of information in order for the form to work. Instead of the usual Harold scene where the two players find the game of the scene and only focus on heightening that aspect, the opening scene in a Deconstruction is usually much more conversational. This allows for a greater variety of topics, stories, non-sequiturs, and tangents, which results in much more material to use for the subsequent scenes. If the opening scene only has the one game and a very focused and specific relationship based on that game, there simply won't be enough material to sustain the form. Furthermore, in order to introduce new themes, give characters back-story, and introduce new characters and topics the opening scene is much more reliant on storytelling than a traditional Harold scene where story is usually given a back seat. In a Harold the opener and first three scenes all provide information for the rest of the form, but in a Deconstruction everything has to come from (and relate to) that initial scene so it requires more depth and breadth.

After the initial scene, however, the following scenes return to the Harold style focusing on relationship, character, and the game of the scene. The major difference is that instead of each scene being a continuation of the previous scene or beat, each scene in a Deconstruction is a brand new scene. While it is connected in some way to the opening, it does not have to follow any set pattern or theme. Sometimes one of the characters from the opening scene is taken to one of the events mentioned in the original scene or interacts with a character that is brought up. Other times the connections are more thematic, or even environmental. For instance, perhaps in the opening scene we find out that one of the characters works for a large corporation. In a subsequent scene we could see him at work, but we could also see his co-workers in a scene without him. Those co-workers then can appear in later scenes in different situations, again either with or without the original opening scene character(s). These scenes, called tangent scenes, help players branch out from the opening scene to more freely explore ideas and themes from the opening scene rather than solely following the characters. Ultimately the original scene comes back to close the piece. It is akin to performing a 1A scene and then doing a long run of possible 2A scenes (and 2A-A and 2-A-A-A scenes) that all in some way are derived from 1A but do not necessarily relate to one another. Then after a half hour of 2A's, returning to 1A to see the scene in a different light. It's helpful to think of a bicycle wheel, with the opening scene at the hub and each subsequent scene a new spoke that is jutting out in a new direction but still connected to the center. Each spoke is its own unit, but only works in concert with the other spokes, and is dependent on the hub for it to go. Once all of the spokes are created, the tire (the original scene returning) works to hold everything together.

The Movie is a much simpler form, and as the name suggests plays much like a film would. It also introduced a strictly narrative form to ImprovOlympic, which helped completely reshape the Harold by incorporating more plot based elements into what Close had envisioned as a thematic form. Soliciting a film genre and fictional title from the audience, the group would then attempt to recreate that genre as accurately as possible. The form is dependent upon a collective knowledge of certain film motifs and pop culture references.¹⁷⁵ Moving at the speed of film, the form has one basic story line, quick filmic style edits, and numerous camera angles achieved by the players moving about the stage accompanied by elaborate narrated film stage directions. For instance, a player might come from off stage and freeze the action, and then the team would lift the player off the ground so that he was horizontal to the stage before proclaiming that the audience is seeing a bird's eye camera shot.

The popular edit "cut-to" also originated with the Movie. Essentially any player at any time can end the scene and move the action forward by saying "Cut to _____." A husband and wife might be celebrating an anniversary for instance, and another player will yell "cut to their first date," and the action then moves instantly to the couple's first date. Usually we see a snippet of the first date before a player says "cut back." Much like the Deconstruction then, the original anniversary scene is informed and changed by what we see in the "cut to" scene. The Movie has not become as popular in recent times as the Deconstruction because many see it as relying too heavily on easy laughs achieved from film parody or pop culture references. Close hated the form because he felt that it screwed up the Harold because players could simply tell one another what to do (through

¹⁷⁵ The form also demonstrates the shift in content and style from the early Compass Players who often inserted literary quotes and motifs into their scenes and saw themselves as the antithesis to television.

narrated stage directions and cut-to edits) instead of creating a group mind and working with each other. Others echoed Close's sentiments and felt that the form was improv cheating. Nevertheless, the speed of the form, the reliance on narrative, and the "cut-to" edit have become staples of contemporary improv. While in *Three Mad Rituals* the three forms were separate, they all informed the Family's Harolds both before and after. By marrying the basic philosophical tenets of the Harold with the storytelling techniques of the Deconstruction and the narrative aspects of the Movie, the Family's Harold's shattered conventional notions of what a Harold could be.

The very next year in 1994 they again experimented with the Harold in *Dynamite Fun Nest*, which employed several different structures, including a more elaborate Movie, a form called Check-in Expansion, and a form called Horror. Check-in Expansion was similar to a Deconstruction, except it started with a one-person scene that detailed that player's week. It would be similar to a series of two person scenes, except only one actor was on stage reacting to everything that was happening. After the series of one person scenes, the group then performed a Deconstruction using the mono-scenes as the inspiration. The Horror deconstructed a terrible recent news event and was not meant to be funny. Instead, according to Stroth, "we were just going to try and explore the darkness that surrounded that event through whatever characters we could imagine might be connected to that event...it was a creepy little piece...It was dark. It was Del Close."¹⁷⁶ While it turned off many audience members, the *Reader* described the Horror as a "revolutionary form that uses improvisational techniques to create profoundly chilling drama...One might think that the story of a woman who fell in front of the train would be tasteless...but the company treated the tragedy respectfully, intelligently, and

¹⁷⁶ Stroth, "Part 2," *Improv Interviews*.

memorably.”¹⁷⁷ While *Dynamite Fun Nest* was not everyone’s cup of tea, the Harold would never be the same.

The Family incorporated new forms and techniques into the Harold and introduced speed as a style of play. The success of *Three Mad Rituals* and *Dynamite Fun Nest* catapulted ImprovOlympic’s popularity and influenced future generations of improvisers who would incorporate elements of the Deconstruction and Movie into their own Harolds. While the theatre still teaches the traditional Harold and encourages young teams to stick to the three-by-three structure, the Family shattered it for more experienced teams, opening the door to future innovations. They showed the beauty of the Harold was in its flexibility. While it stressed the fundamental skills necessary to succeed—relationship based two person scenes, agreement, reincorporation, listening, support, etc.—the form a Harold took could be changed to fit the team. It could have a series of related or tangential scenes in a row; it could have a narrative; it could be fast; it could have a hundred different scenes; it could be anything as long as the team stayed true to the principles of the Harold.

Furthermore, the Family broke the perpetual student status of ImprovOlympic teams that led to Baron’s Barracudas end and the Blue Velveeta split. They were allowed to perform beyond their tenure as a house team in shows, which were non-Harold based performances. While they weren’t the first team to perform a non-Harold show and their own team was relatively short-lived, they helped usher in an era of longevity that allowed numerous future teams to stay together beyond their Harold performances. By keeping teams together longer and allowing them more freedom, future teams could further experiment and push the Harold beyond its traditional structure. The Family, along with

¹⁷⁷ Adam Langer, “Dynamite Fun Nest and ImprovOlympic,” *Chicago Reader*, March 17, 1994.

Ed, and Jazz Freddy, ushered in an era of professionalism. Improv and the Harold were becoming serious business, with performers devoting more time and energy to training, rehearsal, and innovation. And it all came about because of Ed. As Roberts notes, “this is all off seeing that group, Ed, Del getting his competitive juices up, and us wanting to be the undisputed big shots of ImprovOlympic.”¹⁷⁸

THE HAROLD MOVES BEYOND iO

The Family’s success was not going unnoticed. Besser and Roberts would go on to be half of the original Uprights Citizens Brigade (UCB) in New York, taking the Harold to the Big Apple. McKay, after a short stint at Second City became head writer for *SNL*, and later wrote and directed such films as *Anchorman* and *Talladega Nights*, helping to usher in a new style of improv based filmmaking more fully explored in Chapter Six. Stroth became instrumental in the opening of ImprovOlympic’s permanent space and managed the theatre for a time. Neil Flynn went on to a successful television career and became a member of iO West’s famed team Beer Shark Mice. Fahrahnikian performed at UCB, wrote for *SNL*, and is the owner of The People’s Improv Theatre (NYC).

Thanks to Ed, Jazz Freddy, and the Family, Second City was starting to take notice of long form improv as well. Under Kelly Leonard’s leadership, ImprovOlympic’s brand of long form improv began to make its way into the company. Leonard hired several members of the Family as well as Jazz Freddy, commenting about the hiring of Jazz Freddy members Miriam Tolan and Dave Koechner, saying that “these guys have a

¹⁷⁸ Qtd. in Josh Fult, “Ian Roberts Part 1— 2/16/07,” *Improv Interviews*, ImprovInterviews.com/2007/02/ian-roberts-part-1-21607_19.html, February 19, 2007.

fresh approach to work...and I want them to infuse Second City with a lot of that approach.”¹⁷⁹ Leonard took a lot of internal heat for his changes, which included unpopular staff changes, but pressed on because he felt the theatre needed to evolve. Featuring several members of Jazz Freddy and numerous ImprovOlympic performers, Second City e.t.c.’s 1994 all-improvised production *Lois Kaz* became the first fully improvised show put on at Second City, with the *Chicago Reader* calling it “one of the best improv shows in quite some time.”¹⁸⁰ The show was a landmark for the company, and paved the way for a show heavily influenced by the Harold that would completely change Second City’s thirty-five years of tradition.

The long form techniques from both *The Gods Must be Lazy* and *Lois Kaz* were married and fully bloomed in the groundbreaking 1995 revue *Piñata Full of Bees* directed by Tom Gianas. *Piñata* totally revamped the tried-and-true blackout format at Second City and gave the theatre a much needed breath of fresh air. To the theatre’s credit, the changes did not come about due to any financial needs, in fact the theatre was doing quite well and it was much riskier economically to change the format. But that’s what Leonard and Gianas did. In part the timing was right. They had just closed the 35th Anniversary show, which was a rather stale “best of” revue. Likewise, long form improv was thriving and its performers were being hired by Second City, bringing with them ImprovOlympic’s comic philosophy. As cast member Jon Glaser said, “comedically, it felt like things were changing a little bit. And I think the sensibility of a lot of the performers coming in was also different than the standard, especially with the blackouts

¹⁷⁹ Anthony Adler, “Love & Money: Second City at a Crossroads,” *Chicago Reader*, November 11, 1993.

¹⁸⁰ Adam Langer, “Improv Games,” *Chicago Reader*, March 3, 1994.

where it's lights up, kooky joke, lights down... People wanted to try something different.”¹⁸¹

Most of the ImprovOlympic performers were already doing a different kind of comedy. Using the tenets of the Harold they helped create a show featuring longer scenes, and instead of the usual disjointed Second City scenes, in *Piñata*, scenes came back throughout the review and characters and stories connected. Sketches often morphed into one another midway through, and sometimes two scenes were enacted at the same time. They did away with blackouts and really had no set, instead relying on a stage littered with props, and with scenes flowing into and out of one another. The soundtrack consisted of a mix of recorded rock and live piano, a marked change from the usual live peppy piano underscoring of most revues. The content was also a little darker and more biting than recent revues. The *Chicago Tribune* said that the “dark, dark subject matter—cruelty, disability and frightful loneliness—are handled adroitly enough to both walk the fine line of good taste and black comedy and yet draw hearty laughs.”¹⁸² The *Chicago Reader* said that it was:

Easily the funniest and most intelligent, surprising, and creative stuff Second City has done in a long time. Borrowing a few tricks from the Torso and Annoyance theaters as well as from cast member [Adam] McKay's Upright Citizens' Brigade, the show contains some wonderfully dark, taboo-breaking humor: skits about a killer ferret, a sweet meet in an elevator that ends in murder, and a harrowing journey worthy of R. Crumb through the dark side of the 50s.¹⁸³

Gianas, who had directed traditional revues before, said that “I felt like the form was dusty. It was stagnating. The one thing that's most important in comedy is the element of

¹⁸¹ Qtd. in Mike Thomas, *The Second City Unscripted: Revolution and revelation at the world-famous comedy theater* (New York: Villard Books, 2009), 214.

¹⁸² Sid Smith, “In ‘Piñata,’ Troupe Takes Daring Step, Breaks out of Second City Mold,” *Chicago Tribune*, June 23, 1995.

¹⁸³ Jack Helbig, “Pinata Full of Bees,” *Chicago Reader*, July 6, 1995.

surprise, and there was none in those shows anymore.”¹⁸⁴ One of the ways Gianas dusted off the form was by using Harolds in rehearsal and in the late night improv sets. The Harold’s fingerprints are undeniable on the production, and helped transform the revue format.

The breaking up of scenes and the creation of overarching stories, characters, and themes influenced by the Harold blew critics and audiences away. Much like the improvised shows at ImprovOlympic and *The Annoyance*, *Piñata* was much more socially charged, angry, and Chicago-centric than typical Second City revues. The *Chicago Sun-Times* title of its review says everything: “2nd City Sheds Tradition, Finds Its Sting.”¹⁸⁵ While the show was lauded by critics and has gone down in Second City lore, it was “the least attended show in the history of Second City.”¹⁸⁶ It stalled in previews, as Leonard says, “you could hear a mouse shit.”¹⁸⁷ But Leonard stuck by Gianas and the cast, and once critics saw it they began heaping praise on the show, which helped turn around the run and forever changed Second City’s style. In many ways its impact is still being felt. Second City had finally taken notice of long form improv, and with Mick Napier’s further expansion of improv and experimentation in *Citizen Gates* in 1996-97 and *Paradigm Lost* in 1997-98, finally reaped the benefits of the Harold.¹⁸⁸ Second City was not the only theater to benefit though, as *Piñata*’s success proved to be the ultimate validation of Close, ImprovOlympic, and the Harold. It was no longer a new

¹⁸⁴ Qtd. in Thomas, 213.

¹⁸⁵ Ernest Tucker, “2nd City Sheds Tradition, Finds its Sting,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, June 23, 1995.

¹⁸⁶ Kelly Leonard, “The Second City: Anatomy of an Artist-Driven For-Profit Theatre in Chicago,” presented at the *Chicago Theatre Capital of America: Past. Present. Future.* at Columbia College Chicago, May 21, 2011.

¹⁸⁷ Qtd. in Thomas, 213.

¹⁸⁸ Tina Fey was cast in both shows, and after *Paradigm Lost* was hired by *SNL*.

form being toyed with by a nomadic theatre. It was now officially the most significant style of comedy in Chicago.

CHAPTER IV—THE FLEXIBLE HAROLD

“The Harold is the basis of everything but the last step is to fuck with the form.”¹⁸⁹ —Former iO Training Center Director Rachel Mason

With five years of ground-breaking shows from Ed, Jazzy Freddy, the Family, The Annoyance, and *Piñata Full of Bees*, the Harold and improv were experiencing massive changes, and 1995 proved to be a pivotal year for improvisational theatre in Chicago. The Harold had been unlocked by the Family at ImprovOlympic, and its comedic potential was on full display at Second City. The Harold and improv were poised to move to another level and began to be taken more seriously both within the improvisational community and the greater world of comedy. In this chapter I’ll be looking at how the Harold has evolved since the Family took off the training wheels, as well as exploring the current state of the Harold at iO by looking at a sample of the current shows at the theatre. Finally I’ll briefly examine the Harold’s central role in iO’s training center curriculum to understand how the Harold is currently taught and the ways that it is continuing to influence improv and comedy.

A HOME & A BOOK

While *Piñata* was turning Second City inside out, ImprovOlympic, riding the star power of alums Mike Meyers, Chris Farley, and Tim Meadows (as well as the wave of success and vindication from *Piñata*), and fresh off the success of the Family, found a permanent space just two doors down from Wrigleyside at 3541 N. Clark Street. The

¹⁸⁹ Patton, 41.

space was equipped with two stages, the basement Cabaret Theatre mainstage where the Harold would be performed, and the more traditional Del Close Theatre upstairs featuring the newly created experimental shows. One such show debuting in 1995 was The Armando Diaz Theatrical Experience and Hootenanny. The longest running non-Harold show, which is still running today with a rotating all-star cast, Armando is a descendant of the Deconstruction where a monologist delivers a series of stories throughout the evening upon which the other players base their scenes. The form further pushed the Harold in a narrative direction, as well as being another example of the way improvisation works to deconstruct and fragment reality. More importantly, the space provided ImprovOlympic with a stage to perform Harolds and a stage to deconstruct the form, and the combination of the two stages under one roof helped transform ImprovOlympic's product.

Even more important than a permanent home, however, was the publication in 1994 of Halpern, Close, and Kim "Howard" Johnson's *Truth in Comedy*. The book is a how-to manual for performing a Harold, and lays out the main ideals of ImprovOlympic style improvisation. The book became the Holy Grail for those looking to learn the Harold. The book allowed the Harold to spread beyond Chicago, and to spread beyond the oral tradition that makes up so much of improv's history, rules, and lore. Before *Truth in Comedy* there were only two improv training books, Spolin's *Improvisation for the Theatre* and Johnstone's *Improv*, both of which are actually rather dense for training manuals and based on systems of games. *Truth in Comedy* laid out in straightforward terms how to do a Harold and the comic philosophy behind it. Halpern noted in an interview about Close's teaching and her theatre's philosophy saying that "there's no

reason to reinvent it...The Truth is so obvious when it hits you in the face. That's why my book is called *Truth in Comedy*, because anybody who studies with us, anybody who reads this is going to go 'Oh yeah, this makes sense. This has got to be right.'"¹⁹⁰ These comments clearly demonstrate the metanarrative that iO and the Harold were creating, and help set the stage for the burgeoning independent improv movement that would both build upon and reject the "truth" of the Harold.

Nevertheless, the book helped define ImprovOlympic's comic philosophy and spread long form improv, but perhaps equally important, it also served to educate audience members. Even today many audience members and performers who consider themselves knowledgeable about improv don't really understand long form or the Harold. Students in my improv courses are continually in awe of the form, both excited to learn it and afraid of its complexity and mythic status. Likewise during my time with The Improv Mafia at Illinois State University and with MU Improv at Mizzou it took roughly a year to educate audiences about long form. Part of the issue lies with the audience's horizon of expectations. More than likely if they have been exposed to improv it is through short form, most commonly through *Whose Line is it Anyway?* (this is especially true outside of Chicago and other metropolitan areas with a strong long form community). When they go to an improv show, generally they are expecting to see a similar performance, so it can be a bit jarring for them if instead they are greeted with complex improvised scenic structures. To further complicate the matter, unlike short form theaters like ComedySportz where players (or emcees) explain the game that is about to be played (which is usually fairly straightforward anyway), long form teams and theatres have been reluctant to explain their forms before performing. This is partly due to artistic arrogance,

¹⁹⁰ Halpern, Personal Interview.

as if explaining the form takes away its magic. There is also a sort of audience rite of passage for long form, where they come to understand the Harold by watching several, and then are inducted into the club. Part of the audience's enjoyment is their insider knowledge about the Harold and individual teams. It's similar to liking a band before they become popular. This mindset has led to the popular theory that short form improv is an audience-based form, while long form improv is a performer-based form. While there is some truth to the theory, more importantly the lack of audience education turned people away and contributed to improv's misunderstanding. It is difficult to build an audience if new audience members can't figure out what they are watching.

One of *Truth in Comedy's* greatest gifts then, was to act as a sort of decoder ring for audience members. Here was the explanation of what was happening on stage that so many teams refused to give before performing. The effect has been dramatic. Anne Libera of Second City, not specifically speaking about *Truth in Comedy* but about the general growth of improv acumen, said that "what there is now that there wasn't in the mid-80s, there is a really savvy audience...that can watch something and are aware of the moves and techniques....It's like appreciating avant garde jazz: the line between brilliance and noise can be pretty close."¹⁹¹ The improv clique is still an issue the community must address if it wants to fully emerge, but *Truth in Comedy* was a giant step in the right direction.

UNREST IN THE RANKS

While *Truth in Comedy* and a permanent space helped vault ImprovOlympic to another level of success and a growing number of teams—from nine teams in 1992 to

¹⁹¹ Anne Libera, Personal Interview, May 25, 2011.

fourteen in 1994 to twenty-six in 1999, there was also some dissatisfaction about the team structure and the allegiance to the ImprovOlympic “truth.” As we’ve seen there is a definite hierarchy at ImprovOlympic, with the house team(s) resting on top, resident Harold teams next, and the several emerging teams struggling for positioning. The house team gets the prime performance slots and members of the house teams are commonly offered paid positions as coaches for other teams, or as teachers in the training center. Since ImprovOlympic doesn’t pay performers, these paid positions for house team members serve to keep talented improvisers within the company, as many leave for Second City or other paid opportunities. While life on a house team is pretty good, life on the other teams can be a little more stressful as performers live with the knowledge that in a few weeks they might be cut or reshuffled.

Teams are made, reshaped, and cut by Halpern, and it is rather common for underperforming teams to be dropped, or for players to be switched around between teams or cut. In 1992 Halpern began posting team rosters every four to eight weeks. New teams made up of promising students would be created while existing teams would be dissolved. Players were commonly shuttled between teams as well. Not surprisingly, this system didn’t sit well with everyone, especially those on the wrong side of the cuts. They argued that the system of fear went against the ethos of support and solidarity ImprovOlympic preached. Frances Callier, who would go on to a highly successful improv career including serving as co-founder of the Chicago Improv Festival, noted that she had a fear of performing when she was on a team named Gracie, saying that “I remember the first time we performed, I was a tree for, like, five scenes...It was that fear

of actually performing...But then you realize, oh God, Charna is going to break this up. And it was like sink or swim.”¹⁹²

The system, along with an ever growing amount of improvisers looking for stage time helped lead to The Playground Theatre. Founded in 1997 as an improv co-op where virtually anyone could perform, The Playground provided a hub for the burgeoning independent improv movement. Halpern applauded the move, saying “good, that’s what you should do...I thought it was a great thing.”¹⁹³ Of course, while the cuts might not have been popular, with more improvisers than teams and a brand to maintain and rent to pay, it was good business to put out the best possible product, but some felt that it was a hypocritical message for a theatre based on support and trust. There are also numerous examples of teams or players being moved from one team to another and then flourishing, including iO luminary Noah Gregoropoulos. Halpern moved him from his original team, where he was having trouble finding his voice. Halpern told him “Noah, look, I know you’re brilliant—you don’t...I’m going to take you off this team because you can’t be heard, and you’re no good if you can’t be heard. You decide when you’re ready to be heard.”¹⁹⁴ A few weeks later he was moved to Floyd’s Toothbrush and became one of iO’s top performers, teachers, and innovators, later working with Jazz Freddy and directing *Lois Kaz*.

¹⁹² Marie-Anne Hogarth, “Laughing Matters: Where would Frances Collier be without improv?” *Chicago Reader*, April 8, 1999.

¹⁹³ Qtd. in Josh Fult, “Charna Halpern – 6/4/07 – Part 2,” *Improv Interviews*, ImprovInterviews.com/2007/06/Charna-halpern-6407-part-2.html, June 4, 2007.

¹⁹⁴ Michael G. Glab, “Class Clowns,” *Chicago Reader*, February 21, 2002.

FRANK BOOTH & JANE

With the founding of The Playground the mid-to-late 1990s saw a blossoming of improvisation in Chicago. While The Playground and the independent scene were picking up steam, ImprovOlympic was still leading the charge. The era saw many important Harold teams, including 1994 house team Frank Booth and the all-female group Jane. Frank Booth still performed a relatively traditional Harold, using a free-association for the opener to generate ideas and then utilizing personal monologues for their games, building their scene work upon the patient approach of Jazz Freddy. In 1995 Frank Booth, while still performing Harolds, began to experiment with the form, first in *Booth Velvet Lounge*. In a postmodern homage/pastiche/quoting to their name sake, the show was a mix of improvisation and torch songs, setting many of the scenes in a fictional cabaret and performing at various tables in the audience between songs. The form is quoting from the seminal torch song scenes of the film *Blue Velvet* (Frank Booth being the iconic villain from the film), but like most postmodern quoting the parody was largely unacknowledged. They also took a show called *Harold on the Holyrood* to the 1995 Edinburgh Fringe Festival. The show consisted of several long forms, including a Harold and a Deconstruction based on snippets from the newspaper. While the show didn't necessarily break new ground structurally, it did help spread the form to Europe, which has historically been dominated by Johnstone's Theatresports style of improvisation.

Frank Booth did break new ground structurally however, by helping to introduce the form La Ronde. Miles Stroth of the Family is generally credited with first using the exercise in classes to teach story structure (although many still argue that the form was first used by Close). The form was brought to Frank Booth by Craig Cackowski. Based

on the Arthur Schnitzler play of the same name, the form is an excellent character building game as the whole premise rests on exploring one character in two very different scenes, ultimately creating a circular chain of connected characters. Character A and B do a scene, then B and C do a scene where B is the same character as in the first scene but we see a different side of the character. C and D do a scene, D and E, and so on. Frank Booth and other teams initially used it to explore and enrich the second beat of the Harold. Focusing on heightening a character, exploring multiple facets of their personality or history, or simply bringing them to a new situation was essential to a Harold, and La Ronde proved to be a great exercise to help create sharper and more interesting second beats by creating more three dimensional characters with richer histories, wants, and emotions. One can clearly see how the form not only helps improvisers create more dynamic and interesting characters, but how the practice can translate to written work, where improviser/writers use the principles of La Ronde to create depth and complexity for their characters. Training and performing La Ronde's and Harold's then, instills in players a mindset to create, complicate, and deconstruct their characters, which leads to more interesting and complex narratives.

Through its structure LaRonde creates fractured stories and characters, working to create a collage of connected scenes rather than a linear narrative. As Carol Hazenfield notes, "players should avoid making any references to the previous scenes...it works best to play the scenes as if the characters don't know that they have people in common."¹⁹⁵ LaRonde stresses showing varying sides of a character, therefore creating both a highly fragmented narrative, as well as highly fragmented characters, pointing to

¹⁹⁵ Carol Hazenfield, *Acting on Impulse: The Art of Making Improv Theater* (Berkeley: Coventry Creek Press, 2002), 181.

postmodernism's "skepticism about the objectivity of truth, history and norms, the givenness of natures and the coherence of identity."¹⁹⁶ For instance, we might see a highly confident police officer at work during an interrogation, and then see the same man weak and deflated in a crumbling marriage. The form illustrates the idea that "we do not have a homogeneous identity, but that instead we have several contradictory selves...identity is a process."¹⁹⁷ Postmodernists view the self as incomplete and unfinished, the subject in process. The entire form is based on presenting a new reality, of changing what we think we know about a certain character by showing a different viewpoint. While the form does create some sort of overarching theme through the connectivity of life, it also at the same time complicates that connectivity. It shows that there never is a direct line between A and Z.

Kevin Mullaney and Frank Booth cohort Lillie Frances knew there were performance possibilities and brought the form to the Harold team Cinco de Bob, who brought the La Ronde out of the rehearsal room. They morphed the form to fit performance by using the La Ronde as an opener by creating a cast of characters and then exploring the situations that arose in a series of scenes. Frances and Susan Maxman brought the full La Ronde to the stage in 1999 in the two-woman show *Calendar Girls* at the Second City e.t.c., which "knocked the stuffing out of" Jack Helbig.¹⁹⁸ Over the ensuing decade, La Ronde has become a staple of most improv training programs as well as a common form of performance.

¹⁹⁶ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996), vii.

¹⁹⁷ Madan Sarup and Tasneem Raja, *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 1996), xvi.

¹⁹⁸ Jack Helbig, "Calendar Girls," *Chicago Reader*, February 11, 1999.

In a Harold the first three scenes should be as different as possible, but with a La Ronde the first three scenes are going to have some sort of connecting fiber already established and the people in the La Ronde tend to form a community. The form then becomes about exploring that community rather than tying together disparate threads. The form helped influence the Harold by further introducing narrative structure, pushing players to create and explore characters with more depth and dimension, and again demonstrating that the traditional three-by-three structure was no longer a requirement for a successful long form structure. While not as influential as the Family, Frank Booth's forms helped expand the Harold and continued the long and slow transformation from a strictly thematic form to one based more on following character stories. Furthermore, the group spawned many of ImprovOlympic's best teachers, including Liz Allen and Paul Grondy. In all of their forms the group fulfilled ImprovOlympic's philosophy of support and group mind, and signals one of the Harold's greatest influences in comedy by championing the group over the individual. Mullaney says "we support each other's ideas through the creation of a group-mind, and thus the group becomes smarter than its individual components...Frank Booth is a great deal funnier than any of us."¹⁹⁹ Whatever the form or structure, as Halpern says, at ImprovOlympic it's about treating each other like artists, poets, and geniuses on stage.

While ImprovOlympic has always preached the idea of support, improv in general has been dominated by white men, often leaving women and minority groups feeling less than supported. Famed team the Family, for instance, was all men, and most Harold

¹⁹⁹ David Belcher, "Meeting Harold," *The Herald (Glasgow)*, August 5, 1995.

teams of the time, and even today, are majority white male.²⁰⁰ Founded in 1996 as the brainchild of Katie Roberts and Stephanie Weir, Jane was ImprovOlympic's first all-woman group, and for a short time was elevated to house team status. Furthermore, rather than being formed by Halpern as was the custom, Jane was formed by Roberts and Weir. They made it clear that they weren't an anti-male group, but instead wanted "to see what it was like to feel more fully supported in their choices and to explore performance options not open to them in their coed teams."²⁰¹ Women had generally been relegated to supporting roles on Harold teams, letting men initiate scenes and deferring to them throughout, often playing the wife or girlfriend role in performance after performance. Jane demonstrated that women could play any role, and that it was important for women to take a more active role in scenes by moving the action forward rather than simply supporting their male partners. Confidence and an assertive attitude were as important as support, a maxim that seemingly went against ImprovOlympic's support your partner above all else ethos, and something The Annoyance had been teaching from its inception. Part of what distinguished the 1990s, what Seham has deemed the third wave of improv, both within and outside of ImprovOlympic was an increase in diversity. Groups like Stir Friday Night, Oui Be Negroes, GayCo Productions and many more began to break down and challenge the white male dominance of improv. Diversity also meant a diversity of styles, and as we'll see in the next chapter, The Annoyance's philosophy of take care of yourself first was influencing ImprovOlympic teams like Jane by introducing a more assertive style of improv.

²⁰⁰ For instance, it took Second City until 2011's *South Side of Heaven* for the company to have two African-American males in the same cast.

²⁰¹ Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*, 71.

The late 1990s also saw three other firsts for the theatre that expanded the form both geographically and stylistically. First, in 1996, ImprovOlympic alums Matt Besser, Amy Poehler, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh founded the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in New York City. More fully explored in the next chapter, the UCB was infused with an off-beat sensibility and brought a game-of-the-scene-based Harold to New York. The UCB also had a television show from 1998-2000, which was based on a Harold, that further exposed the structure to a wider audience. Then in 1997, ImprovOlympic West opened in Los Angeles, spreading the Harold to the west coast. Finally, the theatre anointed the musical group Baby Wants Candy its first official resident company in 1997-98. Performing totally original improvised one-act musicals, Baby Wants Candy took the basic scenic components of the Harold and married them with musical theatre to create one of the longest lasting forms and teams in improvisational theatre.

The mixture of music and improv had been building for several years (Second City has almost always included musical numbers in their revues for instance), including with the independent storefront theatre group Cardiff Giant Theater Company. They used improvisational workshops and performances as the basis for dark, anarchistic, and absurd ensemble created comic plays and musicals that featured “broad characters playing out often-absurd situations in a familiar, yet not specifically identifiable, world.”²⁰² Behind their improv fueled ensemble created plays the group became a Chicago staple in the late 1980s and early 1990s. After Cardiff Giant closed, two of its members, Greg Kotis and Mark Hollmann, would take their musical improv experience, training, and aesthetic to Broadway with the hit musical *Urinetown*. As the success of *Urinetown* demonstrates, more important than any structural changes to the Harold or

²⁰² Greg Kotis and Mark Hollmann, *Urinetown, The Musical* (New York: Faber & Faber, 2003).

expansion to either coast, by the late 1990s the Harold and long form improv were beginning to make their mark in more mainstream commercial ventures as a generation of performers trained in the style and philosophy of the Harold and long form improv came into their own, signaling the beginning of a shift in the way that comedy was being created.

THE HAROLD AFTER CLOSE

In 1999 with a thriving theatre, burgeoning community, and a list of successful alumni and improv based mainstream successes, ImprovOlympic faced perhaps its biggest challenge: life without the Guru. Just when the theatre was beginning to achieve national notoriety as his students became big time comic performers and Close himself was being hailed as a theatrical innovator and genius, his way of life caught up with him. Close lived what some have kindly described as a self-destructive lifestyle, filled with suicide attempts and numerous decades-long bouts with various forms of substance abuse. At the age of 65 his routine caught up with him and his battle with emphysema landed him in the hospital. As Johnson notes in *The Funniest One in the Room*, while in the hospital “Del watched, bemused by the frustration of the nurses who attempted to draw blood but couldn’t find an uncollapsed vein. ‘Sorry! I got there first!’ he would tell them with a laugh.”²⁰³ When it became apparent that Close was dying, Halpern and others threw a giant party for Close (his birthday was only a week away). Students and former pupils and ImprovOlympic stars dropped everything to come to Close’s bed-side. Sahlins attended the party as well, and said, “Del, for tonight, it is an art form.” Joyce Sloane was with Sahlins and quickly pointed out that “Bernie, you’re standing on his

²⁰³ Johnson, 354.

oxygen line.”²⁰⁴ Close’s passing left a giant void as the theatre was now without its ideological leader.

With Close gone Halpern had to run the theatre alone, and turned to Miles Stroth to help fill the artistic void. Stroth and Dan Bakkedahl would provide some relief with their two-man show *Zumpf!* in 1999, a fast paced show with a dizzying amount of scenes that quickly gained cult status. It also paved the way for two-man improv groups like TJ & Dave, and Stephanie Weir and Bob Dassié’s highly influential *WeirDass*, as well as Joe Bill and Mark Sutton from *The Annoyance* who were breaking ground with their improvised show *Bassprov*, which featured two Indiana hicks on a fishing trip sitting in their boat waxing poetic on deep philosophical points as well as telling fart jokes. *Zumpf!* was in part inspired by the success and innovations of groups like *Quartet* and *Trio*. Aside from its speed, which again pushed the Harold to move faster and present more and more scenes, Stroth and Bakkedahl developed an intricate system of internal editing. Rather than relying on a swipe edit or someone from outside of the scene to edit, the two had to edit their own scenes and created a system of edits within a scene where one actor might make a slight physical shift, which would edit the scene and take the performance in a new direction. Both players would recognize the move and instantly shift to new characters and situations. Aside from speed, the more nuanced editing techniques helped push Harold teams to transition between scenes in more subtle and innovative ways, as well as heightening listening and observation skills. Bakkedahl commented on the show saying “I’ve never done a show as experimental and open-minded.”²⁰⁵ He credited the Family’s Stroth for getting him to focus on the art form of improv rather than on the

²⁰⁴ Johnson, 356.

²⁰⁵ Kabir Hamid, “So Long, Second City,” *Chicago Reader*, March 10, 2005.

opportunities it might provide, pointing again to the commodification of improv as well as the tension between money and creativity, saying “Fuck that crap! You don’t need that. This is the pure art form.”²⁰⁶

Bakkedahl and Stroth’s comments point to another growing problem at ImprovOlympic: its own success. So many students were being picked up by Second City and various television shows that many performers were starting to view the theatre as a stepping stone to something larger. Bakkedahl, who would make it to the Second City mainstage and later to *The Daily Show*, commented that “everybody’s busting their ass to get on mainstage... There are only six spots. So fit one of those roles at the exact right time, and maybe it will happen. In the meantime, enjoy your fucking Harold show, because you’re wasting your time thinking about that shit. You’re already doing it.”²⁰⁷ Performers were now seeking out training in the Harold because it was becoming the premiere training ground for comic performers, and the theatre had to navigate the delicate balance of promoting the success of their students and preserving the hard work and dedication to the craft that made those students successful.

Behind the ethos of “preserve the art form” and “learn your craft,” ImprovOlympic and the Harold pushed on. Inspired by the rigor and love of craft displayed by Jazz Freddy and Zumpf!, in 1999 J.T.S. Brown emerged as the latest super group dedicated to the art form. Directed by Mick Napier (Craig Cackowski later took over), and featuring TJ Jagodowski, Jason Sudeikis, Ed Goodman, and Jack McBrayer among the dozen cast members, the group embraced Napier’s ethos of play. Cackowski summed up the group in a 2006 interview, saying that the group was designed “to involve

²⁰⁶ Hamid.

²⁰⁷ Hamid.

as many players as possible at a time, to have a higher level of theatricality and polish than a typical improv show, and to encourage any move to be made at any time, with the idea that anything that happened was the perfect thing to happen.”²⁰⁸ Much like with Ed and Jazz Freddy, J.T.S. Brown was trying to go back to the basics of Close’s improv philosophy at a time when many performers were looking to become famous as quickly as possible.

Abandoning the three-by-three thematic structure, they embraced the growing trend started by Ed and pushed to the foreground by the Family of a more narrative approach. Rather than a linear plot, however, the story is told and retold from varying viewpoints, displaying postmodernist’s belief in multiple voices, truths, and realities. J.T.S. Brown explores the concept that every story is true from the viewpoint of the storyteller. By showing the same story from different viewpoints we come to realize that truth is constructed. Much like the Harold, Deconstruction, and LaRonde demonstrate the ways that stories, truth, and identity are constructed, J.T.S. Brown’s form posits that truth is not inherent, rather it is something that is made.

While the form moved quickly and could go in any direction, it also usually featured a six-to-seven minute two person anchor scene in the middle of the show. While the form broke many traditional Harold concepts, it also featured recurring characters and story-lines that were interspersed and connected in unique and humorous ways. According to Jack Helbig, “what made J.T.S. Brown special was how carefully they listened, building on one another’s work. Instead of going for the quick laugh, they

²⁰⁸ Craig Cackowski, “JTS Brown description by Craig Cackowski,” *ImprovInterviews.com*, November 15, 2006.

created multidimensional characters and interesting situations that really pulled us in.”²⁰⁹

The group was also highly theatrical, utilizing the entire theatre as a stage and often performing in the audience, breaking traditional barriers of performer/audience. Likewise improvisers no longer stood on the sides of the stage if they weren’t in a scene, but moved backstage. Like Zumpf!, edits could come from anywhere, including within the scene itself. Like the super-groups before them, J.T.S. Brown sought to legitimize improvisational theatre by positioning it as theatre rather than as a comedy show. Like so many before them they recognized the power and influence of improvisation, and sought to broaden improv’s recognition.

Like Jane, J.T.S. Brown is also noteworthy because it is a prime example of the cross-pollination of improv in the late 1990s. While in the 1980s and early 1990s improvisers were often associated with one theatre, with ImprovOlympic’s success and the number of their performers making their way onto the Second City mainstage, improvisers began to train and perform all over the city. The Annoyance, Second City, and ImprovOlympic all have a distinct brand of improv, and performers began going to each theatre to hone certain skills. Mick Napier’s aforementioned directing at Second City also helped break down the barriers between the theatres. At ImprovOlympic, for example, Susan Messing, one of the Annoyance Theatre’s most recognizable members “known for her take-no-prisoners approach,” developed a new level of training for the iO curriculum focused on the more physical and attacking style of The Annoyance.²¹⁰

Messing, who claims to have come up with the curriculum while getting stoned in her bathtub, created exercises based on movement, character, environment, and teamwork

²⁰⁹ Jack Helbig, “J.T.S. Brown,” *Chicago Reader*, April 22, 1999.

²¹⁰ Jennifer Vanasco, “Trois and Panties Happy!,” *Chicago Reader*, January 10, 2002.

that ultimately became iO's Level 2. The first Chicago Improv Festival appeared in 1998, as well as the Chicago Comedy Association, which further worked to expose and intertwine the various styles of improv in the city and around the country, absorbing various voices and styles. This all meant that the Harold was being influenced by numerous styles and schools of thought, and as a result was growing into a fast, loose, aggressive, and narrative form.

TJ & DAVE

With the dawn of a new century ImprovOlympic was thriving. On any given evening the downstairs cabaret featured four to six teams performing Harolds, while upstairs in the Del Close Theatre two-to-three teams would present shows experimenting with the form. Perhaps the most influential show of the young century was TJ & Dave. Debuting in 2002, and performing on a semi-regular basis at the Barrow Street Theatre²¹¹ in New York since 2006, the duo has become one of iO's most popular and influential groups. The *Chicago Reader* deemed them the “gold standard for group improv,”²¹² while *Time Out New York* called TJ & Dave “the best 50 minutes of improv comedy that we've ever seen.”²¹³ Ryan Hubbard captures critical opinion when he says:

In what is perhaps the country's best improv city, this is perhaps the best ongoing improv show... T.J. Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi, who have 30 years of stage time between them, are what most improvisers are not (liberally intelligent, extremely talented actors as well as comedians) and do what most improvisers do not (carefully listen to each other before responding). The result is an exhibition of verbal facility and pantomimic agility—they can do everything from multiple English accents to magic tricks—that anticipates and plays off the audience's reactions. During their

²¹¹ The Barrow Street Theatre is an off-Broadway house in the West Village.

²¹² Ryan Hubbard, “Best of Chicago 2008: Best Improv Group,” *Chicago Reader*, July 1, 2008.

²¹³ *Time Out New York*. <http://ioimprov.com/chicago/io/shows/tj-and-dave>.

hour of subtle character development, it's easy to forget it's all made up.²¹⁴

Celebrating their ten-year anniversary in 2012, TJ & Dave eschewed the rapid fire approach that was gaining traction and re-explored the concept of slow comedy advocated by Close. Their structurally simple shows push “the idea of long, slow improv to its limit,” with Helbig noting that “in less than an hour, they constructed a subtle, moving, dryly funny four-character Pinteresque domestic drama” that can be summed up in one word: “Brilliant.”²¹⁵ Quite simply TJ & Dave is “an hour of improv that, subverting the art form’s record of wild inconsistency, is brilliant almost every time.”²¹⁶

A typical performance is roughly an hour long and centers on the relationship between the two characters that are created at the top of the performance. The duo then explores those two characters—why they are together, what they want, how they feel about each other and themselves. Other characters emerge throughout that heighten the initial characters’ situation and/or illuminate the theme(s) of the piece. The performance usually centers on one very long and nuanced scene that may or may not have shorter tangential scenes that in some way relate to the central characters or the theme of the piece. Usually the new characters simply inhabit the world that has already been created—Jagodowski or Pasquesi simply move to a new location onstage and create a new character—rather than cutting the scene and shifting to a completely new world. Because they tend to deeply focus on one major scene they generally end up using a single general setting. For instance, during a performance at the University of Missouri the performance took place within an office. The action shifted around to various places

²¹⁴ Ryan Hubbard, “T.J. and Dave,” *Chicago Reader*, June 1, 2006.

²¹⁵ Jack Helbig, “T.J. and Dave,” *Chicago Reader*, November 21, 2002.

²¹⁶ Steve Heisler, “Shadow of a Doubt,” *Time Out Chicago*, December 13-26, 2007 (Issue 146).

within the office but always stayed rooted in the central locale. The result of this approach is a more linear show than a traditional Harold, and a performance that closely resembles a play.

It's telling that most critics refer to TJ & Dave's shows as "plays." Jagodowski and Pasquesi themselves can't completely articulate their form, with Jagodowski calling it "an hour-long, two-actor semi play?"²¹⁷ For example, Anne Ford of *The Reader* says that after TJ & Dave have begun "a *play* blossoms, with both men playing pedestrian characters (impatient businessman, barista) as well as outlandish ones (pet groomer cum drug-dealer, 'half-retarded' mailroom clerk)."²¹⁸ Likewise the *Chicago Tribune* recently previewed an upcoming performance thusly: "The long-form, 45-minute *improv play* by comics TJ Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi is still considered one of the best improv shows in the country."²¹⁹ Their shows are so technically sound, and void of most improv gimmicks, that it's easy to forget that they are improvised. It's such a simple form—essentially it is just a two person extended improv scene—but it is done so well that critics and others feel the need to "elevate" it above traditional improvisation when in fact TJ & Dave is a celebration of the most basic philosophies of long form improv.

Another reason that so many critics label their work plays is because they don't follow the nearly religious rite of asking for an audience suggestion. In the improv world foregoing audience interaction is nearly sacrilegious. TJ & Dave don't concern themselves with that, simply telling the audience at the top of the show to "trust us, this is all made up." They do not rely on traditional structures or improv tricks that predominate

²¹⁷ Qtd. in Will Litton, "T.J. Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi, Interview," *Wag's Revue*, Issue 4, Winter 2010, 25.

²¹⁸ Anne Ford, "Life Without a Script: How funnyman TJ Jagodowski fell into improv—and the mysterious affliction that keeps him from leaving it." *Chicago Reader*, June 5, 2008. (Emphasis added.)

²¹⁹ Doug George, "Cheer up at 5 funny fall shows," *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 2008. (Emphasis added.)

so many improvisational performances and experimental forms, instead “their onstage chemistry, comic instincts and never-miss-a-beat improvisation abilities, rather than audience suggestions, keep the evening flowing.”²²⁰ Because the scenes emerge so seamlessly, they use more plot/story than most improv (even though the story is a result of character exploration), and because Pasquesi and Jagodowski don’t take audience suggestions, they’re sometimes accused of writing their material ahead of time, though “we take it as a wonderful compliment,” Pasquesi says.²²¹ This misnomer, however, again points to the idea that improvisation is lesser than traditional theater.

Steven McElroy of *The New York Times* noted that “a latecomer could sit through an entire performance by this duo without realizing that there is no script.”²²² *The New York Post* similarly was struck by the group’s ability: “Most new plays go through endless rewrites, developments, workshops, more rewrites and rehearsals. And yet, most new plays aren’t even good—or at least not as good as the one made up on the spot the other night by the eponymous stars of ‘TJ & Dave.’”²²³ The labeling of their shows as plays helps to legitimize improvisation in a general sense and points to the fundamental connection between improvisation and creativity, but also misses or ignores the core ideology underlying their performances. By downplaying the improv at the heart of the form, critics are actually working to keep improv on the margins rather than celebrating the simple beauty of really well executed improv scenes. They almost seem to be saying that if it’s done that well it can’t be improv, when in fact TJ & Dave is one of the simplest forms of improv being performed.

²²⁰ Steven McElroy, “‘TJ & Dave’ and ‘Two Men Talking.’” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2008.

²²¹ Ford, “Life Without a Script.”

²²² McElroy, “‘TJ & Dave’ and ‘Two Men Talking.’”

²²³ Frank Scheck, “One Act, One Hour Wonders,” *New York Post*, February 1, 2007.

While critics and others point to their performances as “plays” or “improvised plays” instead of improv, and celebrate their storytelling and narrative creations, TJ and Dave don’t think of their form as narrative. As Jagodowski explains, “we don’t really do narrative. What we are concerned with is the two people that are in the space. We just focus on who they are, who they are to each other, and their emotion. The story, whatever the story is just slips out, oozes out through the cracks of the exploration of the relationship between those two people.”²²⁴ Like a Harold and most long form improv, the story takes a back seat to character. In long form improv the relationship between the two characters is paramount. Plot and narrative are a result of character, rather than the other way around. So while their “plays” usually follow some sort of narrative or story, that is not the goal, instead the story is an outgrowth of the exploration of the characters and themes onstage, a philosophy that forms the bedrock of all long form improvisation. Let’s briefly look at how focusing on character and relationship-based scenes informs their work to more fully illustrate this point.

In the aforementioned show at Mizzou, the central character Tommy, played by Jagodowski, was suffering from an allergy to his new feather pillow. The allergy caused him to be abnormally honest. Throughout Tommy’s day at the pen distribution office (where he and his coworkers did virtually no work and nearly every character spent half the day questioning why they even bothered to get out of bed in the morning), he faced numerous situations where he could either lie to be nice to the other person, or tell the truth of the situation. He came clean to his boss about being late for work, chided a customer about his daughter’s chastity and how much she was going to enjoy having sex, and confronted a co-worker about her willingness to live. The comedy came about not

²²⁴ T.J. Jagodowski, Personal Interview, February 3, 2012.

because Jagodowski told everyone what he thought about them, but because of the ways that we are deceitful to those around us, and the ways that simply telling the truth and revealing our intentions can often times be absurd—revealing the lengths we often go to avoid telling the truth.

For instance, Tommy’s co-worker, played by Pasquesi, received a letter from Karen Moleroon from human resources.²²⁵ The letter was filled with blackened flower petals and a note stating “it was nice to have had the pleasure of knowing you.” The duo used this odd turn of phrase to accomplish two things. First, it is an example of the philosophy that there are no mistakes in improv. Rather than trying to correct the grammar or change the letter, they worked to justify the odd phrasing (although whether this was a mistake or intentionally mis-phrased is not clear... which is the point). They then used this mistake to create a series of callbacks about verb-tenses and Karen’s letters—she later sends a letter to Tommy that simultaneously breaks up with him and speaks about a great future together. They also used the “mistake” as a gift to define Karen’s character as a person who lived in fluid time—at least in her mind time doesn’t happen in a linear way. Second, they used the confusing phrasing to muddy Karen’s intentions.

In the scene the coworkers come to the conclusion that Karen might have committed suicide, so Tommy calls her work extension to see if she is alive. After an incredibly awkward conversation where Tommy tries to avoid telling Karen why he’s actually calling (and where he’s going for lunch), he hangs up with the promise to call her back with his lunch plans. When he does call back he eventually comes clean both

²²⁵ In a Q&A after the show Jagodowski pointed to the fact that he had a clear idea of the type of person Karen was simply by declaring her name. “You here Moleroon and you think of someone that is a little bit down on themselves and not necessarily this statuesque bombshell.”

about his lunch plans and why he called, telling Karen “To be honest my initial reason for calling you was because your letter made it sound like you were going to off yourself...So the first call was to make sure you were still alive.” The brutal honesty of the moment elicited a huge audience response because no excuse would have been as humorous as Tommy simply telling the truth. It also fulfilled his character’s point of view from the very top of the show—his pillow made him honest. Since this was established at the very top of the show it allowed the audience to “be in on the joke” and more fully enjoy the moment. Furthermore, this example illustrates how the story develops out of the characters’ relationship and point of view. Tommy’s honesty allergy was driving the story, rather than his honesty being a result of the story.²²⁶

By performing an extended two person improv scene they basically abandon the Harold’s structural elements, while staying true to the scenic relationships that are the base of the Harold and all long form improv. Their different approach is evident from the moment they take the stage. They begin every show with the Ike Reilly Assassination song “I Don’t Want What You Got (Goin’ On).” As the song blares they calmly appear onstage. Jagodowski then begins scanning the audience, making eye contact with whomever he can. Pasquesi and Jagodowski then turn to look at each other. Eventually one of them says something and the improvisation goes from there. The regular opening of a Harold usually starts with the team soliciting an audience suggestion. The team then uses monologues, group movement, word association, or some other game to explore the suggestion and generate ideas: the faster the better, the more info the better. The Harold opening is usually full of energy and can be rather frenetic. TJ & Dave take it slow, relying on their connection and improv skills, jumping right into the action rather than

²²⁶ “TJ & Dave,” performance at The University of Missouri, February 3, 2012.

building an opening full of ideas to later pull from. The duo simply takes the stage and waits for inspiration or a scene to organically emerge. Once it does, “a madcap, multi-character, three act comedy is written, cast, opened and closed before our very eyes. It was one of the funniest little plays no one will ever see again.”²²⁷ The pace of the show is one of its hallmarks, and one of the main sources of comedy. One of the funniest moments of the Mizzou performance came simply from watching Pasquesi’s Karen silently staring at the telephone waiting for Tommy to call her back. He didn’t overplay the moment or rush it; instead he honestly sat and intently waited for the phone to ring. When it did ring and he answered, the audience delighted in the simplicity and truth of the moment.

Thusly TJ & Dave demonstrate the vast influence that the Harold has had on comedic performance—even when they totally break the structural elements of the form they are embracing its philosophical tenets—who are these two characters in the scene and why are they together. What they are doing is actually more basic than the Harold—they are simply exploring a set of characters by doing a series of connected improvised relationship based scenes. In many ways they are the ultimate proof of Close’s belief that long form improv is worthy of the stage. They are so simple that it’s easy to forget that they are improvising. Unlike many of the other forms and structures that have built upon the Harold, for TJ & Dave there aren’t really any tricks: no stage-camera angles, no newspaper bits, no source scenes, no three-by-three structure. Much like the foundation of the Harold, TJ & Dave is based on the improv staple of two person improvised scenes. Their success has helped validate improvisational theatre and points to its potential, and they have done so by executing the core principles of scenic improvisation and slow

²²⁷ John Del Signore, “Opinionist: TJ & Dave,” *Gothamist.com*, February 18, 2007.

comedy at the highest level. Improviser Cal DeBruyne sums it up best: “It’s ridiculous how good they are. Like a guitar player watching Stevie Ray Vaughn play, you know you’ll never be as good as him, you’re a little bit jealous, but happy that someone can be that good at it.”²²⁸

EXPERIMENTATION IN THE NEW MILLENNIUM

While TJ & Dave continued gaining notoriety for their improvised plays, other groups continued experimenting with the form by creating new structures, such as house team People of Earth’s 2002 show *Funny Cry Happy Gift*. Act I featured a traditional Harold, while Act II, *Detours*, took a single improvised scene that the group then repeated over and over again with different actors assuming the roles each time. This structure again demonstrates the ways that identity and truth are constructed, as well as the way that long form improv generates humor from postmodern combinations. Act III, *The Snow Globe*, was almost like a sitcom, with a new set of characters all in the same setting reacting to some interruption of their routine.

That same year the all-star squad Atlantis had a hit with *The Subject*. The highly postmodern form explores the ideas, events, and issues in one person’s mind, deconstructing and fragmenting the subject into a series of connected yet disjointed pieces. Each week a different team member played “the subject.” He or she never leaves the stage while the other players enter and exit as various friends, relatives, enemies, demons, fantasies, and more. Time is relative as past and present can co-exist, it is after all a highly subjective and expressionistic form, and the over-all effect is akin to the idea of your life flashing in front of your eyes. Dual Exhaust, another improv duo, featuring

²²⁸ Cal DeBruyne, Personal Interview, November 22, 2008.

Zach Ward and Beth Melewski performed a structure that Nick Green called “a bastardization of the Harold with every ounce of structure bled from it.”²²⁹ They blended monologues and scenes together into a highly intricate story that the two then untangle to the amazement of the audience. While not a Harold, their form still relied on Ward and Melewski connecting various threads that seem completely independent.

With all of the growing experimentation, the Harold continued to thrive. Still showcased on the theatre’s mainstage, the Harold, while changing and being influenced by the experiments happening upstairs and across the city was still the company’s bread and butter. As Nick Green notes, the Harold is:

the house specialty at ImprovOlympic because it sets all performers on a relatively level playing field. Experienced improvisers stand to learn just as much as newbies by bowing respectfully to the group aesthetic, and the egregious showboating that colors some of the theatre’s less structured efforts rarely crops up in its Harold-based shows. Quality control is assured by the knowledge—shared by the audience and team members alike—that staying true to the spirit of exploration frequently yields intriguing results.²³⁰

So while the theatre continued to produce shows like *The Daily Show* style fake news show Whirled News Tonight and various sketch performances, its house teams continued to try and master the form that made the theatre famous. Teams like Georgia Pacific (2000 Del Award for Favorite Cabaret Team), People of Earth, Deep Schwa (founded in 1996 they are the longest running Harold team), Carl and the Passions, and Valhalla continued experimenting with the Harold, pushing it outside of a set structure while continuing to focus on its basic elements. Georgia Pacific, for example, after years of performing Harolds infused with an Annoyance/Family style consisting of “dark, often sardonic scene work and an emphasis on quickness and verbal gymnastics,” shifted gears

²²⁹ Nick Green, “Original Message,” *Chicago Reader*, January 3, 2002.

²³⁰ Nick Green, “Helix,” *Chicago Reader*, April 17, 2003.

and created the form the Bat, which is akin to a radio play and is performed entirely in the dark.²³¹ Relying on ensemble created sound-scapes the form ignites the audiences' imagination, and though it sounds boring, it actually is like being at a live radio play...with the lights off. As Halpern noted, "The Harold is just training wheels. Long form is all about listening and reincorporating. You don't have to follow the Harold structure to do that. Once they got that message, there was no turning back."²³²

With the Harold still its driving force ImprovOlympic was about to celebrate its twenty-fifth anniversary. Along with a star-studded reunion anniversary show at the Chicago Theatre, ImprovOlympic officially changed its name to iO in 2005, ending a lengthy battle with the U.S. Olympic Committee. Much like 1995 was a landmark year, so too was 2005-06 which also marked the publication of Halpern's *Art by Committee* (2006). Technically a sequel to *Truth in Comedy*, the book explores some of the changes to the work, while reiterating many of the maxims first espoused in *Truth in Comedy*. Perhaps the most beneficial aspect of the book is the DVD, which has several sample performances, including a more free-form Harold performed by house team The Reckoning. Since so many improv performances only happen once and then disappear forever, I think it is beneficial to analyze a recent Harold that is readily available for others to view so that the evolution of the form is a bit more concrete, and the mechanics of the form can be more fully understood. Many of the innovations we've explored have funneled into the Harold, creating a more narrative form that is much faster, elastic, and flexible, so let's see what the new Harold looks like in a bit more detail.

²³¹ Nick Green, "Georgia Pacific," *Chicago Reader*, April 21, 2005.

²³² Halpern, Personal Interview.

THE RECKONING PERFORM A HAROLD

One of iO's most successful contemporary teams, The Reckoning's Harold begins with the suggestion "surgery." For the opener, one player lies on the floor in a "dead" position and the rest of the team gathers around him. While some players provide the background noise of hospital ventilators and beeping machines, the others begin a modified free-association spouting off phrases about the dead man and the situation, such as "The faint smell of formaldehyde and sickness wafts in through underneath the surgery doors," and "This man was hit by a car while walking across the street," "His family waits outside," "They don't know yet of his condition."

After about forty-five seconds, and still within the opener, they then pull out another player, move to a new space and begin creating a medical student character for him. In a similar way, the group begins saying phrases that define the character, again an example of the ways that the Harold speaks to the way identity and truth are constructed, as well as demonstrating iO's support your partner maxim. By giving information and defining the character not only do we see how our identity is often tied up in how others view us, the improviser is given the gift of a relatively developed character that he can then play later in the Harold. We quickly learn that he wanted to study literature and poetry, but felt obligated to his parents to study medicine. In an example of reincorporation or a callback, one player announces "His parents are waiting outside for him," to which another replies "They don't know of his condition." The group then shifts again to create a third frame for the piece, and begin describing a stethoscope and endowing it with feelings and needs using a form known as an invocation (for instance the stethoscope "Longs to hear a beating human heart"). The group then begins to

verbalize a beating heart and we return to the man lying on the ground, who announces from his deathbed “This is the day I passed away.” The group then carries his body offstage, which ends the opener. It is readily apparent from the opener then that the group is not following a traditional structure. Instead of using one method for idea generation, they are intertwining several common elements—word association, endowment, and an invocation. While this is not a radical change, it does demonstrate the more flexible form of the current Harold.

The first beat begins with a scene between a mother, father, and her son (1A), where the mother is experiencing a severe migraine headache. After a couple of comical attempts to ease the migraine, she begins hearing the rain outside (sound effects provided by the offstage players) and has a feeling that a lot of people are going to die and the only way to stop the impending tragedy is to stop the rain. The next scene, 1B, features a father trying to get his asthmatic daughter into a prestigious school, mainly by offering to build various facilities for the school. The father, who owns a concrete company continues trying to bribe the school director as the scene fades out. The first real structural break occurs in 1C, which features a series of monologues and then transitions into a more traditional scene. The first monologue is given by a British orphan who realizes he’s the only kid at school without parents. The second by a student that gets to bring home two friends after school for “fun time in the rec-room.” The third is given by a brother and sister, whose father is a mortician, and they often use the bodies in the basement to put on puppet shows. The four monologists then come together for a scene (1C) where they are classmates deciding what they are going to do after school.

An offstage player then comes on and shifts the scene, declaring that the orphan's real father and the mortician's wife are "in the same Arby's right now, sitting a mere three feet away from each other." As is common throughout their entire Harold, the edits for each scene eschew the traditional swipe edit, and incorporate various elements to move the scene, such as a modified cut-to from 1C to Arby's, as well as the internal edits found within the opening as well as in 1C from monologue to monologue and then into the scene itself. In the Arby's scene the two parents share a rather flirtatious meal, which serves as the beginning of the first game. While the two flirt through quips about the unhealthiness of Arby's food, the humor of which arises out of the social commentary about obesity in America, two players join the scene and begin acting as the man's heart. As the scene progresses we learn that he's in need of heart surgery. The players then seamlessly morph the scene through a subtle internal edit into the man's heart surgery. The other players come onstage and use the woman as an artery, trying to attach her to the man, but his body rejects the woman. Another player tries to be an artery, but again is rejected. The doctor then mounts the man and is sewn to him, giving over his own artery. Another internal edit shifts the game scene to a courtroom, where the doctor is on trial for being sewn to the man, with med students suing their teacher (the doctor sewn to the Arby's man) for not properly teaching them how to be doctors. Commenting on the issue of gay marriage, the doctor argues that he made a lifestyle choice, and that nobody should judge him for the way he wants to live. The judge then rules in favor of the doctor, in favor of love.

Moving out of the game and into the second beat, the next scene (2A) takes us to a bed-and-breakfast, where the Dad from 1A is talking with the owner of the B&B. In a

split scene, the son is trying to comfort the deteriorating mother, telling her that “We found the last person on your list. Dad’s downstairs trying to get him to change his ways before the storm ends and he dies.” Meanwhile, the two men have a conversation about Snoopy, America, and being out-dated. As they talk the conversation shifts to the giant storm on the horizon. For the B&B owner, the storm is a metaphor representing the changing tide of American culture, ominously threatening to take away the conservative America that he loves.

The next scene (2B) takes us back to the asthmatic daughter from 1B, as well as the orphan from 1C. They are waiting for their parents to pick them up from school. The orphan tries to impress her with his fake family history, lacrosse skills, and his father’s Lincoln Town Car. The father from 1B appears and the daughter asks if she can get a ride home from the orphan’s father. We take a quick detour (2C) to see the orphan’s grandparents in England trying to track down the lost boy. The group again splits the stage and the orphan boy begins trying to “hail” a Lincoln Town Car, when he is hit by a car. At this moment the other players on stage move the body to the hospital, and we realize that the orphan is the dead person from the opening.

They begin performing surgery, kicking off the next group game as well as starting the third beat. Here again we see the influence of narrative on the Harold, where the group game is not a thematic exploration of the ideas raised, but is instead a furthering of the plot. While there are underlying themes in this Harold, it is predominantly a narrative kicked off by the dead body in the opening, heightened by the prophecy of the migraine mom (1A) and following the plight of the orphan (1C). Each character that comes back is furthering the story, and there are virtually no scenes that are

purely thematic explorations. For instance, as the surgery starts the Dad from 1A comes on and declares that he was the one who hit the boy “because it was raining so hard.” The dad is sent to the waiting room, but doesn’t go. The hospital staff learns that the orphan has no parents or insurance, and the Harold begins to critique the healthcare system. The hospital staff, rather than work on a patient with no insurance start discussing using the boy’s organs rather than saving him. The dad protests offering to pay for everything. At this point, they find a note on the boy that starts, “If I should die I’d like my heart to go to my real mother.” The rain noise returns, and the team gathers around the boy a la the opening.

The scene then morphs into the mortician’s kids from 1C, who begin using the orphan’s body as a puppet to reenact *The Tempest*, with the orphan as Caliban in what becomes 3A. After re-enacting a scene from the television show *Roseanne*, they then decide to cut out the orphan’s heart, which is “twice the size” of a normal heart because he “was making up for something.” They drag the body off the chair and bring him downstage. The staging initiates a flashback (3B), as the orphan is now at a lacrosse game and he sees his mom and dad. As the scene progresses an aspiring marathon runner with a heart condition runs onstage, and we learn that the orphan’s organs were donated to various people, including the marathon runner, the cement factory owner (who is the father from 1B), a little girl with asthma (also from 1B), a worker at Arby’s (from the first game), a school got a new science department (from 1B), and one woman got a “special vein for her brain” (the mother from 1A). In a callback to the Arby’s surgery, as each person’s new organs are described, the orphan mounts the player (the same actor

played both the orphan and the doctor from the first group game). They then return to the opening, except this time the body on the ground is the mother from 1A.

As this Harold demonstrates, the strict three-by-three structure is only loosely followed, yet the structure is still evident throughout. The Harold still features three initial scenes that are divergent from one another, and all three of those scenes, storylines, and characters reappeared at least once and often twice, before connecting in the end. The main structural difference was that they allowed flexibility within each scene, as evidenced by the monologues used in 1C, the second group game melding into the third beat, as well as the many split scenes and multi-focus games. One of the hallmarks of the evolving Harold that can be seen in *The Reckoning* is the merging of scenes. No longer are scenes solely cut with a simple swipe edit. Scenes grow out of one another, morph together, or happen simultaneously, as evidenced by the second group game starting in surgery, then morphing to the two mortician kids putting on *The Tempest* before shifting to the organ donation sequence. As noted, they also follow a more narrative structure, as the story of the dead orphan boy dominates the Harold, with the themes of loss, storms, belonging, and the like underscoring and supporting the plot. Yet even while the Harold morphed, the three-by-three structure did not go away, and much of the humor relies on callbacks and connections. With all of the experimentation, and while the Harold has evolved, it is still rooted in the three-by-three structure, and as we shall see new teams are encouraged to perform traditional Harolds before branching out.

THE HAROLD AT 25

By the Harold's 25th anniversary in 2008, iO's team roster had grown to twenty-eight active Harold teams, several house teams, and special groups (such as TJ & Dave) that perform on a semi-rotating schedule. While non-Harold shows are presented nightly in the Del Close Theatre that push improv in new directions and influence the Harold's evolution (several of which we've explored), the majority of performances are by Harold teams in the downstairs mainstage cabaret theatre. In a typical evening the Harold lineup usually moves from a very young team (both in terms of players and time together) that performs a rather strict Harold, to a more established team that performs a modified Harold, or as Halpern likes to say a Harold where "we've taken off the training wheels," such as the above example.²³³ While teams have experimented with the structure and form, the basic concept of the Harold has always remained the same, according to Halpern, "we try to take something trivial and find the meaning of life in it, instead of taking the meaning of life and trivializing it."²³⁴ Let's briefly look at one such mainstage Harold line-up from November 2008, featuring Whiskey Rebellion, Troy, and Mike Helicopter.

Obviously due to improv's very nature each performance can be wildly different. So rather than focusing on too many particulars about the actual performances, I will be focusing on the Harold structure employed by each team, which is fairly consistent night to night. The most inexperienced team usually starts off the evening, in this case Whiskey Rebellion. First appearing in July 2007, Whiskey Rebellion has, according to improviser Ben Bowman, "dedicated itself to hitting the Harold with a hardhat mentality... We are on

²³³ Halpern, Personal Interview.

²³⁴ Tom Valeo, "ImprovOlympic," *Chicago Reader*, July 12, 1990.

stage to serve the Harold and each other.”²³⁵ This statement serves as testimony to the metanarrative and quasi religious nature of the Harold, as well as to the structure of iO. As a young team, Whiskey Rebellion is encouraged to adhere to the original Harold structure. The iO belief is that you must first master the Harold before moving on to different and more complex forms, as iO alum Kenny Metroff says, “it’s like learning algebra before calculus.”²³⁶ In their performance inspired by the suggestion “hamster,” the group followed very closely to the original Harold structure. One could follow along with a checklist and easily tick off the opener, 1A, 1B, 1C and the games all the way through to the end. One could also easily see the players keeping track of the structure, and mentally checking off each scene as they went through the structure, which made the performance feel a little restricted—as though the players were as concerned with following the structure as they were with the content of each scene. They did have a slight variation on the structure by using the third beat as a series of quick hitting tag-out scenes, rather than a strict 3A, 3B, 3C format. As Nick Hausman explains their ending run “aims to jumble all of the proceeding scenes together and tie together characters and themes.”²³⁷ While this is a change from the original Harold, it is a minor and fairly typical variation that stays true to the essence of the traditional third beat, and doesn’t dramatically change the Harold structure.

Troy, a slightly more experienced team had a bit more flexibility in their structure. While it was still readily apparent where they were in the Harold form, they added on a few twists. This is partly due to the group’s makeup. Several members trained not only at iO, but also at The Annoyance. As Troy improviser Natalie Kossar says, “a lot

²³⁵ Ben Bowman, Personal Interview, December 1, 2008.

²³⁶ Kenny Metroff, Personal Interview, December 3, 2008.

²³⁷ Nick Hausman, Personal Interview, December 2, 2008.

of people on our team come from The Annoyance school of improv, where basically people are told to chuck rules out of the window.”²³⁸ This cross-pollination of theories has helped lead to the Harold’s evolution. For example, rather than the meta-style opening of the traditional Harold where the group freely flows from idea to idea through movement, word associations, etc., Troy implements a group scene as an opener that intertwines monologues. While this is not a radical shift from the traditional Harold, it does help show the ways in which groups are using the Harold to suit their team, rather than simply playing the form. As Kossar explains “Our team functions better as a whole off of a group scene, where we can remember characters and verbal patterns... [and] is a lot easier for us to deal with and bring back into a second or third beat.”²³⁹ Rather than following the form, they have adapted the Harold to suit their strengths. This falls in line with the iO training philosophy, as iO instructor Bill Arnett tells his classes “understand the form, but don’t be a slave to it.”²⁴⁰ While the opening variation added new dimensions to the piece, Troy still essentially followed the Harold structure.

What is left unspoken, however, is that these young teams are also fighting to stay active. As we’ve seen, iO can be a rather cut-throat place. Staying close to the traditional Harold then becomes one way that young teams try to stay afloat. Teams with limited experience on the iO stage are generally held on a rather tight leash. They are expected to master the Harold before they can begin truly altering the structure. Each team has a coach, usually one of the iO instructors or a very seasoned iO veteran performer from a house team. The coach works with the team to help them find their own voice and style. Like the training center curriculum, the coach wants the team to master the Harold first,

²³⁸ Natalie Kossar, Personal Interview, December 1, 2008.

²³⁹ Kossar, Personal Interview.

²⁴⁰ DeBruyne, Personal Interview.

before altering the structure. The alterations, as we have seen, are usually within the Harold structure rather than any sort of radical departure. The coach not only works with the team in rehearsals, but also gives them immediate post show notes. As we've seen Halpern also is an active presence at the theatre, and teams that do not make the grade or can't master the Harold often find themselves out of the iO rotation. With several sets of eyes monitoring each performance, teams are "encouraged" to stick to the Harold. With so many new improvisers being trained there is a long line of performers waiting and willing to fill in the gap. The added pressure keeps younger teams from straying too far from the Harold, lest they find themselves out on the street. As one improviser on a newer team notes, "at iO they're kind of strict at wanting people to perform the almighty Harold at all times—so there's not too much room to mess with it without getting yelled at by the higher-ups."²⁴¹ However, once teams master the form they are allowed to adapt the Harold.

Mike Helicopter, who rounded out the evening, is an example of a team allowed to play with the Harold. As the most experienced Harold team of the evening they not only get the opportunity to close the show, but they also are allowed more freedom in their structure. They utilize what performer Gianni Cutri calls "source scenes." These scenes are two person scenes, the backbone of the Harold, that help establish themes, ideas, etc. Once the source scene has ended, the group then does a mini LaRonde. So after the first scene between characters A and B, another player can come in and take one of those characters to a different place. So, if character A in the first scene references his strict religious upbringing as an aside, then character C can come in and show an example of that. From there, Character D can come in and swap out Character C to add more

²⁴¹ Personal Interview.

detail about A's upbringing, or alternatively, swap out A to learn more about/add to Character C. And on and on until as Cutri says "we spiral out and run out of things."²⁴² After the first source scene has run its course, they play a group scene, followed by another source scene, and then repeat the process one more time. In total, there will be three source scenes by the end of the performance.

While this structure deviates from the original Harold's scenic beats, it follows a similar structure. Essentially Mike Helicopter still follows the three beats of the Harold, but instead of three scenes per beat, they essentially do a mini-Deconstruction within each beat. Rather than three independent scenes that come together in the end, they explore the A beat with one source scene, the B beat with the second, and the C beat with the third. Like a traditional Harold, Mike Helicopter's structure also begins reincorporating ideas, themes, and characters. By the third source scene beat (C), characters and themes from the first two source scene beats (A, B) begin to inhabit the stage and inform the work. For instance, in this particular performance the first source scene (A) featured a sexually repressed and conservative husband dealing with his sexually frustrated wife. The second source scene (B) featured a young woman who had been impregnated at a local night club. By the third source scene (C) the husband from the first beat (A) and the theme from the second beat (B) were fully incorporated into the third beat, ultimately resulting in the repressed husband giving birth to a turkey sandwich after he had the audacity to engage in oral sex with his wife.

As a more experienced team they are given more freedom to play with the structure, while of course sticking to the Harold in a macro sense. The result is simply a reorganization of the scenic beats and themes, and the incorporation of the forms

²⁴² Gianni Cutri, Personal Interview, December 4, 2008.

LaRonde and Deconstruction. Due to their variations, performers also more freely play various characters. With younger teams like Troy and Whiskey Rebellion, performers generally stick to one or two distinct characters that they play throughout the Harold. With Mike Helicopter, performers play numerous roles. This partly is due to the fact that they have many more than the standard nine scenic beats of the Harold. It's also reflective of the performers increased skill and familiarity with one another. Furthermore, it's a direct result of the freedom they have within the Harold structure. There isn't any fear of "messing up" the sequence or confusing the audience (although it should be said that there was no explanation given of their form), so players are allowed more creative freedom.

In more recent years PLAY, Bullet Lounge, Cougars, and Revolver, which received the 2009 Del Award for best Harold team, have continued to shed the training wheels of the original Harold and push the basic relationship driven scene to new heights. As we've seen throughout the Harold's history, there seems to be an ebb and flow between wild structural experimentation and then a return to basics grounded in patient scene work. The result thirty years later is a flexible Harold that can withstand a structural change like those Mike Helicopter uses that incorporate elements of a LaRonde and Deconstruction, as well as a Harold that simply uses solid relationship based two person scenes. For more experienced teams the Harold is only a guide, as iO instructor and Revolver team member Adal Rifai says, "It's fantastic to do a strict Harold, but more fun for me when you put your own touches on it."²⁴³ Yet as we've seen the majority of teams, and even house teams like The Reckoning still perform what can only be called modified Harolds. The Harold is still the core of the theatre's training program, and new

²⁴³ Adal Rifai, Personal Interview, November 20, 2008.

teams are encouraged to stick close to the original structure, showing that they can master it first before taking it to new places. Before concluding, I'd like to briefly explore iO's training curriculum, since it is vital to the theatre's success, and will help lay the roots for exploring why the Harold and improv have been so influential, and why the Harold is still at the root of iO's performances.

THE iO TRAINING CENTER & THE HAROLD

The iO training center has become the premiere performance based improvisational training grounds in the country, attracting students from all over the world.²⁴⁴ The faculty is made up of the preeminent iO improvisers, all of whom are hand selected by Halpern.²⁴⁵ The curriculum consists of five levels of classes, with each level consisting of an eight week block of classes (there are also separate writing classes offered). Aside from classes, students must also regularly attend performances, which are free for students, providing a built in audience (that also tends to spend money at the bar...and also tends to create an insular community). Rachel Mason, former iO Training Center Director, explains that "there are only so many ways we can verbalize what happens in long form. You have to see it on its feet."²⁴⁶ In class, the Harold "is hurled at them in Level 1... and then broken down more slowly in Levels 2-5B."²⁴⁷ Levels one, two, and three focus on basic improvisational skills designed to build up students' "improv muscle" so that they have the skills required to execute a Harold. Level four is

²⁴⁴ Second City has more students, as do the Groundlings, but both of their training centers use improv as a means to write sketches, whereas iO's training focuses solely on improvisation as performative art.

²⁴⁵ Before Del Close passed away in 1999 all instructors were trained by Close. Since he passed, Halpern is more selective in choosing instructors, and often makes them shadow her own class before allowing them to teach on their own.

²⁴⁶ Rachel Mason, Personal Interview, November 26, 2008.

²⁴⁷ Mason, Personal Interview.

split into two eight week blocks—4 and 4B. The Harold is fully introduced in level four, and students begin regularly performing full Harolds in level 4B. Level five is likewise split into two blocks. Students in level five begin to study and play with other long forms such as Deconstruction, Montage, Movie, and LaRonde. In 5B²⁴⁸ students must develop two of their own Harold inspired forms and perform them on the iO stage. Mason says, “even Del realized that there was something beyond the Harold. We learn the rules to break them. The Harold is the basis of everything but the last step is to fuck with the form.”²⁴⁹

As the curriculum suggests, the Harold sits at the core of the training. Because the Harold requires strong improv skills in order to be successful, it is an excellent way to teach the basics of long form improv. As former iO Training Center Director Jason Chin says, “the Harold is a codified way to teach long form. You get abstract group work, two person relationship scenes, connections, hopefully metaphors.” Chin likes to think of the Harold in terms of languages, “Harold is Latin and other forms are the Romance languages. If you learn Harold well, all of the other forms are easy.”²⁵⁰ iO graduate Becky Duncan described her Harold education as “a starting place you damn well better know.”²⁵¹ Former iO student and current Octavarius member Nick Mikula echoed her sentiments, adding “what I gathered was that once you understand the rules of the Harold, call backs, games, et cetera, it’s up to you to figure out how to use those to best tell your

²⁴⁸ Originally the curriculum was Levels 1-5 and then “Del.” But after Close passed away and Noah Gregoropoulos took over, he said, ‘Del didn’t have a number and nobody is higher or better than Del. Let’s call it 5B and there will never be class higher than 5.’”

²⁴⁹ Patton, 41.

²⁵⁰ Patton, 41.

²⁵¹ Becky Duncan, Personal Interview, 22 Nov 2008.

story and explore your theme. So the Harold is just figuring out the tools and from there you improvise.”²⁵²

The training center’s approach to the Harold spills over into performance. Because the Harold requires so many fundamental improv skills many performance teams simply adjust the Harold to meet their needs. Part of what makes the Harold so brilliant is that it forces performers to practice good improv skills in order for it to be successful. Finding relationships and patterns, yes and-ing, supporting your partner, developing scenes, reincorporating ideas, and creating a group mind are all at the heart of long form improv, and essential in a Harold. Therefore one can clearly see the ways in which the Harold has influenced a generation of comic performers since so much of iO’s improv philosophy is embedded in the Harold—players are so attuned to the skills necessary to properly execute a Harold that they carry them over to other styles and mediums of performance. Other forms have emerged, such as Mike Helicopter’s source scene format, with new forms being created every eight weeks by level 5B students, but most are simply a variation on the Harold. Arena League Football is essentially the same game played by the NFL, just with a shorter field and no sidelines. So too is the modern Harold at iO simply an extension of the original Harold with a few twists.

There are a few notable exceptions to this, and the Del Close Theatre has nightly non-Harold shows such as Armando’s and TJ & Dave. But the Harold is still the dominant form of performance at iO, and the most influential form in improvisational theatre. This is due in part to the transformative nature of the Harold. Its basic concepts are so fundamental to scenic style improv that it’s difficult for any form to truly eschew the Harold. As Mason says, “Del knew that this is an art of transformation and it would

²⁵² Nick Mikula, Personal Interview, 22 Nov 2008.

transform again. What I love about the Harold is that it's still poised for greatness, for transformation. We're in a renaissance now."²⁵³ iO's success redefined improvisational theatre and sparked an improvisational outpouring of forms, styles, and improvisers that would forever be influenced by the Harold.

Most importantly, both the innovations to the Harold and its most basic execution demonstrate its fundamental relationship to creating theatre. Whether a team is altering the form, performing traditional Harolds, or improvising performances like TJ & Dave, they rely on the basic tenets of the Harold. The vast difference in forms and styles explored thus far demonstrates the Harold's flexibility, as well as the thoroughness of its training. The skills needed for a Harold are so fundamental to creating theatre that once mastered players can use them to create a variety of performances and forms. The skills players acquire by training in the Harold—from Spolin's who/what/where exercises to the emphasis on exploring the relationship between characters and why they are in the scene together, to the fundamental concepts of yes-and, listening, justification, reincorporation, and support—allow players the creative freedom to move beyond the Harold into new and exciting forms. TJ & Dave, for instance, simply apply the basic building blocks of scenic improvisation to their performances to create improvised performances that are more highly lauded than most scripted drama. Their success along with the scores of other Harold trained performers and teams demonstrates that the Harold teaches the skills necessary to create theatre, and prove that improvisation should not be on the fringes of theatrical practice, but that it is central to creative work. Therefore in the next two chapters I will first be exploring improvisational theatre that has reacted to or transformed the Harold, before exploring the ways that the Harold is

²⁵³ Qtd. in Patton, 37.

being used as the creative base for a generation of performers changing the landscape of comedy on television and film.

CHAPTER V—POST HAROLD: REACTIONS, TRANSFORMATIONS & COMBINATIONS

“Let us have fun. Let us laugh. Let us smoke cigarettes and drink alcoholic beverages. Let us be stimulated by an experience on stage. Oh God, let us have a party and invite the world. That is why it is called a ‘play’...So let us play, let us play so hard our tits fall off.”²⁵⁴—Mick Napier

Post Harold is a bit of a misnomer since as we’ve seen the Harold is still very much alive. It has morphed and evolved over the past thirty years to the point where long form improv is no longer solely the Harold. There are literally hundreds of forms either based on the Harold or that reject the Harold. While the Harold has provided a foundation and structure for thousands of performers to “invent smart, spontaneous theater,” as Darel Jevens noted in a *Chicago Sun-Times* improv review, “ambitious players are always coming up with new forms in the hope of expanding on the lessons of the Harold and working underutilized creative muscles.”²⁵⁵ Kim Howard Johnson noted that “Del would not tolerate boredom...he was always innovating.”²⁵⁶ That said, there is virtually nothing done at iO that breaks from the theoretical tenets of the Harold, i.e. reincorporation and callbacks, relationship-based scenes, agreement, and creating a group mind.

While the Harold remains the foundation for long form improv, this chapter will explore in more detail some of the innovations and experimentations happening both outside and within iO to help show that improv is not stagnating in the Harold as Deborah Frances-White and other scholars and artists have proclaimed, to perhaps shed light on where improvisational theatre might be going, and to demonstrate the ways in which the

²⁵⁴ Mick Napier, “Director’s Notes,” *Co-Ed Prison Sluts* Program, January 8, 2009.

²⁵⁵ Darel Jevens, “Harold isn’t enough for improv inventors,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, February 17, 2002.

²⁵⁶ Johnson, Personal Interview.

ideological concepts of the Harold are influencing the development of long form improv. While Rob Kozlowski has already documented several of the major structures that build upon or reject the Harold in *The Art of Chicago Improv*, in this chapter I will be exploring some of the groups and theatres that have moved beyond (or built upon) the Harold to exercise and expand their creative muscles, including The Annoyance Theatre, the Upright Citizens Brigade, the Improvised Shakespeare Company, and Octavarius.

THE ANNOYANCE THEATRE

With the establishment of the Harold improvisation finally had a firm structure that allowed for a fairly reliable end product. iO established an improv form, with teachers and rules and structures and a book—they even had a guru—so naturally it didn't take long for a group to come along and break all the rules. Founded in 1987 as Metraform and renamed The Annoyance Theatre, the company quickly established itself as the leading alternative improvisational theatre in Chicago. After students trained at iO and Second City to learn the rules of improv, they came to The Annoyance to learn how to break those rules. The Annoyance provided an alternative for improvisers with an invitation consisting of totally uncensored stage time. Driven by the idea of unrestricted improvisation based in play, The Annoyance developed an irreverent performance philosophy, which author Rob Kozlowski notes in *The Art of Chicago Improv*, can be summed up in two words: “fuck it.”²⁵⁷

Although Mick Napier is the clear artistic leader, the group initially eschewed any form of administrative or artistic hierarchy and aimed to eliminate the internal competition they felt was effecting other companies' productions. Instead, The

²⁵⁷ Kozlowski, 146.

Annoyance created a nonjudgmental support system that measured success by the company members own standards instead of more conventional measures of success such as ticket sales or critical approval. While this certainly resulted in uneven production quality, it allowed the group the freedom they felt was strangling Second City and iO. From this uncensored philosophy, the group of self-proclaimed misfits created a series of productions that Chris Jones of the *Chicago Tribune* called “cheeky, profane, irreverent and thoroughly original.”²⁵⁸ Marrying a subversive style and a free-play mindset, The Annoyance defined itself with shows like *The Real Live Brady Bunch* (1990); *Manson: The Musical* (1990); *Tippi: Portrait of a Virgin* (1991); *Ayn Rand Gives Me a Boner* (1991); *What Every Girl Should Know—An Ode to Judy Blume* (1998); and their flagship show *Co-Ed Prison Sluts* (1989). What garnered The Annoyance the critical acclaim they didn’t seek and separated them from other alternative theaters was the marrying of playfulness, rebellion, and artistic brilliance. Jack Helbig noted that the group’s anti-musicals “twisted the traditions of American music theatre to suit the company’s vile ends. The songs were often roughly treated, sometimes croaked out by actors with little or no musical training. But the craft behind them was undeniable.”²⁵⁹ The theatre’s calling card became subversion, whether it was rules, traditions, or simply good taste.

With a commitment to unrestricted creativity, coupled with a desire to have as many original shows playing simultaneously as possible, the group became a breeding ground for a new type of improvisational performance—full length plays and musicals derived from improvisation. Convinced that improv would flourish in a safe environment void of improv rules they felt handicapped improvisers onstage and focused more on

²⁵⁸ Chris Jones, “They’re Ba-aaack,” *Chicago Tribune*, July 7, 2006.

²⁵⁹ Jack Helbig, “Annoyance: Happy Song Fun Time,” *Chicago Reader*, August 23, 2007.

improv as a commodity than anything else, The Annoyance has developed a hybrid model that allows for a blending of forms and styles. Pushing aside the Sahlins-Close debate, The Annoyance uses improv in whatever way serves the piece or performance best: as a tool, as a performance end, or as some combination of the two. Consequently, The Annoyance is known as much for its eclectic material as its trademark subversion, with as many as thirteen different shows running in any one week. For them nothing is out of bounds, no topic too taboo, no structure or way of doing improv wrong. The only censorship comes from the artists themselves—if it fits the production then it stays, if it doesn't it goes.

Annoyance Theatre member Sean Cusick reflects the group's improv philosophy when he says that improv is just:

Making shit up...Improv itself is just a tool, just a means of expression, a method for the channeling of 'creativity.' To assign it more meaning or duty is to malign it and to misunderstand it...Improv is also beautiful for its total irrelevance. The fact that it is NOT called upon to comment with meaning on anything is freeing and lovely. Sometimes it's nice just to get to put your head back and laugh at the absolute nonsense unfolding around you.²⁶⁰

Yet he also says that improv has the power “to take the very issues of the day, heck, of that very minute, and attack them, deconstruct them, examine them.”²⁶¹ Cusick's comments point to the company's paradoxical mindset. On the one hand they simply want to have fun and play, but at the same time they are actively subversive. While they might not care about ticket sales or critical approval, they attack social norms and cultural beliefs, constantly working to unmask the system, which ironically brings them the critical validation they claim is meaningless.

²⁶⁰ Sean Cusick, Personal Interview, November 29, 2004.

²⁶¹ Sean Cusick, Personal Interview, November 29, 2004.

Behind the fun, Annoyance productions, according to Amy Seham, “question the stability of meaning [and reject] underlying mythic universals,” while “Annoyance players remain incredulous of the metanarratives that once legitimized social norms and conventions.”²⁶² At the same time, the company’s commitment to simply have fun guides their productions and in many ways brings about their subversive material by allowing players the freedom to explore any idea in any way. In his director’s notes for *Co-ed Prison Sluts*, Napier articulated the mission of The Annoyance, capturing both their playfulness and subversion: “to have fun”: ‘Let us have fun. Let us laugh. Let us smoke cigarettes and drink alcoholic beverages. Let us be stimulated by an experience on stage. Oh God, let us have a party and invite the world. That is why it is called a ‘play’... So let us play, let us play so hard our tits fall off.’²⁶³

Sid Smith perhaps best captures the group in his review of *Co-ed Prison Sluts*, when he called the show:

A post-Letterman, post-‘Saturday Night Live,’ post-Second City, post-‘Rocky Horror’ entertainment misadventure. Combining hip and sometimes hypnotic music, the exaggerated comedy of the putdown blackout, a wildly surreal scenario with polymorphously perverse humor and a subject matter that sets new boundaries for the lunatic entertainment fringe. ‘Sluts’ is a rambling, rollicking mess and a new frontier in the playfully sick. It’s also something else—a big hit, part of a package of weekly offerings at Annoyance that seems to be feeding a young nontraditional theatre audience with a new kind of live offering. The aesthetic—raunchy, outrageous, free-for-all and deliberately messy—may be seen as a kind of latter day Second City, the anarchy of its early days somewhat restored, with updated consciousness, for a new generation.²⁶⁴

Behind the mixture of free-play and subversion, The Annoyance was becoming a Chicago institution and changing improvisational theatre. Since The Annoyance was in

²⁶² Seham, 119.

²⁶³ Napier, “Director’s Notes.”

²⁶⁴ Sid Smith, “Beyond the Fringe: Annoyance Theatre Unabashedly Lives Up to its Name,” *Chicago Tribune*, April 7, 1991.

many ways founded as a reaction to iO's reverence of the Harold, it is necessary to briefly look at some of the philosophical differences between *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out* (Napier and The Annoyance) and *Truth in Comedy* (Close, Halpern, and iO) to more fully understand The Annoyance's screw the rules aesthetic.

While there are many similarities between the two theories and improv schools there are two major differences between the two styles: rules and support. While *Truth and Comedy* states that there aren't any rules, the book then provides a series of rules and structures for performing long form improv and the Harold. At the core of successful improvisation for iO is the principle of supporting one's partner—for iO it is an improviser's job to justify, support, and make their partner look good. As iO's Charna Halpern says, "it's about treating each other like geniuses and poets on stage."²⁶⁵ For iO it is all about the ensemble and group mind. The Annoyance and Napier take a different approach. While both philosophies aim to reach the same end goal of quality group improvisation, The Annoyance throws out rules and advocates a much more individual based training and performance ethos.

Napier begins his book by listing out the ten most common improv rules, including iO's improv building block "yes-and," and then systematically analyzes why they don't work. In fact, for Napier, the rules "help one not improvise well. They are destructive."²⁶⁶ According to Napier, the rules get in the way of a performer's natural sense of play. Instead of reacting and engaging in his or her imagination, a performer is thinking about all of the rules he or she needs to follow. A common complaint amongst struggling improvisers is that they are "stuck in their head," and for Napier this means

²⁶⁵ Halpern, Personal Interview.

²⁶⁶ Napier, 4.

they are thinking too hard about the rules and what they should and should not be doing. Rules translate to fear, and the worst thing that an improviser can do is be afraid because fear leads to boring, safe, and appropriate choices. For Napier, “good improvisation has nothing to do with safety or appropriateness. (As a matter of fact, it’s quite the opposite.)”²⁶⁷ Songs like “Shit, Mother-Fucker,” provide evidence that The Annoyance certainly does not make safe or appropriate choices. While Close has long advocated that players “follow the fear,” he is speaking more toward personal hang-ups or the general fear of the unknown facing improvisers. The fear that Napier is referring to is a fear of failure, a fear of messing up, a fear of doing something wrong—a fear of breaking the rules. For example, a player in a Harold might be worried about following the proper structure, and instead of being engaged in the moment and the performance, they are worried about “messing up” the structure.

Instead of adhering to rules and worrying about doing a scene or structure “the right way,” Napier advocates tapping into a sense of play. The best way to achieve this mindset is to simply do something. Instead of worrying about the right way to start a scene, or any rules, simply start the scene. As he says, “*That* you do something is far more important than *what* you do.”²⁶⁸ Conversely, Close’s comic philosophy is based on the idea of slow comedy. He wanted players to take their time, to break the joke based rhythm of comedy, and to explore more subtle and intelligent humor. The basic idea is that rather than responding with the first thing that pops into your head, which is usually a knee-jerk reaction, an improviser should respond with the third thought that comes. Close believed this was necessary in order to play to the top of one’s intelligence. The

²⁶⁷ Napier, 11.

²⁶⁸ Napier, 15.

third thought is the best thought because an improviser has had time to process the situation. Noted iO improv super duo TJ & Dave, considered by many to be the preeminent improvisational group performing today, start each show with a long period of feeling each other out and relative inactivity, and perform at a very slow and relaxed pace.

Napier, on the other hand, believes that over-thinking a response leads to boredom and fear. That doesn't mean that he believes performers should just spout off. He still advocates taking stock of what has been said and how it changes the scene, but he believes that getting too stuck in one's head disengages a performer from their sense of play and creativity. More often than not, stopping to analyze a scene while it's happening leads to routine and safety, which is not what The Annoyance wants on stage. So instead of teaching games or working toward a structure like the Harold, The Annoyance focuses on the individual elements that make a scene work: strong initiations, developing and maintaining strong characters, owning and building upon scenic choices, and learning how to create unexpected scenic or character choices.

Perhaps the largest difference comes down to Napier's belief that the best thing an improviser can do is "to take care of yourself first!"²⁶⁹ A scene has much higher odds of succeeding if the relationship, location, and point of view are established right away. For Napier then it is only logical that instead of entering a scene with the mindset that you will fully support whatever your partner does, it's better to go out there and establish those things yourself. At the top of a scene, it is better to do something and establish

²⁶⁹ Napier, 16.

anything than to worry about support, as he says, “The audience is waiting. They don’t care about your support. They care about what you do. What you do now.”²⁷⁰

This is a gross oversimplification, but perhaps this analogy will help crystallize the theories. Imagine going out to dinner with a group of friends and somebody says, “Where do we want to go for dinner?” An iO trained improviser taking the support your partner ethos to its extreme will say, “wherever you want to go is great. And we can get calamari!” They are clearly supporting their partner, but the group is still standing on the corner no closer to a dining solution.²⁷¹ An Annoyance improviser will say “let’s go to Patty’s Diner (and if you don’t like it go fuck yourself).” Everyone in the group might not be happy about the decision, but most will be thankful that someone has made a choice, avoiding the never ending parade of “whatever you want,” or “I don’t care, I’m good with anything.” By making a choice, The Annoyance improviser is supporting the group. They are moving things along, and if someone is unhappy, they now have been given a character with a point of view that they can play for the rest of the evening.

Yet whatever restaurant one chooses, at their core both philosophies aim for support. For iO, the support should be ever present and is exemplified by the “yes-and” mindset. Listen to what your partner says, accept it, and build upon it. For The Annoyance, the support shouldn’t come from your partner, it should come from you. For Napier:

the times I’ve felt most supported in an improv scene is when my partner took care of herself first. When my fellow player selfishly makes a choice, any choice, at the top of the scene, I feel very supported. I feel supported because now I’m on stage with a powerful, playful person who isn’t afraid to take a chance. I’m on stage with a fearless individual, and not someone in her head, rendered speechless

²⁷⁰ Napier, 16.

²⁷¹ It should be noted that a good iO improviser will probably suggest a place to eat as well.

by fear, and waiting for me to do something...If you don't take care of yourself, how the hell are you going to take care of me?²⁷²

By taking care of yourself, Annoyance improvisers tend to be much more aggressive, brash, playful, and powerful on stage. They also have a higher tendency of driving or bulldozing scenes, pushing their idea at the expense of their partner. While their philosophy appears to be more selfish, in an art form where the possibilities at the top of a scene are infinite, it's imperative that somebody give it direction. Napier believes that it is each improviser's job to give a scene direction as soon as possible, rather than waiting for his or her partner to make a choice. Napier doesn't want players to support each other's fear; he wants them to support one another by making choices. He argues that the mantra "support your partner" encourages improvisers to be weak, to acquiesce their power, and to never make scenic moves.

Much like the underpinnings of iO's philosophy, The Annoyance advocates making a strong choice, sticking with that choice and heightening it, and listening in a way that allows an improviser to make strong choices for his or her character. As Napier says, "my idea of supporting your partner in improvisation is not waiting, but choosing and doing. Maintain and heighten your choice and you will support your partner in the beginning, in the middle, and throughout the scene."²⁷³ The emphasis on where the support comes from has led to two very distinct performance aesthetics. iO has developed a large community where everyone is looking out for one-another. They create a safe space on stage for one another, and as a result their improv tends to not necessarily be safe, but it does tend to follow certain rules and structures. While not necessarily predictable, it doesn't have the same power to shock that The Annoyance possesses. The

²⁷² Napier, 16.

²⁷³ Napier, 36.

very concept of a structure like the Harold goes against The Annoyance's more free-flowing aesthetic. The Annoyance training focuses on the individual improviser, and according to Napier:

students leave our program with a better sense of themselves on stage and with strong tools to navigate through an improv scene. Although The Annoyance has great respect for long form and games, we focus our training on *the scene itself*, and the individual people and elements that make up the scene. Like our creations on stage, The Annoyance training program is uncensored and free of traditional improv rules, providing an encouraging environment in which to improvise.²⁷⁴

The point is not that iO is better than The Annoyance or vice versa, but that there are multiple viewpoints as to what makes a good improviser. Furthermore, the two schools of thought have merged to some extent, with iO adopting several of The Annoyance's philosophies. As noted, Susan Messing of The Annoyance developed the Level 2 curriculum for iO based on The Annoyance's heightened use of physicality not present in most iO trained improvisers, who tend to be more cerebral and verbal. Teachers and performers freely float between the two theatres (and Second City), using whatever bits and pieces from each school that work for them. Usually, students looking to perform sketch comedy go to Second City first, students looking for stage time and the basic long form rules go to iO first, and those looking for an alternative approach focusing on them as improvisers go to The Annoyance. Quite often, students go to all three. Now that The Annoyance's core philosophies are a little more concrete, let's explore their development and productions.

The Annoyance got its start at Indiana University in the early 1980s, when Napier and David MacNerland formed the improv group Dubbletaque, having never seen or performed improv. Napier, like so many others, had read Jeffrey Sweet's *Something*

²⁷⁴ Napier, 130.

Wonderful Right Away, which changed his artistic point of view as well as his career path, he had gone to school to become a veterinarian. Growing weary of traditional scripted drama, he wanted to capture the fun and rush of performance without the burden of tedious rehearsals. Although he would later realize the importance of rehearsal to improvisation, Dubbletaque became his first improv experiment. The group used a Second City model—Napier had seen a grand total of one Second City revue—and created a brand new one-hour sketch show every week.

Upon graduation Napier moved to Chicago to study improvisation, performing wherever he could, including on the ImprovOlympic Harold team Grime and Punishment. Napier, however, quickly grew weary of ImprovOlympic's sacrosanct view of the Harold. He felt like there was more to improv than just one form, and became skeptical of any theatre that put too much stock in one structure or style. Napier himself had created dozens of new forms, saying that "the side of me that started Metraform was kind of in reaction to being relegated to one kind of improv form at iO at the time, the Harold...what I wanted to allow was a lot of different people to improvise a lot of different things."²⁷⁵ Furthermore, Napier and others felt that the control Halpern wielded over the performance schedule and team rosters put performers in constant competition with one-another. For Napier, this set-up put a premium on the product, which he felt wasn't always the best environment for improvisation, creativity, or comedy. Napier's wariness about the "truth" of the Harold and the rigid structure of ImprovOlympic helped form his philosophy of uncensored stage time, and was the guiding force behind the formation of his new company.

²⁷⁵ Kozlowski, 47.

On September 10, 1987, Napier and a group of friends sat around an Italian restaurant talking about slasher films. Like most times when alcohol, late night dining, and theater people converge a show was born. The group, featuring MacNerland, Faith Soloway, Joe Bill, Eric Waddell, Ellen Stoneking, David Razowsky, Gary Ruderman, Richard Laible, and later Mark Sutton, Jennifer Estlin, and Susan Messing decided that for Halloween they were going to put on a gory slasher style show with as much blood as possible. They quickly created a vague set of plot points and beats that captured all of the clichés of the genre. They then began using improvisation in rehearsals to shape the characters and beats, using a mixture of The Compass Players scenario play format and Second City's sketch formula.

After mastering stage blood and painting their set white, exactly one month later, on October 10, 1987, *Splatter Theatre* opened. Directed by Napier with music by Faith Soloway, the show encapsulated the group's free play subversive aesthetic. A parody of *Friday the 13th* style slasher films, the show featured various stock characters from the genre—the jock, the virgin, the class jerk, the nerd, the bimbo, the bumbling old man, the girl scout, etc., who are all killed in creative and disgusting ways. For instance, a nun gets drilled in the back of the head, the bimbo gets her tongue ripped out, and a policeman has his intestines removed. As disgusting as it was, it was also terribly funny and quickly gained a cult following. While the show's plot was spotty and barely held together, a common trait of many Annoyance productions that stems from their improv philosophy, the show's strong characters more than made up for it. Helbig commented that “less than 30 seconds after Matt Walsh enters, for example, he not only establishes that he's the ‘class dick,’ but also makes himself so annoying that we find ourselves looking forward

to his gratuitous, bloody murder.”²⁷⁶ Operating at the time as Metraform, the production announced the arrival of a bold new company.

Riding high on the success of *Splatter Theatre*, the group mounted the lavish, expensive, and even bloodier *Splatter Theatre II* in 1988. Independent producers arrived to try and cash in on the success of *Splatter Theatre*. The result was bigger sets, lavish costumes, a larger cast, and more performances. The young company could not handle the more businesslike approach—both in terms of managing the resources and as an approach to creation. The result was a disaster. The show lacked the charm of the original, and ended up being a critical and economic catastrophe leaving the company fifteen thousand dollars in debt.²⁷⁷ The company dwindled down to nine members and looked to be on its last legs. With nothing to lose Napier and the others sought to create one last show that held true to their principles of “fuck-it-ness” and set to work on *Co-Ed Prison Sluts*. Napier first came up with the title of the show while teaching a class at Second City, knowing only that it would be a musical, he wanted to see a clown fight a drag queen, and he wanted his dog to be in it.

With a title and not much else the group set to work creating what would become their signature production. Early rehearsals were devoted to improvisation, where the players mainly developed characters. Next they would experiment with their characters, combining them in scenes, sometimes with a set of criteria, and other times just letting the players freely improvise. Successful scenes were then re-improvised or written. The system is somewhat similar to Second City’s, although with less emphasis on themes, connecting fibers, and overall composition and more emphasis on character. Over time

²⁷⁶ Jack Helbig, “Splatter Theatre/Ancient History,” *Chicago Reader*, October 8, 1992.

²⁷⁷ Seham, 132-133.

Napier's Annoyance approach began seeping into Second City's style, while his work directing Second City revues forced him to more fully engage with plot and connecting fibers. By utilizing a system that focuses on creating characters over developing plot or story, Annoyance plays focus more on character, bawdy humor, and a deconstruction of popular culture than a traditional plot. Unlike the Harold at iO, which has a built in story/plot structure, Annoyance improvisation focuses more on developing individual scenes and characters rather than an entire plot or storyline. This reliance on character leads to sometimes less than developed plots that can detract from the overall quality of the show, such as with *Splatter Theatre*, and creates a different aesthetic than a Harold where relationships and connections create the humor.

After improvising, re-improvising, and scripting the most successful scenes and ideas, the cast compiles a series of scenes and puts them together into a plot. Yet they never fully set any scene in stone, leaving space for nightly improvisation in the script. The room for improvisation in performance is essential to The Annoyance's free-play philosophy, and the nightly changes and surprises keep the material fun and engaging for both audience and performers. While the dialogue might be changed from night to night (though it is rarely a radical departure from the script), the music was usually set in stone. During rehearsal Faith Soloway, the composer for *Co-Ed* and other early Annoyance pieces, generally looked for moments in the "script" where a song might replace dialogue or be used to heighten character or the situation. For *Co-Ed* generally rehearsals consisted of Soloway playing a piece of music on the piano and the players improvising songs. Once they had some material, most often the songs would be fine tuned and tweaked before being put together into a show.

While most early Annoyance productions were created using a similar system, not surprisingly there is not one set method or formula for developing material at The Annoyance. Most recent productions are written independently or by a small group rather than devised by the company. Several notable early plays were written by company members independently as well, including *The Real Live Brady Bunch*. The group's largest commercial success, the play was conceived by Jill and Faith Soloway, and the authorship and ownership of the play became a dark cloud and turning point for the company more fully explored below. Nevertheless, the majority of shows are created in a similar manner to *Co-Ed Prison Sluts*, with improvisation at the heart of the creative process. Their philosophy for developing material is grounded on a very loose improvisational process that focuses on creating material organically by focusing on character, feeling that the more restrictive method of Second City, along with a salary, forces creativity. For *Co-Ed* the result was a show that would run for eleven years in its initial incarnation, redirect and reignite the company, and transform the landscape of improvisational theatre.

Co-Ed Prison Sluts skips merrily and incongruously through the worlds of sexual abuse, bestiality, incest, necrophilia, and more. A precursor to brash and edgy comedy like *South Park*, *Urinetown*, *Avenue Q*, and *The Book of Mormon*, *Co-Ed Prison Sluts* presented a brand of humor unfamiliar to mainstream audiences. While the show undoubtedly does not shock our jaded sensibilities today quite like it did twenty years ago, it is still a fun, naughty, and subversive piece of theatre. While it certainly was not a hit with everyone—with critic Wayne Scott for instance pointing to its loose plot structure, lowbrow humor, and apparent misogyny—the show became a cult

phenomenon. From the musical's Brechtian songs to the raw language and outright offensiveness, *Co-Ed Prison Sluts* is a prime example of The Annoyance Theatre's philosophy, as founding member Mark Sutton says, "classic Annoyance is not the offending, but the spirit of not caring if you offended."²⁷⁸

The show follows the prison's newest inmate, the naïve ingénue Alice, a self-described "happy masochist," as she learns from her fellow inmates the life lessons prison has to offer, including the most important of all: fear the Clown. Among her new friends are Dame Toulouse, a classically trained actress on the edge of sanity; Henry, a mass murderer with a taste for human flesh; Slick, a child molester; Hamster Man, a man with a hamster infatuation; and Skeeter, a twelve-year-old boy who apparently is in prison due to some sort of bureaucratic error. The inmates are helped along the way by Dr. Bello, a psychiatrist with a penchant for hypnosis and high heels. Wielding power over all of the inmates is the dreaded Clown.

As the impending showdown with the evil Clown looms, Alice and Henry develop a rather unexpectedly tender relationship. Surprisingly, rather than turning into a fraternity sketch, *Co-Ed Prison Sluts* begins to resemble a Brechtian musical. The creators mesh the vulgar and abominable lyrics with an upbeat and bouncy music that results in the show's trademark subversion. For instance, Alice happily sings her horrifying story of abuse to a bouncy pop beat. The show also features perhaps the most unquotable song in musical theatre history, the audience sing-along favorite, "Shit, Mother-Fucker," a George Carlinesque tour through the prison vernacular Alice must learn in order to survive.

²⁷⁸ Steve Heisler, "Major Annoyance," *TimeOut Chicago*, October 10, 2007.

The language, crudeness, and downright offensiveness of the piece, however, never overwhelm. Soloway's upbeat music and the surprisingly vulnerable characters actually make the piece rather touching. Derived from improvisation, there is an overarching care given to each character that keeps it from falling into coarse B-level material. The relationship between Alice and Henry is as touching, playful, and charming as the best romantic comedies. Ellen Stoneking's Dame Toulouse not only elicits laughter, but draws the audience's empathy as she desperately (and elegantly) clings to her dreams of stardom. Structurally, the show mixes the clichés of prison movies with the old-fashioned structure of musical comedy. For instance, Alice the good prisoner must face-off with the evil prisoner in order to regain control of the facility for all of the "good criminals." There are the requisite prison initiation scenes, and a good deal of humor is derived from the underground prison economy. Likewise, the show features the various romantic couplings of a traditional musical comedy. Alice and Henry slowly come together and overcome their different backgrounds, while several other pairings join in odd and unusual ways to provide comic relief. As Helbig noted in 1994, five years into the show's run, "the secret to Coed Prison Sluts...is that it's a carefully constructed satire masquerading as an artless mess...this show is so well made that five-plus years after its opening it remains as funny as ever. In fact it's funnier."²⁷⁹ The show ran for eleven years, and then was remounted for another multi-year run on the theatre's twentieth anniversary. While *The Annoyance's* scripted shows are derived from improvisation and leave room for the actors to play, as Helbig notes they are carefully crafted pieces of theater.

²⁷⁹ Jack Helbig, "Coed Prison Sluts," *Chicago Reader*, September 22, 1994.

The subject matter is used to surprise rather than shock, drawing from the company's improvisational philosophy. The raw approach emphasizes the immediacy of every word put onstage, heightening The Annoyance's theory that if a performer can surprise her or himself, then surely the audience will likewise be surprised and invested. Furthermore, in the improvisational spirit, the company invites the audience to be part of the show through sing-alongs and an energetic Brechtian cabaret style theatre—complete with copious amounts of cigarettes and alcohol—that enhances the feeling of being a part of a surreal prison yard. The show also demonstrates the company's comic philosophy: funny is funny, or as they say, “smart, dumb, funny, fun.”²⁸⁰ There is no such thing as high brow or low brow comedy. If something makes people laugh it goes into the show, exhibiting what Fredric Jameson describes as “the erosion of the older distinction between high culture and so-called mass or popular culture.”²⁸¹ Annoyance shows are filled with crude jokes and vulgar language, but as we shall see they are also filled with deep and moving scenes as well as moments of biting satire and wit.

While *Co-Ed Prison Sluts* became the company's signature piece, The Annoyance's most popular play was 1990's *The Real Live Brady Bunch*, a smash hit that brought national attention to the theatre including a highly successful run off-Broadway. The play, however, was a drastic departure for the group and was simply a recreation of the television show rather than a play that pushed the limits and challenged societal norms through ironic and dissonant songs.²⁸² The show was initially a one-off spoof. Faith and Jill Soloway brought the idea to Napier after they watched their friend Becky

²⁸⁰ <http://www.annoyanceproductions.com>. Accessed 28 February 2012.

²⁸¹ Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, Ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1998), 128.

²⁸² *Manson: The Musical* was playing simultaneously and was much more in line with The Annoyance style.

Thyre's imitation of Marcia Brady. They wanted to recreate a favorite episode and thought it would be a fun off-night show. Napier agreed, and even consented to play Bobby Brady. The initial show was a hit, and the company began producing a new "episode" every other Tuesday. The show was an instant sensation and routinely sold out, with lines wrapped around the block.

The one-off spoof turned out to be an economic engine, and the company desperately needed the ticket sales. At the time *Co-Ed* was technically free, audience members were asked to pay what they thought it was worth after the show (they did eventually charge for tickets), so while it was their main offering the show wasn't a huge money maker. More importantly, in February of 1990 they signed a debilitating lease for their first permanent space at 3153 N. Broadway, which was a rather barren loft space with folding chairs and carpet for seats. While they received free rent for the first six months, the lease then featured an escalating rent starting at one thousand dollars and rising to four thousand. Always ambivalent about money and never good at managing it—see *Splatter Theatre II*—the company needed the income from *The Real Live Brady Bunch* to survive. The show's success was a paradox for the company: the show provided them with economic security but was not the type of play that they necessarily wanted to be their defining production. Commenting on its unbelievable success and the nightly standing ovations, Napier said "I was sad and I was happy. I was Bobby Brady, so I was getting a standing ovation. At the same time I was sad because it was [*The Brady Bunch*] getting a standing ovation."²⁸³ While they didn't want to be known as a theater that simply recreated television shows on stage, and the play was hardly reminiscent of *Co-Ed*

²⁸³ Jack Helbig, "Mick's Bunch," *New City Chicago*, August 16, 1990.

Prison Sluts or their bawdy and ground breaking late-night improv set *Screw Puppies*, the show was infused at some level with Annoyance style.

Much like many later offerings, *The Real Live Brady Bunch* is an excellent example of how the group uses familiar pop culture and media messages to create their plays. The play points out that *The Brady Bunch* was a contemporary of the Vietnam War, the 60s generation, and a drug infused counter-culture; and it also points out that most people wanted to be like the Brady's rather than the protesters. The play was also a symbol of youth for the new generation filling The Annoyance's audience. These people had grown up watching not the original show, but the daily reruns of the show on television after school; it was a part of their upbringing, like it or not the show was a part of who they were. Co-creator Jill Soloway commented that "Those of us who never got to protest, and weren't part of the MTV generation, are left with the *Brady Bunch* and *Saturday Night Fever*."²⁸⁴ She went on to say that "It's our generation's nostalgia...Even though we do feel a little guilty about it."²⁸⁵ *Village Voice* critic Robert Massa commented on the success of the show saying:

Is anyone surprised that the new generation would define itself by a sitcom?...One 'Brady theory' cites the show's innocence...But finally the appeal is that this is theater, not TV. These actors and these production values would seem just a pale imitation on the tube. Live, the audience's rabid enthusiasm becomes part of the show. It's a return to childhood with your adult friends, more slumber party than a play. There's a camaraderie in the shared guilt of having been shaped by the Bradys.²⁸⁶

While Massa points to a shared *Brady* history, the shared experience of The Annoyance for audience members became a huge draw for the company. Neither their initial Broadway home nor their next space at 3747 N. Clark Street

²⁸⁴ Qtd. in Seham, 145.

²⁸⁵ Elizabeth Snead, "'The Brady Bunch' stages a hit revival in Chicago," *USA Today*, July 25, 1991.

²⁸⁶ Robert Massa, "Much More Than a Hunch," *Village Voice*, October 8, 1991, 100.

were reminiscent of traditional theaters, with the Clark Street space outfitted with old couches spread throughout for seating. Audience members took pride in sneaking in cigarettes and alcohol, and liberally using both during the show. The space itself was as subversive as the content, and the shared experience was a large part of The Annoyance lure, one that *The Real Live Brady Bunch* did not necessarily provide. As Anthony Adler commented, “The very shoddiness of the stage values is an attraction—it emphasizes the unmediated, breathing reality of the thing. To an audience born to television, raised on Calvin Klein ads, and brought to maturity in suburbs where the basic political unit is the mall, this is living. This is genuinely alive.”²⁸⁷ In this light, it is easy to see why a satirical riff on *The Brady Bunch* was so appealing to a generation raised on *Brady Bunch* reruns.

The success of the show ultimately created a rift between the Soloway sisters and the company. Napier had never fully embraced the show. He refused to move the show from its Tuesday night slot to the weekends, for example, because that was *Co-Ed's* slot. When big money entered the picture, however, petty scheduling differences were pushed aside and the company was shook to its core. As with any Annoyance production all of the ticket sales went back to the company, with Jill Soloway noting in an interview with the *Chicago Tribune* that “Faith and I make not a dollar off of it. The money goes into the theater so they can perform ‘legitimate shows.’”²⁸⁸ In 1991 New York producers offered to sponsor the show at the Village Gate. While initially the Soloways felt that the show should stay in Chicago, they eventually accepted the offer. The decision forced many

²⁸⁷ Anthony Adler, “In Your Face,” *Chicago Magazine*, March 1992.

²⁸⁸ Mark Caro, “This Bunch Can’t Get Enough of the Bradys,” *Chicago Tribune*, November 2, 1990.

company members to make a major decision about The Annoyance and its relationship to money: go to New York and get paid, or stay in Chicago and work for free in the collective.

While the Soloways and those that left were accused of selling out and betraying the company, the Soloways felt that going to New York was a step toward a professional career. Napier had always espoused a collective amateur approach. Unlike Second City, Annoyance actors are unpaid so as to keep an amateur level apparent to the audience and to instill in the performers the idea that they are on stage for the love of performance. Everything is about the group. Napier argues that money is the antithesis of artistic creation and inevitably causes problems in a group form. Money, he says, can “mess up what happens on stage. It can mess up the freedom. People start working against each other. If I had a million dollars in the bank, betcha I’d pay actors. But I’d probably figure out some socialist or communist way of doing it.”²⁸⁹ The Soloways and others were growing tired of the utopia and felt like the time had come for them to be paid for their work.

While the New York deal put Napier’s ethos into question, the irreparable rift came when the Soloways signed an independent contract with a Los Angeles producer without acknowledging The Annoyance as co-creator or producer. The Soloways felt like the show was theirs since they had brought it to the company virtually in-tact. Napier felt that every show was owned by the group since everything was created by the group, and consequently felt that all money should go back into the company. No contracts had ever been written or signed, with the unwritten rule always being that everything was by and for the company. The Soloways hired a lawyer and Napier did little to legally fight their

²⁸⁹ Eric Spitznagel, “Much Ado about Mick Napier,” *Third Word*, 1, No. 4, January-February 1994, 32.

claims. As a gesture of good faith the sisters did begin sending \$250 weekly checks to The Annoyance that they were careful to point out were sent as gifts, not royalties. The split was interpreted differently by various sides. To Napier the Soloways had given in to commercial success and were trying to destroy the communal system. But others felt that The Annoyance had been taking advantage of performers for too long, exploiting people “by paying them with feel good philosophy instead of fair wages for their labor.”²⁹⁰ Facing a gutted company and without the financial security *The Real Live Brady Bunch* provided, Napier and the remaining company members pushed on. Staying true to his principles of free play (both in terms of censorship and economic concerns) and wearing the scars of artistic divorce Napier rebuilt the ensemble and the company continued its subversive group created shows.

In *Dumbass Leaves the Carnival* (1993), for example, the group took on the product versus process ethos that came to a head with *The Real Live Brady Bunch*. The show takes a pointed look at the financial realities of comedy and the monetary pressures facing comedic actors, as well as serving as a fable for the company’s own financial and artistic struggles. Aside from the *Brady Bunch* fight, like so many alternative companies The Annoyance has signed numerous leases over the years and moved from space to space. As noted they signed a disastrous lease for their first permanent space in 1990 that left them with heavy financial burdens, and their less than copious bookkeeping left them with an unexpected fifteen thousand dollar tax bill in 1992. In 1994 they leased a space on Clark Street only a few blocks from iO, but the space was closed in 2000 so it could be converted into a parking lot for nearby Wrigley Field, a move that put the future of the company in serious doubt and resulted in a six year production hiatus. Similarly, like so

²⁹⁰ Seham, 151.

many Chicago companies, they have lost many talented performers over the years to paying careers with Second City or in New York or Los Angeles.

Dumbass opens with a stage full of carnivalesque performers with so little regard for wealth that they allow money to literally walk by them on stage. Their artistic utopia is disrupted, however, when the evil Coffee returns to the group to teach them the power and value of a dollar. Over the course of the play they must all choose between art and self-expression, or money and conformity. Coffee slowly claims his victims, with the various carnival workers swapping their own free will and individual aesthetic for a conventional plot line and a pile of money. A puppeteer, for example, transforms her eccentric animal characters into such rigid sitcom fixtures as a heterosexual couple and their wacky neighbor in exchange for material comfort. Helbig went so far as to compare *Dumbass* to Bertolt Brecht and *The Caucasian Chalk Circle*, saying that: “*Dumbass* is clearly Napier’s anguished protest against a system that teaches talented comic actors to buckle down, play the game, and perform not for the joy of it but for the chance to make a pot of money on a network TV show.”²⁹¹ The Annoyance may have fun and perform for the pure joy of it, but they do so with razor sharp teeth.

Another example is *The Really Really Strange Couple* (1996). The play is a retelling of Neil Simon’s *The Odd Couple*, featuring a filthy roommate who literally smears food all over himself throughout the production, and Adolf Hitler as the neat roommate. The play “is a prime example of the Annoyance Theatre’s willingness to suspend all judgments as to taste, credibility, or coherence.”²⁹² The play does more than challenge conventional taste, however. They take the traits of Simon’s characters, and

²⁹¹ Jack Helbig, “Brainwarp: The Baby Eater/Dumbass Leaves the Carnival,” *Chicago Reader*, July 15, 1993.

²⁹² Seham, 128.

then turn the slob into a sexual deviant and the neat roommate into a ruthless fascist dictator who advocates ethnic cleansing. The hints of homosexual desire in Simon's play are likewise made much more overt in *The Annoyance* version. Further, the play is an example of how "their productions almost always depend on the audience's collective memories of familiar narratives to give coherence to convoluted plots and to produce the double-coded pleasures of its skewed citation of remembered texts."²⁹³ As noted, *Annoyance* plays tend to be short on plot, therefore they rely on the audience to fill in the blanks with a shared cultural language and memory. Part of the satisfaction of an *Annoyance* production is being in on the joke, of being part of the collective society they are taking apart on stage. Their focus on character places an almost co-creative pressure on the audience as their productions rely on the audience's ability to make connections between characters, storylines, and cultural references.

One of *The Annoyance*'s most recent productions, for example, plays on the audience's connection, attachment, and relationship to Chicago icon Oprah Winfrey. In *Oprah! A Comedy!* (2011) co-creators Anne Marie Saviano and Marc Warzecha imagine Oprah's farewell episode three months prior to Oprah's actual final show. Instead of a feel-good trip down memory lane, *Annoyance* presents an Oprah who is "a power-hungry and just plain hungry lady with a god complex."²⁹⁴ In their version Mayor Richard J. Daley is sent from heaven to keep Oprah from leaving Chicago, and over the course of the one-act Winfrey meets over seventy Chicago icons in a twisted *It's A Wonderful Life* series of encounters that raise questions and poke fun at Chicago history and figures. The play satirizes the lore of Oprah—no one is allowed to look Winfrey in the eye, and Oprah

²⁹³ Seham, 128.

²⁹⁴ Marissa Oberlander, "Oprah! A Comedy! Live Your Best Laugh," *Chicago Reader*, February 17, 2011.

knows as little as we do about her mysterious man Steadman, at one point asking him, “Steadman, where do you work?” to which he replies, “That’s the first question you’ve asked me in twenty years.” The play not only takes the obvious pot shots at Winfrey, but also opens up rather taboo topics, such as the lesbian undertones in Winfrey’s relationship with Gayle King, and more importantly society’s falsely intimate relationship with celebrities.

Similarly, *Waiting for Drew Peterson* (2011) and *40 Whacks* (2010) each take an absurd look at contemporary society’s fascination with murderers, celebrity culture, and justice. The former focuses on Drew Peterson, who in real life was in jail awaiting trial for the murder of his third wife (he is suspected of murdering two of his previous wives as well). In the play he finds himself the object of affection of two young women who believe he is innocent. Peterson’s lawyer commented that the incarcerated Peterson himself said that “it’s the funniest thing he’s ever heard...(seeing the play) is one of the first things he’s going to do when he gets out.”²⁹⁵ In *40 Whacks* we revisit Lizzie Borden, the nineteenth century ax-wielding murderess, who exerts her own brand of celebrity justice. The three plays question society’s obsession with celebrity, and the ways in which “ordinary” people try to connect and identify with celebrities rather than living their own lives. Each play looks at celebrity as a means of escape, as a way to avoid reality. They question society’s obsession with celebrity, where fame alone determines a person’s level of success and even their self-worth. As with *The Real Live Brady Bunch* and other “classic” Annoyance productions, part of the enjoyment of these shows is recognizing and being a part of the culture that is being eviscerated on stage.

²⁹⁵ Brian Stanley, “Curtains for Drew Peterson? Case is Subject of Chicago Play,” *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 17, 2011.

Of course any subversive theater in the twenty-first century cannot avoid one topic: religion. In 2009, the group had another rebellious hit with their revised version of Genesis in *Sodomites!!! A Musical of Biblical Proportions*, directed by Sean Cusick. According to Zac Thompson, “the show revels in the sheer fucked-upness of a story that includes the attempted gang-rape of angels and a human-to-salt transformation.”²⁹⁶ The play twists the story, presenting us with a bitter God, bumbling angels of destruction harboring doubts, and a Lot mad with paranoia. Framed as a flashback, the play retells the Biblical story of Sodom and Gomorrah as if Lot was a malcontent and sexual deviant whose only concern is the city’s rampant homosexuality (read Fred Phelps). Of course the citizens of Sodom are all mild-mannered, and it is Lot who appears to be the one in need of Biblical judgment.

In typical Annoyance fashion, the play doesn’t stop at simply refocusing or twisting the story. Coupled with the more absurd and lewd forms of humor is a rather sophisticated religious critique. At its core, the play is about the way fundamentalist Christians interpret the Bible verbatim to show among other things the evils of homosexuality. As Lisa Buscani said, the show is The Annoyance’s “hopelessly warped look at the Bible, and man’s equally warped translation.”²⁹⁷ The play also reexamines God’s rather arbitrary and often homicidal nature, and in turn raises questions about the limits and abuses of power. The archangels Michael and Gabriel are sent to Sodom to find one good man in order to save the town from destruction, and even though they find him, God destroys the town anyway. Playwright James Asmus lets his feelings be known,

²⁹⁶ Zac Thompson, “Sodomites!! A Musical of Biblical Proportions,” *Chicago Reader*, June 24, 2009.

²⁹⁷ Lisa Buscani, “Review: Sodomites!!! A Musical of Biblical Proportions,” *NewCityStage.com*, June 22, 2009.

when it is said that “genocide is always someone else’s fault.” A pointed jab at humanity’s ability to rationalize away abuses of power.

The show is the perfect example of the company’s “funny is funny” philosophy, with Biblical gay sex jokes mixed with humor questioning the very structure of Western Judeo-Christianity. For instance, at one point the voice of God uses his two favorite films—*Armageddon* and *You’ve Got Mail*—to highlight the intrinsic absurdities of the Bible and the ways it is used and abused in contemporary America. Another instance occurs when a Sodomite couple is punished for breaking Biblical rules that have yet to be written and the archangel Michael descends to give the couple “an advanced copy” of Leviticus. Later, as they are being punished, Michael reminds them that “He’s doing this because he loves you. Unconditionally.” They reply, “Have you read this fucking thing?” As Scott Morgan notes, the play “intelligently offends by questioning many moral aspects of the story, which includes the frequently omitted incestuous ending bit when Lot’s daughters...get pregnant by their father.”²⁹⁸ Not to worry though, as the angel Michael tells Lot, “the whole incident will be left out of the Quran.”

While *The Annoyance* continues to push the limits, the contemporary *Annoyance* is a different theater than the one that started as *Metraform*. The Soloway split, Napier’s Second City directing stints, and other *Annoyance* members exploring outside opportunities, including working with Napier at Second City, changed the company. Most importantly, as noted the company temporarily closed its doors in 2000 when they lost their space on Clark Street. The company had been losing steam, with Napier and others working extensively outside of the company. That work was bringing critical

²⁹⁸ Scott Morgan, “Theatre Review: Sodomites!!! A Musical of Biblical Proportions,” *Windy City Times*, July 1, 2009.

acclaim and helping to validate *The Annoyance*, but it was also spreading the company too thinly. Napier himself had only worked on one originally created show, *Madcap* (2000), in four years. Even *Co-Ed* was beginning to look tired. While the larger improv community and Annoyance fans were devastated when they heard that the company had lost its space, Napier saw it as an opportunity. Thirteen years and ninety-two productions later he was ready for a change. In the interim they opened a new branch of the company called Annoyance Productions that focused on multimedia and film projects, including their first film *Fatty Drives the Bus* (1999).

During their absence they continued teaching classes, but quickly realized that they missed live performance, realizing that “without the live experience, Annoyance isn’t really Annoyance.”²⁹⁹ After several failed attempts to secure a new home, in 2006 they opened a brand new larger (and more conventionally nice) space at 4830 N Broadway in Uptown—complete with a full service bar—with *President Bush is a Great Man*. The new Annoyance has some notable changes from “classic” Annoyance, including a more overt interest in money—along with a full service bar they now license a number of their plays for outside production—but the most notable change is in its mode of creation. Many contemporary plays are written in a more traditional manner, and are often brought to the company by its extensive and wide spread company (mainly comprised of graduates of the training center), or by outside groups/artists that propose shows to The Annoyance, instead of shows created collaboratively by the ensemble.

Upon its twenty-fifth anniversary in 2012, the company remains dedicated to its subversive free play mindset. While a core group of solely devoted artists are no longer devising the majority of the shows, the company still retains its uncensored and rebellious

²⁹⁹ Jones, “They’re Ba-aaack.”

edge. The company remounted *Co-Ed Prison Sluts* and continues to celebrate uncensored stage time with an eclectic mix of improvised and scripted shows, including *Holy Fuck Comedy Hour*, *An Unscripted Romance*, and *Messing with a Friend*. While they may have changed a bit, the group was still so influential that The Second City tapped Napier to direct their 50th anniversary show in 2009. Due in large measure to the success of *Co-Ed Prison Sluts* and the publication of Napier's improv manual *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out*, The Annoyance has emerged as a foundational theatre for improvisation. The alternative improv company in Chicago, they helped to revitalize and reinvent Chicago improvisational theatre by throwing out the rules and embracing the idea of uncensored play.

UPRIGHT CITIZENS BRIGADE

If The Annoyance Theatre is the alternative to iO, established as a reaction against the Harold, in many ways the Upright Citizens Brigade is iO's bastard child. Founded in 1991 by a collection of iO improvisers and based on the teachings of Close and the Harold, the group relocated to New York in 1996 behind the UCB Four—Amy Poehler, Matt Besser, Matt Walsh, and Ian Roberts—bringing an absurd, aggressive, playful, and socially discontent brand of long form improv and the Harold with them. The group relocated to New York in order to bring smart comedy to the Big Apple...and to get a television deal, both of which they eventually did. They entered a comedy scene that for several decades had been dominated by stand-up comics. Unlike Chicago where long form improv and the Harold had a long legacy and helped shape the city's comic aesthetic, in New York long form improvisation was virtually non-existent. The UCB,

pushing Close's philosophies and the Harold, helped usher in the transition in contemporary comedy from stand up comics and star performers headlining sitcoms and film comedies to ensemble based comedy such as *30 Rock* and *Bridesmaids*. Filling a much needed niche for collaborative ensemble created improvised comedy, fifteen years later the group has become one of the most influential comedy troupes in the country, with alumni flooding television and film, including most of NBC's 2011-12 Thursday night comedy lineup (*Community*, *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Parks & Recreation*).

Much like The Annoyance Theatre, the UCB sought to marry intelligence with absurdity, with Brian Raftery noting that "the UCB Four's comedic style was distinctly absurdist, marked by an understanding that being gross and being smart were not mutually exclusive."³⁰⁰ Like The Annoyance's *Splatter Theatre*, UCB has their own bloody comedy show called *Kilgore*. It was so bloody that they often just wrapped the theatre in clear plastic wrap. Like The Annoyance they sought to disrupt social conventions, with Jack Helbig noting that during UCB shows "it wasn't always easy to decide whether to laugh or gasp at how gleefully the troupe fucked with their audience's minds."³⁰¹ And much like The Annoyance, the members felt that they were improv misfits. They didn't really feel like they fit in with the iO group, or as Adam McKay says, "we were legitimately fucking delinquents. There were a lot of people in the improv scene who wanted to kick our asses."³⁰² What makes them different from The Annoyance is that they made the Harold the staple of their company, in the process marrying the form of iO with the aesthetic of The Annoyance.

³⁰⁰ Brian Raftery, "And...Scene," *New York Magazine*, September 25, 2011.

³⁰¹ Jack Helbig, "Upright Citizens Brigade," *Chicago Reader*, April 30, 1998.

³⁰² Qtd. in Raftery, "And...Scene."

As noted, the group started in Chicago in 1991 as a loose collection of iO improvisers, initially doing a show called Cerebral Stripmine. The group was just focused on having fun onstage, doing forms like Bucket of Truth, Punch Your Friend in the Face, and Machine Gun Blackout, which essentially was a game where the group would take a suggestion and see how quickly their scene could decay into a fight. Their first formal UCB show was called Virtual Reality. The group would select a member of the audience and that person would join McKay and a cameraman on a car trip around Chicago. They would then quickly edit the tape and show it to the audience. They became known for being very brash and taking risks in their work. For example, Horatio Sanz was doing a bit where he was leading a protest against Congressman Dan Rostenkowski, who several years later was indicted and sent to jail. Sanz led a group of protesters with lit tiki-torches and fake handguns onto the streets. Naturally the cops showed up. Sanz kept the bit going, and was arrested, much to the delight of the audience. They often would take audiences on field trips throughout the city, only to abandon the audience who then had to find their way back to the theatre (and their stuff). Through these pranks and their socially deconstructive improvisation they were getting some notice in Chicago, but the group felt like they could be bigger and didn't want to get buried in the flooded Chicago market. They also wanted a television show and didn't think that would happen if they stayed in the Midwest. They debated between Los Angeles, which had an emerging improv scene thanks to The Groundlings (founded in 1974 by Gary Austin), and New York, which was virtually void of improvisation. They chose the latter, relocating to New York in 1996 hoping to fill the city's improv vacuum.

Like many upstart groups they initially had trouble attracting audiences, in part because they were doing something totally new. While the Harold formed their ideological base, their main performance form is ASSSSCAT, which is a monologue deconstruction based on The Armando Diaz—a form many of the UCB folks had performed at iO (Armando Diaz himself was an early member of UCB). The main difference between the form is that ASSSSCAT uses a guest monologist (Conan O'Brien was one such early guest) who tells personal stories that then inspire the very free-form and playful improvisation, instead of using a member of the troupe who more fully integrates the monologues into the show. The monologist often tells two or three separate stories, but the form can be done based off of just one monologue. They began performing the form in Chicago, where the name originated as an homage to the form's deliberately sloppy and mess-around nature, and quickly became UCB's biggest draw when they relocated to New York. The form is still UCB's most popular show, featuring the theatre's top performers and alumni. It has run Saturday nights continuously since 1996 and features a who's who of guest monologists, including O'Brien, Tina Fey, Alec Baldwin, Chevy Chase, Janeane Garofalo, Robin Williams, Neko Case, David Cross, Andy Richter, Sarah Silverman, and others.

As noted while long form improv had become a staple of the Chicago comedy scene, it was unknown in New York. O'Brien commented that "they were filling some kind of void...there were people—and I was one of them—who thought, 'I'm less interested in doing stand-up. I really want to create weird things with other people.'"³⁰³ Rob Corddry remarked that "in 90 minutes, they changed how I felt and thought about

³⁰³ Qtd. in Raftery.

comedy.”³⁰⁴ They quickly started to get a following, in part because of their sketch shows. *The Saigon Suicide Squad* (1998) is a good example of the group’s comic aesthetic. The show works to deconstruct ethnic stereotypes, with a promise “to apologize to every ethnic group who has ever suffered from stereotyping.” Since they don’t have time to apologize to every color and creed though, they pick one group to represent all oppressed minorities: the Jews. Perhaps the most well-known apology in the show was a viciously hilarious, absurd, and disturbing sketch between a very Aryan looking Ian Roberts leading a public apology for the Holocaust to Jewish comic Matt Besser.

Behind the success of their sketch shows and improvisation, they began teaching classes and performing shows at Solo Arts, a very tiny (and very hot) space in Chelsea. While the UCB performed ASSSSCAT 3000 and other forms, their improvisational philosophy was rooted in the Harold, and those ideas formed the bedrock of the training school. Much like iO, UCB began building a roster of Harold teams, including early teams such as the Swarm, Mother, and Respecto Montalban. Competition for spots on UCB Harold teams is perhaps even more competitive since they have fewer teams, although in the early years teams were filled out with whoever was available.

While both iO and UCB perform Harolds, there are several notable differences between the two forms. UCB Harolds tend to be faster and more aggressive than iO Harolds, but also tend to stick more closely to the traditional Harold form, known in New York as the “teaching Harold.” They also focus more fully on the game of the scene, which is akin to a comedic premise, and simply means that the players are agreeing to the comic element of the scene, or what makes the scene funny. The game usually results from the actors recognizing something unusual about the scene or the characters. The

³⁰⁴ Qtd. in Raftery.

UCB focuses on three questions to find and play the game: What is the basic situation? What is the first unusual thing about the scene? If that, then what? Ideally each scene will have a basic situation, something that is familiar to everyone such as a typical father-son conversation, or doctor-patient exchange, etc. It is then up to the players to initially play out the scene according to those rules, but to stay alert so that they can recognize the first unusual thing that happens in the scene. For instance, the son seems to be giving his father advice, or the doctor is revealing personal information to the patient. Once the game has been established—and often times the players call out the game, “I didn’t think you were going to share that about your wife, doctor”—the players then push the game by looking for variations and ways to heighten or raise the stakes. The doctor might give more and more intimate details about their personal life, for instance, that mirror and heighten those of the patient. While it sounds simple, recognizing and playing the game of the scene is a difficult skill.

While iO teaches the game of the scene, it is considered a tool that a player can use to further the relationship of the scene. UCB training focuses almost exclusively on finding the game of the scene and heightening that aspect of the scene, and not necessarily as a way to explore character or relationship. Not surprisingly this philosophical difference spills over into performance, where the second beat of iO Harolds tend to heighten or follow characters or relationships, while at UCB they tend to follow the structural game of the scene. As a result UCB Harolds are structurally tighter (in terms of the three-by-three structure), faster, shorter, very playful and bold, slightly more vulgar (sometimes), and more thematic, whereas Chicago Harolds tend to be more

narrative and relationship-based, with the comic element of the scene based on relationships and connections.³⁰⁵

Let's briefly look at a Harold performed by UCB house team Bastion to demonstrate a Harold based on the game of the scene.³⁰⁶ The suggestion was comic book, and they opened the Harold with a series of three short personal monologues, which is not surprising considering the influence of ASSSSCAT. A good example of privileging the game of the scene over the relationship happens in 1A. A young woman is in a novelty shop looking for sex toys. The clerk engages her and the scene becomes about how the various toys can be like boyfriends. There are then two walk-ons that focus on the toys as boyfriends, instead of focusing on the relationship between the clerk and the young woman. The scene becomes about the various ways the dildos are like boyfriends, rather than the connection between the two characters.

The next scene (1B) features a young man who is trying to borrow money from the bank using comic books as collateral. Again, the conceit of using comic books as collateral becomes the game of the scene, with the players working in a series of comic book references proving their value. The scene becomes about using the comics to get a loan, rather than focusing on the relationship between the loan officer and the man. 1C features two men talking about haircuts. The scene begins by playing the game of how stupid "Tom's" haircut is and all of the various elements of it that make his life hard. The scene partner tries to make the scene about Tom's recent divorce that led to the new

³⁰⁵ There are several regional differences in the Harold that are both a result of the culture and artistic climate of each city as well as their exposure to the Harold. For instance, in Toronto the Harold more closely resembles a Montage, also known as a Toronto Harold. Most improvisers in Toronto aren't trained in the Harold (at least not as their first improv training) and there isn't a set form for the Harold there, so teams perform what they think a Harold can be, which in reality is nearer to the way Close originally saw the form. Likewise, Dirty South Improv based in North Carolina performs a game-based quick play Harold.

³⁰⁶ Performed June 15, 2010, Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre.

haircut, which would push the scene in a more relationship based direction, but instead they continue to play the game of the scene—heightening how Tom’s haircut is affecting his life and taking on a persona of its own, thus making things very difficult for him (he can’t see, he can’t drive, etc.).

The first group game is a series of two person scenes where one person in the relationship finds a reason why the two can no longer spend time together. The game then became a series of short scenes (featuring tag-out edits) all heightening the game of the original scene, with each person finding a more outlandish reason why they can’t hang out. In 2A, the young woman from 1A is on a game show to find “the dildo of her dreams.” In a parody of the Dating Game, she asks the dildos a series of questions about why they are the dildo for her, thus heightening the game of the original scene: dildos are like boyfriends. There is a quick tag-out that takes us to the host being fired from the game show because he isn’t famous enough. The scene begins to explore the host as a character, but is quickly cut off when Sinbad introduces himself as the new host of the show. In 2B, an African American preacher is trying to get a loan from the bank from 1B. Heightening the game of the scene from the first beat, we find out that he is trying to use sermons he has given as collateral. In 2C, Tom is getting his hair cut...only it is his pubic hair that he’s getting cut. Again, rather than exploring the character of Tom, they continue to heighten the game of the funny and absurd things that Tom’s hair does...including “his pubic hair alarm clock.”

The next group game features a comic book author at a book signing. Each member of the audience asks him to sign something that isn’t one of his comic books, including the receipt for his hotel, a sketch he made in fifth grade, a girl who needs a

father to sign her birth certificate, and a boy who wants him to sign his penis. The game is clearly finding different things for an author to sign other than his work, and becomes the thrust of the scene. 3A features the end of the dildo girl's story, when she meets Sebastian, a guitar player. She thinks he's a dildo, when in fact he's a real person. In 3B, Sinbad is trying to get a loan, and he's initially denied the loan, but the loan officer changes her mind when she finds out that he has singing pubic hair, which becomes the blackout moment that ends the show.

As this quick example demonstrates, UCB players tend to focus on the game of the scene, and once they find it they spend the scene (and subsequent beat) heightening the game. The humor comes out of playing the game, rather than exploring the relationship. For instance, the A beat became about making dildos as much like real boyfriends as possible to the point that the girl could no longer tell the difference. The B beat became about finding different outlandish things to use as collateral for a loan, and the C beat was about the funny and absurd things haircuts can do. Focusing on the game tends to make scenes quicker and gives the comedy a more rapid-fire approach that generally speaking is less complex, but also has a higher "hit" rate. As this example demonstrates, UCB Harolds also tend to stick closely to the three-by-three structure. While there were numerous tag-outs within any given scene, they never fell out of the A, B, C structure. Let me be clear that there is nothing wrong with following the "teaching Harold," or focusing on the game of the scene, but it is a different approach than the iO Harold and delivers a different type of humor than iO's slow comedy based in relationships, which tend to utilize more intellectual humor. That is not to say that UCB

does not perform humor with depth, or that iO never tells a “dick joke,” but the varying ideologies produce different types of humor.

Some of the differences can be attributed to time. UCB has only been performing Harolds for a little over a decade, while iO is approaching thirty years. Furthermore, UCB only has Harold Night once a week, whereas at iO every night is a Harold night where teams perform both Harolds and forms inspired by the Harold. While the Harold is the foundation at UCB, the theatre features many other shows and styles, including a vibrant sketch schedule, whereas the Harold is the main performance piece at iO and has thusly undergone numerous changes. Since UCB doesn’t perform as many Harolds or rely on it in performance so heavily, they tend to use the “teaching Harold” form as it is rather than tinker with it to find new forms because they are already performing a variety of forms and styles.

In 1999 they found their first permanent space, thanks in part to Rudy Giuliani’s anti-porn crusade, when, fittingly, they took over a closed down burlesque club on West 22nd Street fitted with mirrored walls and a runway. Meanwhile in 1998, they got their television show, *Upright Citizens Brigade*, which was a sketch show on Comedy Central. It only ran until 2000, and while it wasn’t improvised, it was structured much like a Harold with each show centered on a theme. As Walsh explains, “the theme of the show was our suggestion, and we would take existing scenes or write scenes that related to that topic or explored that idea, then we would start to weave it together, like the Harold does. We’d tried to find interesting and unlikely ways for those characters or ideas to meet.”³⁰⁷ They culled a majority of their material from past improv scenes and generated a greater

³⁰⁷ Qtd. in Josh Fult, “Matt Walsh 7/19/06 Part 2,” *Improv Interviews*, improvinterviews.com, November 15, 2006. www.improvinterviews.com/2006/11/matt-walsh-71906-part-2.html.

part of their new material from the Sunday night ASSSSCAT performances, so it isn't surprising that the show felt like a Harold.

It was one of the first sketch shows since *SCTV* to revolve around a central theme and overarching narrative, rather than a loose collection of sketches about current events. The show was based around a fake group of "social terrorists" who sought to disrupt the status quo through sketch comedy. Del Close even recorded the voiceover in the show's opening title sequence, which captured the group's postmodern deconstructionist mindset:

From the dawn of civilization, they have existed in order to undermine it. Our only enemy is the status quo. Our only friend is chaos. They have no government ties and unlimited resources. If something goes wrong, we are the cause. Every corner of the earth is under their surveillance. If you do it, we see it. Always. We believe the powerful should be made less powerful. We have heard the voice of society, begging us to destabilize it. Antoine. Colby. Trotter. Adair. We are the Upright Citizens Brigade.

The show broke new ground for sketch comedy shows because it wasn't based on popular culture or celebrity impersonations, endlessly shoving catch-phrases down the audiences' throat. Rather, like a Harold, the humor was based on connecting seemingly unrelated events, characters, and plots.

Structuring the show like a Harold allowed *UCB* to create its own universe, with products and characters frequently called back throughout the show's three seasons. By avoiding the sketch comedy crutch of catch phrases, the show allowed their characters room to breathe and live in many different spaces. For instance, Duke Thompson is not only the sleazy creator of "Power Marketing," but also owns one of the Pro Thunderball teams from a separate episode (which is a sport exactly like baseball except with murder). A knowledge of "Power Marketing" makes the Pro Thunderball sketch even funnier, but

isn't necessary for the sketch to work. Much like the theatre version of UCB, as the show progressed it moved away from pranks and more into the world of connections, with sketches essentially working to tie together elements and characters across not only each episode but eventually across the entire series.

While the show was never a huge hit and was cancelled after three seasons in 2000, it broke new comedic ground based in the concepts of the Harold, and brought incredible attention to the group, who seemed like they were unstoppable. In 2002, however, the company faced a series of challenges, first when members Ali Farahnakian and Diaz left the company and founded the Peoples Improv Theatre (Diaz later founded the Magnet Theatre). In a much direr situation than a competing theatre, and in an eerily similar history to The Compass and iO, in November UCB's building was shut down due to a fire code violation. The company continued performing around the city while they searched for a new home, but much like iO's many space-based setbacks, the future of the company was tedious. Eventually in 2003 the group found a 150 seat theatre on West 26th Street below a deli that still serves as their New York base.

Aside from space issues, they began facing other issues similar to those of The Compass, Second City, and iO: they were losing their players to bigger paychecks. *Saturday Night Live* began plucking the group, taking Sanz, and Poehler among many others over the years. *The Daily Show* likewise hired Ed Helms, Rob Corddry, and Rob Riggle among others. The result was increased exposure, but it also brought a sense of competition to the group, people who saw UCB as a stepping stone, which in a way it was. While the group brought a raunchier and more aggressive aesthetic to the Harold, their main contribution to the Harold came from the success of their alumni who along

with the alums of Second City, iO, and The Groundlings have formed the bedrock of contemporary film and television comedy. UCB's focus on the teachings of the Harold, most notably supporting your partner, have infected and infused the ensemble-based comedy that has become the standard of contemporary comedy.

IMPROVISED SHAKESPEARE COMPANY

While The Annoyance and UCB broke away from iO, The Improvised Shakespeare Company is one of iO's most celebrated non-Harold teams. They begin by asking the audience for a title of a play that has yet to be written, and then create a fully improvised two-act play in Elizabethan style. *Chicago Tribune* critic Kerry Reid noted that the mixture of Shakespeare and improv results in "a delightful evening that celebrates the best of both iambics and long-form improv."³⁰⁸ Patrick Sharbaugh of the *Charleston City Paper* went even further saying Improvised Shakespeare Company is "one of the funniest, most amazing things I've ever seen."³⁰⁹ The group performs in the increasingly popular narrative style, but combines many of the elements of The Annoyance's philosophy, including deconstruction of popular culture and a mixing of high and low comedy. As an iO team, I'd like to explore their style and performance to demonstrate not only a group that has moved beyond the Harold, but also to illustrate the mixing of improv philosophies and styles.

Named the "Best Improv Group" of 2009 by *The Chicago Reader*, The ISC is the brainchild of Blaine Swen. He began his improvised experiment in Los Angeles at iO West with the group Backstreet Bards. In 2000, the group performed in improv

³⁰⁸ Kerry Reid, "Improvised Shakespeare," *Chicago Tribune*, October 13, 2006.

³⁰⁹ Patrick Sharbaugh, "Improvised Shakespeare," *Charleston City Paper Online*, June 6, 2006.

performances known as cage matches, where two groups face off with competing twenty minute performances. The group was an instant sensation winning ten consecutive matches. Their success forced them out of the cage match (after ten consecutive wins a group is required to retire from competition), but opened other doors. As Swen notes, “the audiences had grown so large that they offered us a regular Friday night spot. So we became the Spontaneous Shakespeare Company at iO West.”³¹⁰ The company was relatively short lived, however, and Swen left Los Angeles in 2001 to come to Loyola University in Chicago to study for a graduate degree in Philosophy. It wasn’t until 2005 that Swen brought the improvised Bard back to the stage. Along with a group of fellow improvisers, he produced a show at Donny’s Skybox at The Second City. Audiences again began clamoring for more. Charna Halpern caught wind of the group, and brought them to iO where they quickly became a mainstay, performing twice every Friday night since 2006.

Yet they are not like your typical improv group. Yes, they perform in tunics and speak in iambic pentameter, but like many of the groups that have distinguished themselves it is their dedication to the craft—in this case to Shakespeare’s work—that sets them apart. If Close wanted improvisers to play to the top of their intelligence, Swen and the ISC have taken it one step further. They aren’t content with parodying Shakespeare by simply peppering their language with ‘thees’ and ‘thous.’ And they don’t simply recreate a comedic burlesque of Shakespeare’s plays. They are trying to create original work informed by Shakespeare. A recent performance, “Two Many Dudes to Remember,” (titles are given by the audience), featured several Shakespearean tropes and

³¹⁰ Patrick Sharbaugh, “Chicago’s Improvised Shakespeare Company hones its Piccolo Fringe act to a fare thee well.” *Charleston City Paper*, June 7, 2006.

themes, among them: royal marriage and crown succession, mistaken identity, a twin brother and sister separated by time and circumstances, cross dressing and swapped identities, forbidden love, a group of players performing a play within a play, a massive death scene, sexual innuendo with both bawdy and metaphoric language, homoerotic sexual innuendos, an old crone with mystical powers, and in true Shakespearean comedic tradition the play ended with a marriage as well as a trademark rhyming couplet. And all of these are from just one performance! But the ISC isn't trying to recreate Shakespeare or simply show off how many references they can cram into one performance. The group always strives to make the material fresh and original; "we really try to create an original play," Swen says.³¹¹

One of the ways the group avoids simple parody is through rigorous study. The group meets regularly to discuss Shakespeare's plays and other works, immersing themselves in the language, which, Swen says, becomes second nature. He likens it to reading Mark Twain:

when you put the book down you sort of think with a southern accent...If you read Shakespeare and you put it down, you sort of start thinking with 'thees' and thous.' So in order to make sure we're staying true to the form, we constantly read Shakespeare and keep our noses in the text so that when we put it down it's fresh and we can jump up and just start speaking with a sort of Elizabethan language.³¹²

They don't limit their studies to Shakespeare. Swen steeps his players in Elizabethan drama and culture as well. The group studies plays and films, attend Renaissance Faires, hold seminars with local scholars, and even take vocabulary and history quizzes. The group even spent several weeks reading and discussing Plato's *Republic*. They meet

³¹¹ Sharbaugh.

³¹² "Improvised Shakespeare adds fresh, comedic turns to Bard's turf." *What'sOnWinnipeg.com*. July 21, 2009.

regularly to rehearse, but unlike most improv rehearsals they dedicate the first hour to lecture and discussion. These forums, Swen says, have contributed to making their improv deeper and richer. It also has made their humor work on two different intellectual levels. Their facility with the language obviously improves, as does their sense of Shakespearean plots, characters, and archetypes. They are able to more artfully infuse the bawdy with the profound. It also has helped them become “better listeners with richer reactions to discoveries within scenes. But most importantly, we continue to have more and more fun.”³¹³ The ISC has taken the concept of slow comedy and playing to the top of one’s intelligence to new levels.

These intellectual discussions have an impact on the performance in several ways. Performer Thomas Middleditch credited the forums for giving his improv a sharp intellectual edge and greater emotional complexion and depth. He remembers a performance where he was playing the son of a bloodthirsty queen, “and I had to kill someone else to satisfy her bloodlust. At the end, I stabbed her. People gasped. He [Swen] and I took that moment, no jokes, just, you know, acted.”³¹⁴ The group’s dedication to knowledge illuminates their performance and serves to support a learned approach to Shakespeare more often found in English departments than in improv theaters.

Since most readers probably have not seen The ISC, let me briefly describe a recent performance I attended—“Two Many Dudes to Remember.”³¹⁵ The all male

³¹³ Steve Heisler, “No holds Bard: ISC frees its group mind with highbrow ideology,” *TimeOut Chicago*. May 24-30, 2007.

³¹⁴ Heisler.

³¹⁵ I attended three different performances between October and November 2009, this particular performance is from October 9, 2009.

company takes the stage while modern punk music fills the theatre.³¹⁶ The players are dressed in faux Elizabethan tunics, contemporary dress pants rolled to the knee, dress socks, and gym shoes. This mixture of past and present, high and low immediately sets the tone for the performance, and is but one of many signs of The Annoyance's influence creeping into iO. It is apparent right away that notions of highbrow and inaccessible Shakespeare should be left at the door; this performance is a Shakespeare for the people. Their collaboration is immediately apparent, setting a tone not only of revelry and modernity, but also of reverence. This is further reinforced during Swen's introduction, where he announces the group will perform a world premiere Elizabethan play, and "we'll do it all using the styles, the themes, and the language of the immortal Bard, William Shakespeare." When Swen mentions Shakespeare's name, the entire company bow their heads for a moment of reverential silence.

This moment of solemnity works to both subvert and assert Shakespeare's status as the ultimate symbol of high art. The audience generally responds to this display with laughter. Their laughter is an acknowledgment of society's Bardolatry, but more importantly by bringing that viewpoint into the performance from the very start allows the audience to connect with Shakespeare on a more "equal" level. It allows the audience to drop any preconceived notions, fears, or anxieties about Shakespeare that are common among many theatre-goers (the novice improv audience member usually has similar fears and anxieties about improv and the Harold). The reverence allows the audience to poke fun at their own feelings toward Shakespeare and the assumption that if one doesn't get Shakespeare it's a failing of one's education and intellect. Furthermore, it pokes fun at

³¹⁶ The group currently has eleven members, but due to the weekly performance schedule and other factors an individual performance usually only features five to seven players. Punk music also is a feature of the Annoyance aesthetic.

the highbrow usage of Shakespeare by other artists. As Diana Henderson argues, “more often than not, modern artists invoke Shakespeare as precisely what he could not be in his own time: a source of unquestioned artistry and authority.”³¹⁷ Thus the moment of silence is working on several levels, both cementing Shakespeare’s canonical status and subverting those that place him there.

Improvisational theatre in general has a similar relationship with traditional theatre, much like the popular and legitimate stages of eighteenth and nineteenth century England. Improv actively works to mix the high of traditional theatre with the low of popular culture, trying to alleviate audience fears that they “won’t get it” because it’s theatre, so it should be no surprise that the ISC begins their performance in this way. This example of mixing high and low by celebrating the high is apparent time and again throughout the performance. While the company performs this silence to get a laugh, they also are not doing it as a parody. There is a definite grain of truth behind the silence. As we have seen through their rehearsal process, the group truly does elevate Shakespeare, so the moment of silence works on several levels, both constructing and contesting Shakespeare’s cultural status and authority.

The basic plot for this performance pulled in several plays, including *Two Gentlemen of Verona*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *King Lear*, *Hamlet*, *Twelfth Night*, *The Taming of the Shrew*, and *The Tempest*. Following an episodic structure, the performance follows star-crossed lovers Benvolio and Bianca. Clearly drawing on *Romeo and Juliet*, Benvolio’s “wingman” is none other than Romeo himself, who is rather asexual throughout the performance, contrasted with Bianca’s nurse-maid, who is a hyper-sexual take on the Nurse from *Romeo and Juliet*. The two Italians have come to Verona,

³¹⁷ Diana Henderson, *Collaborations with the Past* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006), 3.

England (the setting sets up one of the more parodic lines of the play when a guard finds Benvolio and Romeo and cries out “There are Italians in the streets of Verona!”) to capture the hand of the lovely Princess Bianca. Mimicking the secondary plot line from *The Taming of the Shrew*, Bianca plays the unwed ingénue. Rather than an unmarried older sister in the way of her love, however, her father the king has planned a political marriage with Prince Ferdinando of Spain. The king wants Bianca to marry so that she and her husband can be next in line for the crown since nobody wants Bianca’s half-wit older brother Peter to claim the crown.

Over the next ninety minutes Benvolio and Romeo have a falling out over a misunderstanding, Ferdinando proves to be as dastardly as his accent (and Catholicism) suggests, the king finalizes the royal marriage, and Bianca and her nurse-maid sneak out in disguise a la Portia and Nerissa, to find their true loves. Bianca’s over-sexualized nurse-maid has thrown herself at Romeo in an inversion of Act II, Scene iv of *Romeo and Juliet* where she is sent by Juliet to find Romeo and reports back of his continued affection. The nurse-maid later throws herself at Ferdinando, a humorous scene featuring a series of nautical sexual metaphors sinking deeper into the abyss of vulgarity, but since she was disguised at the time, Benvolio, who overheard their textual mating, assumed that she was actually Bianca.

Through a series of mistaken identities, cross dressing, and bloody fights, Benvolio, Bianca, and the twenty-odd characters introduced all converge at the royal masquerade where Ferdinando and Bianca are to be wed. Interrupted by a performance from a group of players who discover that pantomime is not simply presenting a series of sexually suggestive poses, the play comes together in a series of fights waged between

the many characters played by the five actors. Dressed as her brother to deceive her father and Ferdinando, Bianca and Benvolio ultimately come together after a bloody battle between Ferdinando and Benvolio that leaves nearly everyone dead (in the midst of the chaos one of the actors called out “raise your hand if you’re not dead.”). The play ends with a pair of marriages, first a same sex marriage between the dying Chamberlain and Apothecary, and finally with Bianca and Benvolio.

Much like most Harold performances and certainly a descendant of *The Annoyance*, the performance featured several instances of mixing high and popular culture. For instance, when one of the king’s servants was helping the hapless king open doors with his mind, he quipped to the audience, referring to royalty being bestowed with honors and awards that they haven’t earned, “It is rather unexpected—and some may argue undeservèd?—for you to win such an award.” The line was in reference to the day’s big news: President Barack Obama winning the Nobel Peace Prize while also overseeing two wars. Furthermore, the play blended the improvisational and Shakespearean practice of doubling. This technique is not only humorous, but allows for the group to present the type of sprawling cast found in Shakespeare’s plays, while also showing the virtuosity of the performers. But more than that, it directly comments on Shakespeare’s doubling, and links the two popular forms of entertainment. Furthermore, the doubling debunks the idea that Shakespeare can only be acted by highly trained and respected classical actors, although one could rather convincingly argue that the ISC cast is highly trained and respected.

With the sample performance in mind, the one issue that faces any Shakespearean adaptation/appropriation is language. Ryan Hubbard said of “*The Taming of the Jew*,”

that the show “flowers in the language: they relish iambic dialogue, execute perfectly timed asides, occasionally utter rhyming couplets, and drop parodic phrases, and well-placed anachronisms.”³¹⁸ Of “Iago’s Regret,” the *Chicago Tribune* said that “the ensemble creates a clever riff on the source, complete with torturous riddles...A delightful evening that celebrates the best of both iambics and long-form improv.”³¹⁹ The language that the group uses in performance clearly has its root in a textual base. One can see in their approach a reverence for the text, a common theme in contemporary popular Shakespeare—a deification of Shakespeare’s language that serves as the foundation for an adaptation or appropriation that ultimately rewrites that language. While many contemporary examples try to tear down the language and with it notions about high and low art, the ISC uses the language to connect with a popular audience. In other words they “address an audience hungry for words *as* performance.”³²⁰ It is a similar approach to the Harold, which sought to make the process of improv the product.

Perhaps the biggest issue facing any contemporary Shakespearean production—whether a faithful staging of *Othello*, a film adaptation of *Henry V*, or a commercial featuring “to be or not to be”—is the language. Shakespeare’s language is often used by high culture to assert Shakespeare’s cultural supremacy. The reverence of the play texts, the oceans of ink spilled analyzing the plays, and the tradition of academic close readings all help to place Shakespeare’s language on a pedestal perhaps higher than any other artistic pedestal in Western art. Language supposedly offers us the ‘authentic’

³¹⁸ Ryan Hubbard, “Seven Strapping Men in Swashbuckler Shirts,” *Chicago Reader*, March 31, 2006.

³¹⁹ Kerry Reid, “‘Underwater’ Drowns, the Bard Inspires Fun Improv,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 13, 2006.

³²⁰ Diana Henderson, “From Popular Entertainment to Literature,” *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*, ed. Robert Shaughnessy (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 18.

Shakespeare. The ways in which the text is treated as scripture reinforces the idea of the language holding the key to Shakespeare, and henceforth the key to cultural and artistic authority. As Douglass Lanier notes, “the value accorded the Shakespearian text is so widespread that it seems perverse to think otherwise; where *else* might one locate the authentic Shakespeare than in Shakespeare’s exact words?”³²¹ Adaptations and appropriations must constantly negotiate the language, and the strong attachment many have to the aesthetic authority it represents.

The major question facing nearly every contemporary popular representation remains the same: “is Shakespeare’s language essential to Shakespeare? Can that language be changed, translated, reduced, or even jettisoned entirely and the result remain in some sense Shakespearian?”³²² How then does a group that improvises negotiate the issue of language? Shakespop has a fundamental ambivalence about Shakespearian language. On the one hand, popular appropriations recognize the inherited cultural authority of Shakespeare’s language and often take pains to preserve and co-opt it. On the other hand, because high culture has erected Shakespearian language as the stylistic achievement in English, popular culture has used Shakespearian language as a foil against which to establish itself as popular.

One example that helps position The ISC’s approach to language is the Firesign Theatre. Working in the mid-1960s and 1970s, the foursome created psychedelic stream of consciousness radio recordings mixing high and pop culture. At first glance the group may appear to simply be a burlesque, but upon closer inspection Firesign’s approach is best described as parodic homage, one that celebrated Shakespeare’s language. Like

³²¹ Douglass Lanier, *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 59.

³²² Lanier, 62.

Firesign, and unlike many other comedic Shakespeare adaptations/appropriations that simply mock Shakespearian language, The ISC works to celebrate the language. While the group still works to subvert the authority that exists within that language, they clearly have a reverence for it. This is evident from the very beginning of the performance, when the group takes a moment of silence to celebrate the Great Bard. Yet The ISC has a unique relationship to language since it is completely improvised and not an adaptation or appropriation of a particular play or idea.

By removing the ‘language,’ and all of its connotations but maintaining its authority, and still celebrating the poetry, the ISC make their performances more accessible and less threatening to popular audiences who sometimes assume they simply ‘won’t get the language.’ Through improv the group is able to avoid language issues that other groups and adaptations must face. By having modern actors speaking in Elizabethan vocabulary, improv allows the players to modernize the language without vulgarizing or desecrating the text. The audience revels in the modern players’ ability to ‘naturally’ speak in an Elizabethan style. By celebrating the language without the ‘language’ the group supports Shakespeare’s cultural authority and supremacy while also subverting the common deification that usually accompanies Shakespearean language.

But why Shakespeare? Why not mix improv and Socrates? By using Shakespeare, the group asks us to rethink our notions about Shakespeare. More and more Shakespearean adaptations and citations appearing in more and more diverse ways and places beg the question, what exactly is Shakespeare in the twenty-first century? The ISC takes that one step further by asking what *makes* Shakespeare SHAKESPEARE? The language? The text? The tunics? By questioning what makes Shakespeare, the group also

puts a new twist into the stage versus page debate that has contributed to Shakespeare's meaning and reception for centuries. By removing the text the group privileges performance, but does so knowing that all Shakespearean performance comes from a text—whether it be a traditional production, adaptation, or revision. Even an improvised performance stems from the page. As we've seen through the group's rigorous study of Shakespeare's works, a printed source still informs a production even if there is no printed text. Lastly, Shakespeare's cultural authority and prestige brings people into the theatre, and it brings them to improvisation, which is continually fighting for new audiences. Shakespeare is one of pop culture's favorite ways to critique the culture and aesthetic he seemingly represents. Likewise, improvisational theatre is a traditionally subversive form, which can be seen in the dismissal of the primacy of text and traditional creative hierarchies. Improv also challenges the audience to rethink their notions of Shakespeare, and through this we can see The Annoyance Theatre's profound influence on iO and contemporary improvisation. By combining improv and Shakespeare the group asks fundamental questions about the meaning, creation, and primacy of art. What is art? And who decides what is good (i.e. Shakespeare) and what is bad or popular (i.e. improv)?

The ISC seems to be saying that Shakespeare and modern popular culture should not be separate terms waged in a battle between cultural strata, but should be a way to understand Shakespeare in a broader context. Shakespeare should not be solely seen as the bearer of cultural supremacy, but as a part of popular culture whose survival and authority depends upon his relationship to that culture. The ISC works to negotiate the distance between the popular playwright and the bearer of cultural supremacy, asserting

and subverting popular notions about The Bard, ultimately presenting Shakespeare without SHAKESPEARE.

The group also shows the many ways that iO itself is moving beyond the Harold. While the ISC bases their work in two-person relationship based scenes like a Harold, their form is completely narrative and hardly resembles a Harold. It is this very type of experimentation, however, that allows iO to continue innovating, and allows the Harold to morph and change. The ISC has certainly been an influence on the growing narrative trend in contemporary Harolds, as well as demonstrating how to effectively deconstruct popular culture through improvisation. Furthermore, the very issues ISC raises—Shakespeare’s relationship to culture, the place and role of art in a society, for instance—further demonstrate improv’s vital role in theatre scholarship, practice, and debate.

OCTAVARIUS

I’d like to conclude the chapter with a brief exploration of Octavarius, which was named the best sketch/improv group of 2011 in Chicago by the *Reader*. With the growth of improv spurred on by the Harold, and the cross pollination of styles that The Annoyance ushered in, there are now literally hundreds of independent improv groups in Chicago and beyond. Not affiliated with any one theatre or style, these groups usually consist of players that have trained at Second City, iO and/or The Annoyance, and often times at all three, as well as either with college or university troupes, or with independent instructors. As the next generation of performers that aren’t necessarily identified as an iO or Annoyance player, often times performing on teams at a variety of theatres, they

consequently tend to have a hybrid aesthetic that mixes the styles, rules, and forms of the three institutions.

Growing out of The Improv Mafia at Illinois State University, and officially forming in March 2009, Octavarius has borrowed The Annoyance's motto to simply have fun, or as they put it, "fun is everywhere."³²³ Exemplifying their hybrid approach, they work mainly in improvisation (performing both long form and short form), but they also make video shorts, record music, write stories and blogs, record podcasts, create cartoons, created the web-series *I Made America* (2012), and explore other "performance" mediums. Within each improvised performance they present written sketches and songs, members Matt Herzau and Keith Habersberger actually produced a rap album together called "Vanilla Point." They've also occasionally brought in stand up comics or other improv groups to serve as opening acts. Essentially they go beyond improv in their shows, presenting an entire evening of entertainment, leading *TimeOut Chicago* to say that "more improv shows should be this much fun."³²⁴

Brian Wohl explains the group's approach, noting that they always keep the audience in mind when planning for a show, "we're always understanding it's a choice to leave your house... We make it a whole night, instead of just improv... so you're darn glad you left your house."³²⁵ This audience-first mindset is in stark contrast to much of long form improv's history, where as we've seen keeping the audience in the dark was seen almost as a right of passage, and is one of the major reasons that long form improv's popularity has stagnated. Part of their formula is creating a theme for each show, such as

³²³ "About Octavarius," Octavarius.com, accessed June 5, 2011.

³²⁴ Jason Heidemann, "Live Review: Octavarius So Nefarious at the ComedySportz Theatre," *TimeOut Chicago*, September 13, 2010.

³²⁵ Qtd. in Kate Thayer, "Suburban Natives See Success with Improv Group," *Chicago Tribune Local – Schaumburg*, June 8, 2011.

the beach, Die Hard Christmas, Hipster-prov, pro-wrestling, and others. The audience is notified of the theme beforehand and die-hard fans often dress to that week's theme. At the end of the show the group throws a party with the audience invited. Furthermore, improvisation is generally associated with Chicago (although it is everywhere), and even in Chicago it is localized to a very small radius on the north side of the city. Octavarius, like many other independent groups performs both within this radius but also in an expanding market. They perform in the suburbs and at other places throughout the city that don't have a bricks and mortar improv theater. They did, however, recently sign a contract for a thirty-five week run at ComedySportz Chicago, the longest contract the theatre has given out in its twenty-five year history. What they represent, however, is the spreading influence of the Harold and long form improv where in 2012 it is more uncommon for a city not to have some type of long form improv presence.

Octavarius shows are noted for their energetic audience friendly approach as well as the mixing of short form into a long form performance. The theme incorporates the audience into the action, and the mix of long form and a sprinkling of short form helps create a very welcoming and non-intimidating atmosphere. As Brian Costello noted, their shows aren't so much about the themes or games, and demonstrate "the fearless, spirited, energetic interplay that has come to represent the very best of Chicago improv."³²⁶ The group is important in the development of the Harold and long form improv for three reasons: 1) mixing of long form and short form into one show; 2) heavy audience involvement; 3) dedication to one team in an era of improv polygamy.

The group formed professionally after several of the members, who had first performed together at Illinois State, had gone through the iO training center. According

³²⁶ Brian Costello, "Octavarius: So Nefarious," *Chicago Reader*, November 1, 2010.

to Wohl, they were “very unhappy with what we found with the structure...you are at the mercy of where they put you.”³²⁷ Teams are made, reshuffled, and cut regularly, and while there are certainly notable teams that have stayed together for years, the average iO team is cut or reshuffled within a year. Marc Muszynski noted that “we knew who we wanted to play with and that wasn’t happening at iO...we wanted to commit to one team.”³²⁸ Like Ed, Jazz Freddy, JTS Brown, and other groups, they wanted to commit themselves to one group. Many contemporary improvisers play on numerous teams, often running between shows and teams every night of the week. While this can be a good strategy for an individual performer who will get better by playing so much (and be seen by more “improv players”), it isn’t always great for the teams. Octavarius is so dedicated that they actually have their own stage manager, Lauren Aimone, who is one of the only non-improvisers in Chicago that handles the ever important black-out to end shows.

Like many players and groups before, they were unhappy with the team structure of iO. In the post-Harold era, however, players have more options and agency. They no longer need iO to teach them improv or to provide a performance home. As noted the group had already been performing together in college, and they wanted to continue working together, something that wasn’t possible at iO. They also came to iO with a relatively deep knowledge of improv and a strong performance background. They not only wanted the freedom to play with their own team, but they wanted the artistic freedom to stray from the Harold.

The group’s main form—The Nefarious—is a combination of long form structures infused with short form games. The form starts with a short form game, usually

³²⁷ Brian Wohl, Personal Interview, October 23, 2011.

³²⁸ Marc Muszynski, Personal Interview, October 23, 2011.

Challenge or Objection. They take a topic suggested by the audience and then perform a series of emotionally charged monologues that bring the players' personal perspective to the piece, which Keith Habersberger notes "really help connect us to the audience."³²⁹ They then go into a montage based off of the monologues, but their scenes often take on short form elements. For example, they might play a traditional guessing game, then have the characters from the game come back later in the piece in scenes unrelated to the game, playing with the information in new ways. Inspired by JTS Brown, they also often "freeze" the action of a scene and ask the audience for their input, asking for example how they might want a scene to play out or even filling in basic information such as relationship or location.

The form allows the group to create and maintain a relationship with the audience. Much like Theatresports, Octavarius points to professional wrestling as a major influence. Wohl commented that they "are always checking in to the crowd, making sure they are in with what we are doing."³³⁰ Unlike a Harold, which typically takes one audience suggestion and then presents a performance to the audience, an Octavarius show takes the audience interaction of short form and applies it to long form. They often will stop a scene or even a form and explain what is happening (often times in a humorous way), and "the audience totally appreciates that."³³¹ Their audience friendly approach is influenced by their short form roots, but it also comes from their target audience—the general public. Many iO and other long form teams perform mainly for each other. Theaters often have student passes that allow students to see shows for free, and consequently a majority of the audience is made up of improv insiders. Therefore part of

³²⁹ Keith Habersberger, Personal Interview, October 23, 2011.

³³⁰ Wohl, Personal Interview.

³³¹ Muszynski, Personal Interview.

the performance becomes decoding what is happening, to prove your improv knowledge. Octavarius aims for a more general audience. According to Habersberger, “we try to keep our parents entertained. If we can keep them entertained then we can probably entertain a general audience.”³³² There are certainly elements that an improv insider can appreciate, such as incorporating elements from the highly complex form *Close Quarters* that plays with time and space, but also allows the improv novice to enjoy a high energy performance.

Some would argue, however, that Octavarius’s audience friendly approach demonstrates the commodification of improv most often seen in short form improv and exemplified by *Whose Line is it Anyway?* and *ComedySportz*. Yet they avoid many of the trappings of short form improv, such as the quick jokes, unrelated games, and almost fast-food type approach by fully incorporating the games and ideas into a longer piece. While the speed and disconnected nature of short form tends to present a series of quick fragmented realities, or what Jameson calls “a series of perpetual presents,” by combining and exploring those games in a deeper and more connected context (long form) Octavarius works to question the black-and-white reality that short form tends to present.³³³ By taking characters from a game show, for example, and then exploring their history, relationships, and desires later in the piece, the characters and game transform from a two-dimensional reality where the joke is often based on an easily recognized stereotype, and are further deconstructed, presenting a character that is not simply a vehicle for a joke, but a complex and flawed person.

³³² Habersberger, Personal Interview.

³³³ Jameson, 1138.

Octavarius represents a new generation of performer, one that didn't come of age under Del Close's tutelage, and one that doesn't view Second City, iO, and The Annoyance as three separate brands that can never be combined—or moving to Chicago as necessary to perform long form improv. They freely incorporate elements from short form, long form, sketch, multimedia, and other forms into their performances. Octavarius's audience friendly approach is likewise a drastic change from most of long form improv's history, and along with growing improv acumen among the general public is helping to legitimize improvisation by further spreading it to a mass audience while not compromising the core elements of long form improv.

While these four groups/theatres are wildly different, they are also directly tied to the Harold—whether they are reacting to it, transforming it, or using its foundational skills. They demonstrate the ways in which the Harold and iO's philosophy have permeated long form improvisation in a variety of forms, styles, and practices. Again we see the ways in which the skills of the Harold can apply in a multiplicity of ways, and point to the vast influence of the Harold on comic performance. Furthermore, these groups and others like them are spreading the Harold and long form improv to new audiences. Whether through the free play mindset of The Annoyance playing to “the misfits,” the in your face game-of-the-scene Harold that helped transform New York comedy, the cultural questioning of the Improvised Shakespeare Company, or the audience friendly hybrid approach of Octavarius—improv is being used in new and innovative ways, and in the process is helping to transform comedy. By using the concepts of the Harold and applying them in different arenas, these groups and others are

demonstrating the Harold's flexibility and influence. As we shall see, the Harold's basic tenets aren't just influencing improvisational theatre, thanks in part to groups like the Upright Citizens Brigade they are being used by the leading comic performers, writers, and directors to transform television and film.

CHAPTER VI—IMPROV BEYOND THE THEATRE: THE HAROLD’S INFLUENCE ON TELEVISION & FILM

“I’m always surprised when I meet someone who thinks that sitting and writing is the only way of creating comedy. It’s like meeting someone who thinks that in vitro fertilization is the only way to make a baby. You want to say, ‘No, there’s this whole other way of doing it that’s natural and sometimes pleasurable.’”³³⁴—Tina Fey

While the last chapter explored how the Harold has influenced improvisational theatre beyond iO, this chapter begins to explore the Harold’s immense influence on ensemble-based comedy. Part of the reason that White and others point to the stagnation of long form improv is because they are not considering improv outside of traditional notions. Improv is not restricted to short form, long form, or sketch. As Harvard Professor Shelley Carson argues, “improvisation is the prototypical creative behavior.”³³⁵ As such it has been used in a variety of ways for decades, and this chapter will analyze how the Harold, its philosophy, and the performers trained in the system have influenced dramatic writing, television, and film. As Raftery argues, the “all-together-now asininity [found in improv] permeates comedy today, from improvised podcasts like ‘Comedy Bang Bang’ to *30 Rock*.”³³⁶

Yet it is not only “asinine” comedy that is being influenced by improv. One needs look no further than the 2012 Oscars for proof of improv’s vast influence on comedy and the creative process. *The Descendants*, winner for Best Adapted Screenplay, was written

³³⁴ Qtd. in Libera, 139.

³³⁵ Shelley Carson, *Your Creative Brain: Seven Steps to Maximize Imagination, Productivity, and Innovation in Your Life* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010), 244.

³³⁶ Raftery, “And...Scene.”

by Groundlings alumni Jim Rash and Nat Faxon³³⁷ (and Alexander Payne); while Best Original Screenplay nominee *Bridesmaids* was written by Groundlings alumni Kristen Wiig and Annie Mumolo. Rash commented that “improv has been immensely beneficial to me as both an actor and a writer...for writing, I feel like it’s almost as simple as the idea of making new choices and trying different things.”³³⁸ In order to understand improv’s influence on contemporary comedy I will be analyzing the various ways that the Harold trains writers, and then will look at improv and the Harold’s relationship with television. Finally I’ll explore the burgeoning use of improvisation in contemporary comedic film in order to demonstrate the ways in which the Harold has ushered in an era of ensemble-based comedy.

THE HAROLD AND DRAMATIC WRITING

Once relegated to theatres that wanted to write sketch comedy shows, improv, behind the principles of the Harold, is now being used by professional playwrights, screenwriters, and television writers. They are drawn to improvisational structures and themes, implement improv’s basic rules, or they harken back to the scenario plays of The Compass Players and simply give freedom to the actors portraying their characters, a technique known as retroscripting seen in the television show *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and in many contemporary comedic films. George Wendt commented that even if the Harold “wasn’t entirely clicking as a performance piece, it was invaluable. I thought it was the

³³⁷ The duo also had the most memorable (and funny) moment of the Oscars when they mimicked Angelina Jolie’s seductive pose—Jolie presented the award, in the process flashing her leg through a long slit in her dress.

³³⁸ Qtd. in Tim Molloy, “How Jim Rash Went From Improv to ‘Community’ to a ‘Descendants’ Oscar Nomination,” *The Wrap*, February 17, 2012.

best way to create material.”³³⁹ The basic skills necessary for a successful Harold are the same skills that writers use to create dramatic stories.

Considering that the Harold and long form improvisation grew out of a reaction against the use of improv as a tool for generating written material, it is rather ironic that one of the Harold’s greatest influences outside of improvisational theatre has been its implementation as a writing tool. At first glance it seems counter-intuitive to put writing and improvisation together. Yet upon closer inspection the two are actually well suited, after all contemporary improv grew out of a desire to create full length plays. Both mediums tell stories, and both use similar tools to achieve similar aims—they just aren’t always implemented in the same ways. Second City’s Anne Libera argues that the difference between improv and writing is that with writing “it’s a back and forth between the left brain and right brain instead of doing it simultaneously [with improv].”³⁴⁰ The best writers and improvisers have equal parts of both, and training in either discipline can help strengthen one’s weaker hemisphere.

It is the balancing act between hemispheres that makes the Harold such a good training tool for writers and creative artists. *Almost Atlanta: Act Too* is an improv-writing experiment that rather explicitly demonstrates the left-right juggling act. The show features one improvised act and one semi-scripted act. During intermission an invited playwright gives the improv group direction for Act II based on the improvised story and characters created in Act I. Brian Costello said that “when you combine the improviser’s sense of creative play with the playwright’s narrative skill, the result can be awe-

³³⁹ Qtd. in Halpern, et. al., 20.

³⁴⁰ Libera, Personal Interview.

inspiring.”³⁴¹ While most improv-based writing doesn’t go quite to the extreme of *Almost Atlanta*, the collaboration is wide spread, but not always acknowledged.

As *Almost Atlanta* demonstrates, both written work and improv begin in improvisation. Virtually every idea is rooted in improvisation, whether written or not, often referred to as a moment of inspiration. The writer at the desk gets to “doctor” their improvisation by revising and restructuring over time, while the improviser on stage does not. Writing from an improv mindset means that writers should temporarily shelf their left brain and write with a “yes-and” mentality. Following the basic building block of the Harold, writers simply need to take one idea, accept it, and begin building upon it. Paula Vogel’s famous “bake-offs,” where writers create a short play based on assigned themes in a forty-eight hour period is but one example of using yes-and to help achieve an improv mindset in traditional writing. Too often writers judge what they are doing and get stalled. But as any improviser knows, you must push on. Libera urges writers to yes-and themselves while they are writing and to let go of judging what is happening. After immersing yourself in an improv-writing mindset and completing a draft, then “analyze it as opposed to judging yourself as you write.”³⁴² The system of creation used in improvisation is used by writers and really all creative artists, whether they know it or not. While the writing process allows time for revision, the moment of creation is still an act of improvisation.

The history of improv is packed with the right brain-left brain marriage. The Second City has become one of the most influential American theaters because they use improv to create written work. Many of the most successful contemporary comedy

³⁴¹ Brian Costello, “Almost Atlanta,” *Chicago Reader*, July 22, 2011.

³⁴² Libera, Personal Interview.

writers got their start in improvisational theatre. iO, Second City, Brave New Workshop, Groundlings, Annoyance, and Upright Citizen Brigade alums are on the writing staffs of *Saturday Night Live*, *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, *30 Rock*, *Parks and Recreation*, *Community*, and many more of television's most popular comedy shows, as well as at the forefront of comedic screenwriting. Caryl Churchill, Mary Zimmerman, and even playwrights like Sarah Ruhl, who received her earliest training at the Piven Theatre Workshop, utilize improv in their writing. Filmmakers like Adam McKay and Judd Apatow have wholeheartedly embraced improv as part of their process. The pairing isn't so implausible when one considers that "improvisers and dramatists face the same challenge: how to sustain dramatic action that compels the attention of the audience."³⁴³ Tina Fey commented that "I'm always surprised when I meet someone who thinks that sitting and writing is the only way of creating comedy. It's like meeting someone who thinks that in vitro fertilization is the only way to make a baby. You want to say, 'No, there's this whole other way of doing it that's natural and sometimes pleasurable.'"³⁴⁴ As musician and author Stephen Nachmanovitch says, "I came to see improvisation as a master key to creativity."³⁴⁵

Many mainstream dramatic writers that have never done any improv in their lives are realizing the Harold's principles directly translate to written work. Playwright Jeffrey Sweet began taking improv classes while he was working on his influential improv history *Something Wonderful Right Away*, when he realized during an improv class that:

Yes, of course, what I was doing...was writing on my feet. Though no words were being propelled onto a page, what we were creating was

³⁴³ Jeffrey Sweet, "Improvisation as a Playwriting Tool," *The Spolin Center*, December 20, 2004.

³⁴⁴ Qtd. in Libera, 139.

³⁴⁵ Stephen Nachmanovitch, *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art* (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1990), 6.

nevertheless dramatic material. What's more, I realized that our improv had to meet the same criteria to engage and hold an audience's interest as does any scene by Williams, Chekhov, Shakespeare, Pinter, Molière, or Wasserstein. To be successful, it had to present characters behaving in compelling ways in pursuit of their goals.³⁴⁶

Therefore, I would like to begin by first focusing on why the Harold is such a good tool for developing written work, before exploring how this highly effective tool is being implemented.

THE HAROLD AND THE WRITER

So why is the Harold such a good tool for developing written work? Aside from the brain hemisphere balancing act, the basic rules of the Harold also happen to apply to the basic rules of comedy and comic writing. The most basic tenets—agreement; yes and; support your partner; creating a point of view; reincorporation; play to the top of your own and the audience's intelligence—not only make great improv scenes, they form the bedrock for comic writing. By following these simple rules writers like Tina Fey and Adam McKay, who are just a few from a long list of Harold trained performers turned writers, have gone on to extraordinary comedic writing success. The same problems that plague bad improv scenes are present in bad plays, teleplays, or screenplays. For instance, many sitcoms and other comic films fail because they don't play to the top of the character or audience's intelligence. Nearly all of the skills that one learns in improv are completely applicable to writing, and that's why so many writers trained in improvisation, and the Harold specifically, have been so successful.

³⁴⁶ Jeffrey Sweet, *The Dramatist's Toolkit: The Craft of the Working Playwright* (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993), 140.

At the root of improv writing, much like performance improv is acceptance. As noted, writers need to accept ideas (both their own and others) in order to keep moving forward. If you don't accept, you are left with a blank page. Saying yes means exploring an idea and what it might become instead of judging it and burying it before it even begins. It does not mean that a writer has to spend a year writing every idea that pops into his or her head. Instead it means saying yes to the value and potential of the idea. This concept applies both to collaborative writing—where writers must accept the ideas of the other writers around the table and on the project—as well as solitary writing, where the writer needs to accept his or her own ideas (which is often times more difficult). Writers in my playwriting classes are often initially very proprietary about an idea and can be hesitant to share. Yet once they do and the class yes-and's the idea and we build upon it and explore where it might go, the writer not only is energized by the creative output, but has a series of new ideas and options that they might not otherwise have had. By accepting we build into the concept of support your partner, which is vital to improv writing. Build the idea and support where it is going, instead of judging it and shutting down the idea or other writers.

Not only does the Harold help change a writer's mindset, but it also teaches basic dramatic structure. The Harold provides a structure for improvisers and writers alike. The three-by-three structure mirrors the traditional three-act structure of most screenplays: set up, confrontation, resolution. The Harold teaches improvisers and writers how to break up stories into non-linear forms, but it is still based on a story having a beginning (1A), middle (2A), and end (3A). Likewise each scene in a Harold has a beginning, middle, and end, based around the relationship between the two characters. Rash, who teaches sketch

writing at The Groundlings, echoes the sentiment, saying “when I teach sketch writing, there’s still a beginning, middle and end. You have to figure out within 3 to 5 minutes how to present that, especially in a relationship scene, and it’s still about characters—not stereotypes, but unique individuals.”³⁴⁷ Hence, improvisation possesses an easily recognizable dramatic order rooted in realism. Therefore, Bill Lynn can say with certainty that “the good news is that if you can improvise a scene, you can write one....recognize that *you’ve already honed your writing technique through improv.*”³⁴⁸ The Harold tells a story, either thematically or through a narrative, and players become adept at structuring a story.

The Harold teaches improvisers how to weave story lines and characters together, helping performers realize what elements are important to the plot or necessary to bring back by learning how to follow the focus of the scene. It also teaches how to combine two characters or ideas into a story that otherwise would have never met. Keith Johnstone’s A-B exercise is an excellent example of developing storytelling skills through improvisation, by focusing on the key improv skills of free association (right brain) and reincorporation (left brain). Simply put, reincorporation is reusing information given earlier in a scene to tie the scene together. Also known as a callback, reincorporation is one of the keys to a successful Harold, and is a basic principle of storytelling. In the exercise Player A spends 30 seconds laying out the foundation of a story. He or she should only be concerned with providing elements of the story through free association—it is not Player A’s job to have the elements connect, and forcing

³⁴⁷ Qtd. in Lawrence Toppman, “Charlotte native wins Oscar for ‘Descendants’ adapted screenplay,” *The Charlotte Observer*, February 26, 2012.

³⁴⁸ Bill Lynn, *Improvisation for Actors and Writers: A Guidebook for Improv Lessons in Comedy* (Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 2004), 124. Lynn’s emphasis.

connections at this point dooms the story to failure. After 30 seconds Player B then ties together the various elements of the story. They simply need to reincorporate the ideas already provided to end the story. Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow sum up the use of improv through free association and reincorporation, saying “free association takes care of invention and development; reincorporation takes care of structure.”³⁴⁹ This simple A-B exercise shows that improvisation is not just quick jokes and silly games, instead it is a system of creating and structuring ideas. As Johnstone argues in *Impro* “a knowledge of this game is very helpful to a writer...[it] encourages you to look *back* when you get stuck, instead of searching *forwards*. You look for things you’ve shelved, and then reinclude them.”³⁵⁰ Or as iO instructors teach, the end of the Harold is often found at the beginning.

The act of doing becomes a great teacher as well. I can lecture about structure, dramatic need and the like, but when students improvise a scene that works and then we point to the mechanics of why—clear intentions, defined relationship, heightened dramatic need and premise, etc., they are more likely to have the lesson sink in; and they will definitely remember the lesson when they are in a scene that is going nowhere. An improviser stuck in a scene where they have no point of view, lack a defined relationship, and don’t really know what they want is in many ways the best way to teach basic dramatic action. Putting improviser/writers on their feet skips the step of writing a first draft and then having it read only to discover that there is no action, the dialogue is lifeless, the story doesn’t progress, and there is no resolution. Fey likewise points to the power of performance, noting that “if you sit at the computer and write a scene, you

³⁴⁹ Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow, *Improvisation in Drama* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 134.

³⁵⁰ Johnstone, 118.

might end up with a long, draggy section that doesn't work. But you'll intellectualize that it does work...If you're developing a scene through improvisation, you'll get rid of that section instinctively because you're the one out there with the warm sticky egg on your face."³⁵¹ By getting students on their feet and improvising they can learn these lessons more quickly and often times more effectively.

The game "New Choice" is a good example of how a writer either working collaboratively or alone can use improv in their writing. In the game an offstage player rings a bell every time they want the onstage player to say something new (or simply say "new choice"). For instance, the onstage player might say "I'm going to the store." (Bell.) "I'm going to the zoo." (Bell). "I'm going to my dog's funeral." And then the scene goes on until the next bell. The game forces players to instantly bring a new idea to the table without judging it. It can be used to flesh out a story idea, hone a single line of dialogue, or just to break a creative block. It helps teach writers how to adapt, how to accept their own ideas (and to let go of an idea), how to treat change as fuel and opportunity, and to tap into their own creative reserves. The game often helps free writers from preconceived notions and opens them up to new possibilities.

The Harold also teaches students how to get to the point of a scene, both because a scene with no point in improv gets cut, but also because good improvisers understand that everything said on stage can and should be used in the scene. By working to justify what is being said the actors automatically move the story along. If an improviser makes a seemingly meaningless comment about a car wash for instance, the other players work to justify the comment so that the car wash ultimately becomes a vital element to the scene. By justifying what is being said, players are also following the maxim of support

³⁵¹ Qtd. in Libera, 139.

your partner. By doing so players allow one another the freedom to take an artistic risk or push the scene in new and interesting ways because they know that their partner will accept the idea and build upon it.

As any writer knows, a play or sketch is only as good as the characters that inhabit it. Improvisers are trained how to create, develop, and sustain compelling and interesting characters. Improv training stresses creating characters with specific wants and desires by giving characters a precise point of view. An improviser *is* his or her character, giving them firsthand experience at using the character's intelligence and wits, of making choices moment to moment, and achieving the difficult task of creating characters that exist in the present (usually achieved by focusing on the relationship between the two characters onstage). It also gives the improviser practice providing the motivation, the why and often the how of the character's behavior, while at the same time trying to interpret and react to his or her scene partner's actions. They learn how to create behaviors—something that also lends to more believable and life like characters. Improv requires the determination to make active rather than passive choices, to not deny realities established by other players, and to pursue objectives as truthfully as possible from within the logic of the character. The Harold, and structures like LaRonde, also teaches performers how to heighten their own or another character's situation—to raise the stakes. Improvisers are constantly taught to look for ways to heighten the scene/situation and raise the stakes for the characters, which in turn raises the dramatic effectiveness of the piece—this is the entire premise of the second beat of the Harold.

Yet it cannot be denied that many improv scenes and improvisers rely on clichés in their dialogue, and create two-dimensional characters based on types. The pressure of

performance, of being in front of a room full of people expecting you to be spontaneously hilarious can sometimes bring out clichéd or just flat out boring scene work. This is one of the biggest differences between improv and writing. While these characters are sometimes successful in improvisation, they almost always fail in scripted drama. This is an instance of the right brain-left brain mode of writing, where the writer at his or her desk can shape character and dialogue in ways that many improvisers cannot.

While sometimes clichéd, the Harold does teach players how to create efficient action oriented dialogue that is rooted in actual language. Creating dialogue that sounds spontaneous and plausible is a major challenge to any writer. The writer's task is to generate dialogue that does not sound like it is written, rather that sounds like the realistic interaction between two (or three or four or however many) independent minds. In a Harold, an improviser is not worried about creating poetic language. Rather they are focused on objectives and goals, motivated by behaviors, movements, wants, and desires. Therefore they use language that helps them reach those goals. The improviser lives in a world where action trumps everything, therefore they focus on action and behaviors rather than clever or poetic language. Because their dialogue is spoken first as opposed to written first, it is also inherently speakable and lifelike because it *is* speakable and lifelike. Sweet defines the improvisers' language as one that is a "concept of dialogue as an extension of trying to achieve objectives."³⁵² Certainly there are examples of clichéd improvised language, or an improviser telling a joke or trying to be clever. These scenes often feel inauthentic and are rarely successful in long form improv where the best Harold performers know that the most effective dialogue moves the story forward and reveals information.

³⁵² Sweet, *The Dramatist's Toolkit*, 88.

Many critics have commented on the lifelike aspect of the language in David Mamet's plays. Mamet, while not a trained professional improviser, trained for a short while under Del Close and worked as a busboy at Second City where he was able to absorb the actors' unique approach to language, often times spending more time watching the performers than doing his job. Lanford Wilson, another playwright noted for his grasp on American language and colloquialism, said that during his time at the University of Chicago he spent a great deal of time at Second City and that "much of the way he approaches dialogue has been influenced by watching the actors there improvise."³⁵³ Michael Tucker, one of the actors in Sweet's *With and Without*, which utilized improvisation in the writing process, told Sweet that "it was one of the rare scripts in which he didn't feel the urge to rephrase anything to make it more playable."³⁵⁴ Dialogue derived from behavior is at the core of the improvisational process, and it is one of the most important contributions improv makes to writers. As the Mamet and Wilson examples illustrate, one need not be a trained improviser to benefit from improvisational techniques.

Perhaps the most effective tool that the Harold offers writers is fear. Many writers struggle with creating or developing ideas and waste days, weeks, and months not writing because they are waiting for inspiration (or judging their ideas instead of accepting them). Well let me tell you that nothing is more inspiring than standing on stage in front of two hundred people (or three if it's a slow night). Improv forces you to create, and I believe that the more active you are in creating the more ideas you generate. One does not have to simply transcribe improv scenes (although this can be done and is a part of the sketch

³⁵³ Sweet, *The Dramatist's Toolkit*, 88.

³⁵⁴ Sweet, "Improvisation as a Playwriting Tool."

writing process), but by creating through improv usually we create new ideas inspired by the scenes or forms being done. I've often had an idea for a play come out of an improv scene, and usually the idea is not directly tied to the scene, but it might be a theme, idea, or character that I want to further explore. Or I might simply be extending the creative process from the stage to my desk, continuing the flow of ideas that improvising unleashed. There is no such thing as writer's block in improv—even standing on stage in silence will elicit a response from your scene partner and generate a scene. By doing something an improviser discovers a scene; by overcoming their fear they unlock their creativity.

By forcing artists to continually generate material, improvisational theatre provides the alluring concept of an almost unlimited source of ideas, which is perhaps improv's greatest use by contemporary authors. Numerous improvisers and writers have learned that writer's block is easily overcome by simply following Mick Napier's instructions for beginning improvisers—"for God's sake, do something. Anything. Something. At the top of an improv scene, do something."³⁵⁵ Libera argues that "blocked writers are drawn to improvisation as a means of forcing themselves to create. After all, you can't stop the scene and play Minesweeper when you're in front of an audience."³⁵⁶ As Fey argues, improv helps writers get over the impossible pursuit of perfection. She says:

What I learned about bombing as an improviser at Second City was that, while bombing is painful, it doesn't kill you. What I learned about bombing as a writer for 'Saturday Night Live' is that you can't be too worried about your permanent record. Yes, you're going to write some sketches that you love and are proud of forever—your golden nuggets. But you're also going to write some real shit

³⁵⁵ Napier, 14.

³⁵⁶ Libera, *The Second City Almanac of Improvisation*, 137.

nuggets. You can't worry about it. As long as you know the difference, you can go back to panning for gold on Monday.³⁵⁷

In short, the more you generate, the greater the odds of finding a golden nugget.

As we've seen the Harold provides numerous tools for writers, but writers still need to implement them. They can use improv simply to brainstorm an idea by using a yes-and approach either alone or with other writers or performers. They can use it to generate ideas, characters, or scenes. While many directors have used improv in rehearsal to explore character, writers likewise can use improv as a way to explore character or work out a tricky section of a script. Much like with *Almost Atlanta* they can simply take an evening of improvised material and work as a sort of editor and put it all together. They can even try out alternate endings or outlets for scenes—let's see what comes about if "x" happens instead of "y." They can also train in improvisation to help hone and expand the skills they already possess. They can use improv to help simulate performance. Many writers are not performers, while improvisers obviously are on stage. Being in touch with how the stage actually works is vital to successful playwriting, so improvisation might simply be a way that writers connect with the performativity of the stage.

Some writers are drawn to improvisational structures as starting points for their plays. Dramaturg Liz Engelman reminds playwrights that "form and function help give birth to the content...sometimes for the creative spark to burn, you need a container to hold it in."³⁵⁸ While Engelman's comments are not directed at using improv specifically, they certainly have been heard by writers working within improvisational structures. I

³⁵⁷ Tina Fey, "Lessons from Late Night," *The New Yorker*, March 14, 2011.

³⁵⁸ Liz Engelman, "Talkin' Turgy: Structure as a Catalyst for Creative Output," *The Playwright's Center*, www.pwcenter.org/ebulletin/TalkinTurgy7-28-2004.htm, July 28, 2004.

have used several improvisational structures to house my own plays. As one can see, improv and playwriting are much more alike than they are different. Improvisers are inherently trained as playwrights, and playwrights are turning more and more to improv and improvisational workshops to help create and shape their work.

Apart from comedy theaters like Second City, The Brave New Workshop, The Annoyance Theatre and others, improv is being used in many new ways to create scripted drama. Perhaps the most influential form of Scriptprov, and the Harold, is on film and television. Larry David and Christopher Guest have used the scenario play idea and turned it into comic gold. David's *Curb Your Enthusiasm* has garnered critical acclaim using the scenario play format, while Guest's films combine the mockumentary style with a scenario play outline. The idea of retroscripting, where a script is written but scenes are often filmed multiple times where the actors are allowed to improvise and then the best of both is put together in the final product is prevalent in shows such as *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and is widespread in film comedy. So now that we know how improv writing works, let's turn our attention to the relationship between improvisation and television and film.

IMPROV AND TELEVISION

Improvisational performance and television have had a long and rocky courtship. Improv has been on the tube for decades, with a recent explosion of shows. Improv specific programs like *Whose Line is it Anyway?* have proven successful, while shows using improvisation and improv techniques like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and even *Saturday Night Live* have changed the way people view and make television. The 2011-

12 television line-up is littered with writers and performers trained in the Harold. Yet improv and television have never tied the knot. There exists a tension between the two forces that continually threatens their coexistence. So what's the problem? Why can't improv and television live happily ever after? Perhaps the answer lies in the type of improv that has been featured on television. *Whose Line* has sparked controversy and tension between television, the improv community, and audiences by presenting a highly manipulated brand of one genre of improv and presenting it as the definitive version of improv. The show exposed improv to millions, but it also didn't provide a clear picture as to what improv actually is. So is there an alternative? Can we get these two to the table to talk out their differences and see if there is a way they can not only coexist, but flourish? Like Ross and Rachel, can't improv and television see they were meant to be together?

Television has already paved the way for improv through shows like *Whose Line*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *Reno 911!*, but I believe the future of improv on TV exists in its ability to produce what Jason Mittell has labeled narrative complexity. Mittell cites *Seinfeld*, *Arrested Development*, and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* as examples of programs that invert the traditional sitcom plot for narrative complexity. I would also add programs like *30 Rock*, *The Office*, *Community*, *Parks and Recreation*, and even *The Simpsons* to the list. While only one of these shows actually uses improvisation, they all share similarities with improvisational ideas and structures, and *30 Rock*, *The Office*, and *Arrested Development* are in many ways scripted Harolds. Describing *Seinfeld*, Mittell argues that the “show revels in the mechanics of its plotting, weaving stories for each character together in a given episode through unlikely coincidence, parodic media

references, and circular structure.”³⁵⁹ Sound like a familiar structure? While I’m not suggesting that *Seinfeld* was consciously created as a Harold, the show’s structure is very similar to a Harold, with the humor coming from relationships and connections rather than jokes.

Mittell goes on to explain the ways in which *Seinfeld* works, in opposition to the traditional sitcom structure:

In conventional television narratives that feature A and B plots the two stories may offer thematic parallels or provide counterpoint to one another, but they rarely interact at the level of action. Complexity, especially in comedies, works against these norms by altering the relationship between multiple plotlines, creating interweaving stories that often collide and coincide. *Seinfeld* typically starts out its four plotlines separately, leaving it to the experienced viewer’s imagination as to how the stories will collide with unlikely repercussions throughout the diegesis.³⁶⁰

Contrast this with the Harold, which starts out with three separate story lines in the first beat (1A, 1B, 1C). As with *Seinfeld*, it is not through individual jokes or ridiculous plot lines that generate laughs in a Harold, but the way the players weave together the three different and unrelated story lines and connect them together in the end.³⁶¹ In a Harold, an audience takes further joy in watching these connections unfold in the moment. In both instances, whether live or taped, the plot is not what is solely interesting, it is the process by which it is created.

This interwoven plot structure is a staple of long form improv, and can also be seen in *Arrested Development* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. The former often featured up to six revolving plot lines in any given episode, while *Curb* has extended “the coincidences and collisions across episodes in a way that transforms serial narrative into

³⁵⁹ Mittell, 34.

³⁶⁰ Mittell, 34.

³⁶¹ Halpern, *Art by Committee*, 19.

elaborate inside jokes.”³⁶² Although a Harold is a single performance, ideas and coincidences often find their way into unrelated scenes, creating “inside jokes” that are only funny based on the connection with an earlier event. This form of humor—created through call backs and connections—is a hallmark of the Harold and long form improv. As Mittell suggests, this narrative complexity, with multiple plots and story lines bumping into one another, results “in unlikely coincidences, twists, and ironic repercussions.”³⁶³

This style of comedy is becoming increasingly more popular on television. Likewise it has been a hit with critics, with all of the shows mentioned receiving numerous accolades and awards, although not always winning the ratings wars. This is partly due to the unique experience they provide for audiences. Much like the Harold, which provides a one of a kind experience by creating a show from audience suggestions in the moment and never to be seen again, these shows and this style helps to recreate that insider feeling. As Mittell argues, these shows not only allow viewers to enjoy the story lines and characters like a traditional sitcom, “but also revel in the creative mechanics involved in the producers’ abilities to pull off such complex plot structures.”³⁶⁴ These shows can be a lot of “work” to watch, and consequently they aren’t always appealing to a giant mass audience, however, much like long form improv, for those willing to go down the rabbit-hole the shows are more rewarding for their complexity.

The rabbit-hole analogy again brings Neil Harris’s idea of “operational aesthetics” into play, which argues that pleasure is derived not solely from a machine’s output, but also in understanding how a machine works. Operational aesthetics is based on the idea

³⁶² Mittell, 34.

³⁶³ Mittell, 34.

³⁶⁴ Mittell, 35.

that one needs to appreciate the process in order to fully appreciate and understand the final product. Audiences attend Harold performances to see the wheels in motion, to be a part of the operation so to speak. Audiences are swept away by the narrative techniques of scripted shows, which can be seen in the various online fan forums and magazine articles dissecting plot structures of shows like *Lost*. Imagine then the enjoyment and fascination that could accompany a fully improvised show, or one that fully embraces the Harold. Not a show like *Whose Line*, that plays it safe by relying on short games and repeatable jokes, but one that relies on the narrative complexities of long form improv. Walk into iO, The Annoyance Theatre, Upright Citizens Brigade, or a host of other long form improv theaters and you will witness completely spontaneous half hour performances that feature as much if not more narrative complexity as some of our favorite television shows. Of course there will also be clunkers, and much like these “shit nuggets” led to Sahlins argument against improv, they have scared television executives.

While improv has yet to totally take hold, the four current shows that have come closest to capturing this idea are *30 Rock*, *The Office*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, and *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, all of which boast strong improv influences. *Curb* employs the same tool of retroscripting as *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, which, unlike *Curb*, is at least initially fully scripted. Actor Charlie Day said that “75 percent of the show is scripted and a good 25 percent is off the cuff. Sometimes we get it right in the writer’s room, and sometimes we get it close and then try to push to make it better.”³⁶⁵ While most television shows are on such a tight schedule that they don’t have time for improvisation, shows like *It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia* and *The Office* make room

³⁶⁵ Qtd. in Laremy Legel, “An Interview with Charlie Day of ‘It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia,’” *Film.com/tv*, September 12, 2007.

for it. In *The Office*, the talking head monologues where characters comment on the action of the episode are done twice, first with the scripted version and then again with a selection of alternate lines known as “the candy bag.” It is common then for the actors, many of whom also write for the show, to improvise on top of “the candy bag.” The mindset also allows for smaller bits of improvisation within the show, but for the most part the influence of improv comes from the performers and the comic aesthetic of the show.

30 ROCK AND THE HAROLD

Of all the aforementioned shows, however, *30 Rock* is the one that most closely resembles a Harold both structurally and comedically. When one considers Tina Fey’s background at iO and Second City, it is only natural that the show is infused with elements from improv and the Harold. *Newsweek* named it the funniest TV comedy of the last decade, proving Close’s improv philosophy by saying that “dense can be smart.”³⁶⁶ As Tracy Morgan and others have asserted, there is actually very little improvisation on *30 Rock*. This in part is due to the fact that the show is so well written, but it is my contention that the show is essentially a scripted Harold and that many of the elements in the teleplay are deeply rooted in improvisation, including its collage structure, reliance and subversion of popular culture, smart comedy, and humor rooted in connections and ironic juxtapositions. The show is breaking new comedic ground, and with the rising number of Harold trained writers and performers working in television and films, is foreshadowing the shifting style of the comic sitcom. By understanding how the Harold

³⁶⁶ Joshua Alston, “Funniest TV Comedies: #1 ’30 Rock,” *Newsweek.com*, December 7, 2009.

has influenced *30 Rock*, we can begin to understand the way that comedy is being created in the twenty-first century.

While the show features more jokes than a typical Harold, the root of the comedy comes from the relationship and juxtapositioning between the worldviews of the highly confident conservative network executive Jack Donaghy (Alec Baldwin) and the self-deprecating liberal head writer of the fictional sketch show *The Girlie Show with Tracy Jordan*, Liz Lemon (Tina Fey). It is the way that these two often intersect and must work together despite wildly divergent value systems that humor arises, such as Jack's turn as a writer in "Jack the Writer," and the fight over product placement in "Jack-tor." It is the way that these two seemingly different personalities from totally different worlds must interact and successfully run *The Girlie Show* that anchors much of the humor of the show. *30 Rock*, however, is not simply reliant on the combination of two unlikely characters for humor.

Much like a Harold and other improv, many of the show's episodes feature culturally important topics, such as corporate greed, racism, sexism, women in comedy, and global warming, but approach these hot-button issues through narrative complexity and absurd situations. The show achieves success by taking its audience and subject matter seriously (and themselves less so). In the process *30 Rock* has become a show that speaks deeply about important issues, mainly by following Close's advice of playing to the top of the audience's intelligence. Cast member Scott Adsit (who also trained and performed at iO and Second City), noted that the show's writers "are all devastatingly intelligent, and they assume that the audience is just as smart as they are too. They're never writing 'down,' they're always writing 'to' exactly what they would laugh at, and

respecting the audience as being as smart as them. [They're] writing 'up' to them."³⁶⁷ By following this simply improv maxim, *30 Rock* is able to be both silly and smart, and comment on many of the major social and cultural issues of the day.

The eco-friendly character Greenzo from the episode "Greenzo" (2007) is a good example of how the show uses comedy to speak to larger cultural issues. Jack creates the green mascot Greenzo as part of a company-wide green initiative that is designed to make money "from this environmentalism trend." Jack casts an actor named Jared (David Schwimmer) to play the eco-friendly mascot Greenzo. He is an initial success after an appearance on *The Today Show*, but his second interview changes the game when he begins ranting about "big companies and their two-face, fat cat executives." Jack quickly fires Jared, trying to trick Al Gore into replacing Jared to no avail.

Greenzo, who is absurdly dressed in a green skin tight leotard type super-hero costume, clearly represents corporate America's lack of interest in the green movement—Greenzo's slogan is "Greenzo! Saving the Earth while maintaining profitability!...The free market will solve global warming! IF that even exists." Jack tells Liz that they are going green not to save the Earth, but "so we can drain the remainder of its resources." Jack horribly mismanages the effort though by creating a monster out of Jared and ultimately Jack and Greenzo square off, not about the Earth, but about their own petty squabbles. Their conflict reaches a head on the set of *The Girly Show*, which happens to have a fake Earth as a prop for that week's show. The two literally fight over control of the Earth and use the planet to further their own self-interests. As the two fight Greenzo loses control of the planet, it hits a light on the set and catches fire, causing Liz to

³⁶⁷ Qtd. in Louis Virtel, "Scott Adsit Talks *30 Rock*, Improvisation, and Alec Baldwin's Big Ideas," *MovieLine.com*, April 29, 2010.

exclaim “This Earth is ruined. We have to get a new one.” The comedy arises out of the double layered conflict between corporate America (Jack) and the green-movement (Greenzo). But it also makes a point—the green movement is failing because everyone on both sides is more concerned with their own self-interests than with the planet itself.

The influence of the Harold is not surprising considering the writing staff is a mix of what Fey calls “Harvard Boys” and Chicago improvisers. Kay Cannon, one of the producers and original writers on the show (and another iO and Second City trained writer/performer) echoed Libera’s right brain-left brain juggling act that improv writing allows, and that the *30 Rock* writing staff reflects, saying that “writers who sit down and write might judge what they’re putting down, but I always just try to barf it out.” Just because the writing starts in improv doesn’t mean that it isn’t revised, as she went on to say, “there’s a ton of re-writing on our show... Sometimes we’ll spend an hour or two on a joke, on one line.”³⁶⁸ Yet the freedom from judgment allows the show to take its hallmark unexpected quirky turns.

Fey purposefully mixed the writing staff with both right and left brains, “mix Harvard nerds with Chicago improvisers and stir,” because they balance each other out. She explains that:

Harvard boys and improv people think differently because their comedy upbringing is so different. If you’re sitting in the Harvard Lampoon Castle with your friends, you can perfect a piece of writing so that it is exactly what you want and you can avoid the feeling of red-hot flop sweat—especially because you won’t even be there when someone reads it. But when you’re improvising eight shows a week in front of drunk, meat-eating Chicagoans you experience highs and lows. You will be heckled, or, worse, you will hear your heartbeat over the audience’s silence. You will be bombing so hard that you will be able to hear a lady in the back putting her gum in a napkin. You may have a point to make about the health-care system in America, but you’ll find out that you need to present it through a legally blind bus-driver character or an exotic dancer whose boobs are

³⁶⁸ Brendan O’Byrne, “Cannon talks role of improv in ’30 Rock,” *The Stanford Daily*, May 20, 2011.

running for mayor...Ultimately, you will do whatever it takes to win the audience over...This is all to say that Harvard boys and people from Second City or the Groundlings (the L.A. improv group) make beautiful comedy marriages. The Harvard guys check the logic and grammatical construction of every joke, and the improvisers teach them how to be human.³⁶⁹

The mix has been particularly effective for the show, which has earned numerous awards and accolades for its writing. It also points to the way that the show uses comedy based in improvisational principles to make greater cultural and social points.

In order to make this all a bit more concrete, I'd like to briefly look at the episode "Lee Marvin vs. Derek Jeter," which was the seventy-fifth episode of the series and was nominated for a Primetime Emmy for Outstanding Writing in a Comedy Series. Written by Fey and Cannon, this episode, like many others demonstrates the way the series is similar to a Harold. Within the first four minutes of the show we are introduced to our three storylines:

A: Jack and his love triangle between his no-strings-attached girlfriend Avery, and his old high school sweetheart Nancy, who has recently finalized her divorce.

B: Liz starts making an effort to date by attending various singles activities at the YMCA.

C: James "Toofer" Spurlock learns that he might have been hired as a writer on *The Girlie Show with Tracy Jordan* because he was black.

While the episode doesn't follow the strict three-by-three Harold structure, it bears a striking resemblance to the modified Harolds that have been performed since the Family took off the training wheels and began experimenting with the form. Likewise, it displays the narrative complexity that Mittell has argued for, as well as a series of pop culture references, and as we shall see all three plot lines in the episode interact and comment

³⁶⁹ Fey, "Lessons from Late Night.

upon one another. While the dialogue is often witty, much of the humor comes from the connections between the storylines as well as the Harold structures that are implemented.

The “A” story line continues with Jack and Nancy out for dinner reminiscing about the old days. Nancy tells Jack that she is only in town for a few days, and he tells her they’ll meet for drinks after a black tie event he has to attend...with Avery. The “B” story features a quick scene with Liz at a square dancing event with no men. Jenna has offered to serve as Liz’s wingman to prepare for a role in the upcoming National Lampoon movie *Van Wilder’s Wingman, Incorporated*. When Jenna offers to help Liz, there is a quick cut-to edit of Liz aggressively playing Dodgeball. The “C” story continues as Toofer confronts Liz about his job status, which he believes is the result of a diversity initiative. She confirms his suspicion, so he quits.

In “A” Jack visits Nancy’s apartment where they start to watch a Lee Marvin movie. He gets a call, however, from Avery, who invites Jack to a party at Derek Jeter’s apartment. He goes to the party. The next day he solicits Liz’s advice, asking her “how do you choose between Lee Marvin and Derek Jeter?” Jack asks Liz to take Nancy out to cover for him. The “B” thread begins to connect, because Liz has a singles event that evening and takes Nancy with her. In the “C” beat, Pete, one of the head writers of *The Girlie Show*, is freaking out because he has so much paperwork to file concerning Toofer’s resignation. Tracy enters and Pete asks for his help, which Tracy takes as a racially motivated statement, “because all black people know each other right?” The group then discusses racism in the age of Obama through Disney princesses. Tracy argues that everyone is really mad because there finally is a black Disney princess; while Jenna counters that there hasn’t been a white princess since 1991. This is yet another

example of the cultural commentary of the show, as well as the ways that humor is used to discuss a larger cultural issue.

Back in “A” Avery and Jack are out to dinner. Avery thinks that Jack is acting strange because of their age difference. While he wasn’t, he then tries to use their age difference as a way to get out of the relationship. She wins him back though by giving him the cufflinks that Reagan had on in his coffin. The “B” thread picks up with Liz and Nancy at the singles event. Nancy tries to help Liz meet a man, but Liz has a problem with every man in the room. Nancy tells her to stop being negative and to go after what she wants (or in improv terms she tells her to defer judgment). The scene then shifts back to the Dodgeball scene, where Liz tells the guy from the first cut-to edit all of the things she wants in a man while she is being pummeled by dodgeballs. Unfortunately, the man doesn’t speak English and thinks he’s at an AA meeting. The “C” beat returns, and Pete has Liz’s file, which reveals that she attended college on a partial competitive jazz dance scholarship. Again, we get a quick cut-to edit and see Liz in full jazz dance action before coming back to the original scene. Pete then tells Liz that she was able to pay for college because of Title 9, and she was hired by Second City because they needed someone who could remember to feed the cats, and the only reason she was hired for *The Girlie Show* was because women’s groups were angry at the network after airing the show *Bitch Hunter*. Again there is a cut-to, and we see Will Ferrell as the title role in the film.

Liz realizes that she has been hired because she is a woman and goes to Jack for help. He confirms that she was only hired because of affirmative action, and he again asks for her help deciding between Avery and Nancy, which works to connect “A” and “C.” After he decides that he wants to be with Avery, Nancy enters and Jack is right back

where he started. We then get a quick scene where Toofer is rehired, under the condition that he be called James. But the writers take the opportunity to give him new nicknames, and he eventually settles back on Toofer, validating Tracy's argument that there still is racism even though "we've elected a black president."

Not only does the overall structure resemble a Harold, but there are several comic elements that are borrowed from improv. Within the first five minutes of the episode there are two distinct moments that are straight from improvisational theatre: cut-to edits. Similar to a tag-out edit, cut-to edits are usually very brief scenes that take the action to something that is referenced in the scene and then back to the original scene. For instance, if a father is talking to his son about school and says "Kids have it so easy nowadays. When I was in school things were a lot tougher." Another player might say, "cut to when the dad was in school when things were a lot tougher." The scene would then instantly shift and another player would then beat up the father or do some quick action that fulfills the cut-to, before the scene goes back to the father and son. In the "B" beat, when Jenna asks Liz about her singles Dodgeball event, Liz replies that there was one okay guy there. The scene then immediately cuts to a five second clip of Liz whipping a Dodgeball into said guy's face, with the tag "eat it bitch." The scene then immediately cuts back to Jenna and Liz's initial conversation. Similarly, in the "C" beat when Tracy and his unexpectedly highly intelligent entourage are talking about racism in America in the age of Obama, there again is a quick cut-to edit. This time Tracy talks about a Slovin Shield commercial with a "black burglar," and then we cut to a three second snippet of that commercial. At the end of the episode when Liz finds out she was hired because of affirmative action and Pete reveals that she attended college on a partial

competitive jazz dance scholarship, again, we get a quick cut-to edit and see Liz in full jazz dance action before coming back to the original scene.

There is also a runner, or callback throughout featuring Tracy that helps to tie everything together. In the first “C” scene, Tracy mentions that he has learned the word “black” in every language and its historical uses so that he can tell when he’s being insulted. He then pops into two future scenes to briefly say that the word just used was a black insult, when it clearly was not. Tracy bounces between the “B” and “C” beats, not only to pop in with humorous quips about racism in America, but also to help tie the themes of “B” and “C” together. In many ways the “B” beat is about the difficulties of being a single working woman and trying to balance a career and a love life, while the “C” beat is about race relations and racism in an America that elected a black president but still employs several institutional forms of racism. The “A” storyline ties all three threads together by juxtaposing the themes of inequality in “B” and “C” with the rather trivial concerns of the wealthy middle-aged white businessman Jack, whose success in some ways is dependent upon the work of Liz and Toofer. Similar to a Harold, the comedy comes out of the ways that these seemingly different worlds connect, for example in the ways that Liz is both a beneficiary of affirmative action type programs as well as being part of the power structure. The juxtapositioning of Disney princess and race relations in the age of Obama is another example, with Tracy telling the writing staff that “I know you’re all secretly mad, because we finally have a black Disney princess,” a reference to the 2009 Disney animated film *The Princess and the Frog*, which features the first Disney black princess, but is a double message that also speaks about the covert racism that exists in some ways because we finally have a black president. Likewise, the

rather trivial manner that all three storylines deal with their issues causes the viewer to more fully grapple with the actual topics by bringing attention to the root of the issue by highlighting its absurdity. This style of ironic juxtapositioning has been a hallmark of improvisation since the Compass Players.

STEPHEN COLBERT, BRECHT, AND IMPROV

While *30 Rock* is the best example of improv influencing a scripted television show, Stephen Colbert is the best example of improv's influence in performance. Stephen Colbert, an alum of Second City, has used his improvisational training to take on politics and the media. Colbert's performance of conservative talk show host Stephen Colbert is one of the most effective Brechtian performances in contemporary performance, and is rooted in two basic improv rules: yes-and, and truth in comedy. A great example is during a segment called *The Wørd*, which is a satirical riff on Fox News and Bill O'Reilly's *The O'Reilly Factor*. The screen is split in half during the segment. On the left side Colbert discusses the topics being addressed, but on the right side of the screen a list of bullet points analyzes the argument. Unlike the similar format on O'Reilly's show, for Colbert the bullet points actually undercut Colbert the commentator's message. Essentially what Colbert has done is to yes-and the logic of O'Reilly and other conservative commentators. By following those arguments to their extreme, but still logical ends, Colbert is able to show what he perceives to be the absurdity of their arguments.

Furthermore, he takes the self-congratulatory and arrogant persona of O'Reilly and other Fox News personalities to their absurd but logical extremes. He simply listens

to what they are saying and reacts to it, which comes directly out of his improvisational background, as he told Charlie Rose, it's like "jumping down the rabbit hole."³⁷⁰ For example, he yes-and's the typical bravado of most conservative television hosts and pushes it to its comical extreme. His news desk is in the shape of a giant C, and Colbert has his guests seated at a distant table and uses their introduction as a chance for him to cross the stage to applause. Unlike Jon Stewart on *The Daily Show*, who takes an outsider's perspective on the news, Colbert embodies the people that Stewart and others mock. On *Charlie Rose*, Colbert described the difference saying, "Jon deconstructs the news and he's ironic and detached. I falsely construct the news and am ironically *attached*...Jon may point out the hypocrisy of a particular thing happening in a news story...I illustrate the hypocrisy as a character. That's Jon being Jon. And that's me not being me. That's me being the Stephen Colbert guy."³⁷¹ In the process Colbert has fully embodied Brecht's notion of acting and alienation. Brecht says that the performer's "artful and artistic act of self-alienation, stopped the spectator from losing himself in the character completely...the audience identifies with the actor as being an observer, and accordingly develops his attitude of looking on."³⁷² Colbert works to deconstruct the news by constructing the Brechtian character Stephen Colbert.

His most widely known moment came at the 2006 White House Press Correspondent's Dinner, where he delivered a speech that was on the surface defending President George W. Bush, but was actually a line by line deconstruction of the President's policies. Everyone in the audience knew that Colbert wasn't defending Bush.

³⁷⁰ Qtd. in Charlie Rose, "A Conversation with Comedian Stephen Colbert," *Charlie Rose*, www.charlierose.com/view/interview/93, December 8, 2006.

³⁷¹ "A Conversation with Comedian Stephen Colbert."

³⁷² Brecht, 93.

Neva Chonin said in the *San Francisco Chronicle* that “George W. Bush was, in fact...listening to [Colbert] eviscerate his administration on live television. I wasn’t just watching a comic’s routine; I was witnessing courage incarnate...[we need] a few more Colberts.”³⁷³ The power of comedy evident in Colbert’s speech is evidence of the shift in comedy that improvisation has helped usher in, a comedy that can have a point and that is socially and culturally relevant.

While *30 Rock* and *The Colbert Report* represent the best of improv on television, the two haven’t completely co-existed. Why hasn’t this form of improv been transferred to television more often? Fear, uncertainty, and the unknown all play a part, but it is my contention that this is where the future of improv on television lies. As Mittell argues, complex narratives based on operational aesthetics, such as those found in the Harold, is only now becoming possible on a wide scale. With the advent of DVDs, TiVo and other technology, it is possible to view episodes multiple times, and as Mittell notes:

it naturally follows that shows would take advantage of this by rewarding repeated viewings. A certain generational savvy about popular culture, in which viewers are active as both critics and participants, has been fortified by the rise of internet culture, making complex narrative structures accessible to larger groups, as opposed to small cliques of superfans. Whatever the reason, it is clear that the operational aesthetic is giving us access to new forms of TV pleasure.³⁷⁴

This is how improv and television can not only peacefully coexist, but flourish, such as the scenario play format utilized by *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, with improv both onscreen and onstage receiving the boost it hasn’t experienced, and pushing improv from the ever percolating next big thing, to the actual next big thing.

³⁷³ Neva Chonin, “Truthiness to Power,” *San Francisco Chronicle*, May 7, 2006.

³⁷⁴ Jason Mittell and Steven Johnson, “Is Popular Culture Good for You?” *MIT Communications Forum*. 6 October 2005. http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/popular_culture.htm.

IMPROV ON FILM

While television is still working to fully incorporate improvisation, contemporary comic films are deeply ingrained in improvisation. For film, the Harold's influence comes less from structure and more from its comic philosophies—yes-and; acceptance; fearlessness; playing to the top of one's (or one's character's) intelligence; and most importantly, support your partner. Improv is so ingrained into comedic filmmaking that it is more uncommon in 2012 for a comic film *not* to feature improvisation. Whether the film is totally improvised like *Close Quarters* (2012), featuring a who's who of Chicago improvisers and based on the improv structure of the same name; or is a film simply allowing actors extra freedom over lines like a slew of recent comedies, improvisation is now a fundamental part of the creative process. Pixar Studios, for example, requires their employees to take improv classes because improv's philosophies are fundamental to their collaborative creative system.

The idea of improvising on film, however, is hardly new. The first silent films were almost always totally improvised, with stars such as Charlie Chaplin making their fortune based on their improvisational skills. While “talkies” ushered in more formal scripts, improvisation was still widely used. Ted Flicker says that he “taught Stanley Kubrick to improvise” back in 1962 for Kubrick's *Lolita*. Flicker says that Kubrick used improv for “the first long scene in *Lolita*. I told him the best thing I could think of, he had such great actors, he should explain some of the rules I had and then just let it go and have at least five cameras going from every angle. That's what he did. It's the best scene

in the picture.”³⁷⁵The idea has since caught fire, and in recent years improvisation has been wildly influential in American comedic filmmaking.

Any examination of improv on film must start with Christopher Guest. While Mike Leigh, Robert Altman, and John Cassavetes were highly influential in the use of improvisation on film, Guest is generally credited as the contemporary father of *comedic* improv on film. Employing a system similar to the scenario plays of *The Compass Players*, Guest has created a series of films where improv is the driving creative force. Starting with the 1984 cult classic *This Is Spinal Tap*, directed by Rob Reiner, Guest has tapped into the comic potential of improvisation and created his own line of improv-based films, including *Waiting for Guffman* (1996), *Best in Show* (2000), *A Mighty Wind* (2003), and *For Your Consideration* (2006). While there is no script, Guest and co-writer Eugene Levy spend months creating the scenario, which for *Waiting for Guffman* was about fifteen pages (contrasted to the typical screenplay that is roughly 128 pages). This is an important distinction as nearly every film utilizing improvisation—including the fully improvised *Close Quarters*—also has either a script or a fully developed story in place. Actors are not creating the story or the characters on the spot during filming. Instead they are working within a (often rigid) set structure.

Guest and Levy, for example, not only have a fully formed scenario but also deeply develop each of the characters before shooting. They then devise detailed note cards that contain a beginning and ending point for each scene. While the cards provide the actors with a starting and end point, Guest doesn't tell them how to go from A to B. Guest said “there's something about improvisation—the spontaneity of it—which sparks

³⁷⁵ Flicker, Personal Interview.

the actors that we work with here. There's a different feel. The comedy is different."³⁷⁶ They also do not really rehearse before the camera starts rolling, with Guest wanting to capture all of the magic of improvisation on film. Levy was surprised during *Guffman* that Guest didn't rehearse, but commented that "the great fun of being involved in those first takes on camera is that the scene is opening up for the very first time, and you don't know what anyone is going to say...It's always an amazing experience."³⁷⁷

Guest works with essentially the same cast for each movie, in part because he believes there are only a handful of actors capable of improvising on film. While that might be a bit presumptuous, his cast, which includes Levy, Michael McKean, Harry Shearer, Catherine O'Hara, Parker Posey, Fred Willard, Jane Lynch, Bob Balaban, John Michael Higgins, Michael Hitchcock, and Jennifer Coolidge, is remarkably adept at creating hilarious and spontaneous dialogue apparently without effort. David Edelstein recently called them "one of the most gifted improvisatory comic ensembles the movies have ever seen."³⁷⁸ While the ensemble is often simply following basic improv maxims—yes-and, support, etc.—it often comes across as spontaneous magic. While much of that success is due to both the actors and their improv training, it also has to do with familiarity. Many of the filmmakers that use improvisation likewise utilize the same core of actors, in part because actors like working with improv, and also because ensemble and group mind are at the heart of successful improvisation. One of the keys to unlocking the Harold and further experimentation was eliminating the student ceiling and allowing teams to stick together over time. Guest has often said that "comedy is like music. You

³⁷⁶ Qtd. in Peter Canavese, "Christopher Guest & Eugene Levy – For Your Consideration," *GrouchoReviews.com*, November 10, 2006.

³⁷⁷ Qtd. in Matt Paoletti, "Eugene Levy is 'Not a Comedian,'" *Northwestern News Center*, *Northwestetrn.com*, April 13, 2011.

³⁷⁸ David Edelstein, "Tap Into Folk," *Slate.com*, April 16, 2003.

have to know the key, and you have to find players with good chops.” Part of what makes Guest so successful is his ability to find the right actors and put them in scenarios where they can fully display their talents. Too often gifted comic actors flail in scripted roles because they aren’t allowed to use the tools that made them successful. Guest simply lets actors do what they do best. Echoing the basic argument made in *Truth and Comedy*, Edelstein goes on to say that Guest’s films affirm “the idea that the best comedy is rooted in characters with strong psychological reality and that the right actors may, if guided by a sensitive hand, create figures as startling as those by all but the greatest dramatists.”³⁷⁹

While Guest is one of the only filmmakers currently making completely improvised films, many other directors are following his lead and using improv as part of the writing and filming process. They also have reached a level of financial success and celebrity that has eluded Guest and his cohorts, although Jane Lynch’s turn as Sue Sylvester on *Glee* has made her a star. Guest actually argues that one of his casts’ strengths is their relative anonymity, which allows them to play any role, whereas a Vince Vaughn, for instance, tends to always play some variation of Vince Vaughn. Filmmakers like Adam McKay, Judd Apatow, and Paul Feig have achieved more pop-culture success, in part because their casts are much more recognizable than Guest’s. Stars like Will Ferrell, Steve Carrel, Seth Rogen, Owen Wilson,³⁸⁰ Vince Vaughn, Ben Stiller, Paul Rudd, Jonah Hill, Leslie Mann, and Kristen Wiig head up all-star ensembles of many improv-based films. The relative popularity between filmmakers is not what is important, however, what matters is that these latter day improv filmmakers are reaching

³⁷⁹ Edelstein.

³⁸⁰ Wilson is an interesting case. He does almost no improvisation on the films he co-writes with director Wes Anderson such as *Bottle Rocket*, *Rushmore*, and *The Royal Tenebaums*, but for the films where he is simply an actor Wilson is noted for continually going off script and improvising.

a mass audience, and in the process changing the way that people view, make, and appreciate comedy.

Adam McKay, formerly of iO house team the Family, Upright Citizen's Brigade, and later Second City, and *SNL* has been one of the most successful improv based filmmakers of the last decade. In films like *Anchorman* (2004), *Talladega Nights* (2006), and *Step Brothers* (2008) McKay relied heavily on improvisation, or retroscripting. *Anchorman* had so much unused improvised material that they created a spin off with a completely new narrative called *Wake Up, Ron Burgundy* (2004). McKay admits that he was highly influenced by John Cassavetes, sometimes known as the "father" of independent film, who used retroscripting most notably for his films *Husbands* (1970) and *Faces* (1968). McKay grounds his characters in a reality and then lets his actors, often with prompting from McKay, improvise. Much like Flicker urged Kubrick to trust his talented actors, directors are beginning to trust the comic instincts and talents of a new generation of actors trained in comic improvisation through the Harold. For example, McKay's characters are excellent examples of an actor playing to the top of his character's intelligence. Richard Jenkin's monologue about his dashed childhood dreams of becoming a dinosaur in *Step Brothers*, the epic death-by-trident street fight in *Anchorman*, which McKay said has "the Upright Citizens Brigade spirit...behind that,"³⁸¹ or John C. Reilly's riff on friendship and compatibility in *Talladega Nights*, saying "we go together like Chinese food and chocolate pudding...Like cocaine and waffles...like peanut butter and ladies," all are rooted in improvisational theory, and all were executed improvisationally.

³⁸¹ Raftery, "And...Scene."

While actors are using improv skills in performance, Judd Apatow is perhaps at the forefront of the contemporary improv based filmmaking club, using improvisation as a major part of his filmmaking process. His influence in improv based filmmaking has been huge, as evidenced by the fact that he has been the writer, director, or producer of nearly all the films discussed in this chapter. He often lets his actors improvise scenes before filming and then incorporates the ideas and character traits into the script. As Apatow was writing *Knocked Up* (2007), he invited the cast to his home so he could tape them improvising. For instance, Apatow asked Seth Rogen, “What if your girlfriend came over and there was an earthquake and weird things fell out of your drawers? What would be the most embarrassing?” Rogen took a moment and then replied, “There’s a picture of me smoking pot with a fishbowl on my head...And I used to keep a drawer full of all the baggies I got pot in. That drawer was full.”³⁸² Apatow took the ideas and incorporated them into the shooting script. Apatow said in an interview that “I’m a big fan of improvisation as part of the process. Whenever I’m having trouble with a scene, I always would bring the actors into my office, and we would improvise the scene. So I could see what the instincts of the actors were.”³⁸³

Apatow, like McKay, Roach, Todd Phillips, and many other comedic directors don’t simply use improv to help create the script though. He brings it out of rehearsal and allows a generous amount of freedom for his actors to improvise and explore during filming. He often will just let the film roll and capture whatever his actors come up with. Many of the best scenes of *The 40 Year Old Virgin* (2005) were improvised, including the cult favorite “You know how I know you’re gay?” repartee between Rogen and Paul

³⁸² Stephen Rodrick, “Judd Apatow’s Family Values,” *The New York Times Magazine*, May 27, 2007.

³⁸³ Qtd. in Ivana Redwine, “Judd Apatow Interview,” *About.com*, December 13, 2005.

Rudd. Rogen commented that he prefers to improvise dialogue, saying “I always laugh harder at stuff my friends say than anything ever in a movie. The reason is because it seems like they said it on the spot. It doesn’t seem like someone told them to say it. When you can capture that on film I think it’s a lot more interesting to watch than scripted lines.”³⁸⁴ This comic aesthetic comes straight from *Truth in Comedy*, which states, “we’re funniest when we’re just being ourselves. Sitting around relaxing with friends usually inspires far more laughter than a TV sitcom or someone trying to tell jokes.”³⁸⁵ Most of *The 40 Year Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up*’s funniest scenes consist of a group of friends sitting around talking.

The improvisational filmmaking process is reliant on trust between the director and actors, and of course between the various actors. By placing his trust into his cast and allowing them to be part of the creative process, Apatow is often rewarded. As Close and Halpern say, “treat others as if they are poets, geniuses and artists, and they will be.”³⁸⁶ By incorporating improvisation into actual shooting of the film, Apatow and others are making the actors a greater part of the process, recapturing the idea of actor-creator from *commedia* and one of the most alluring aspects of contemporary improvisational theatre. With trust comes a higher investment in the piece. It is not a coincidence that each of the directors mentioned thus far tend to work with a fairly stable cast from picture to picture. And it is not a coincidence that those actors want to work with directors that treat them with such artistic respect.

Nearly every writer in whatever medium strives to capture the realistic qualities of improvised language found in films like *Superbad* (2007), *Anchorman*, and *The Forty*

³⁸⁴ Qtd. in Daniel Robert Epstein, “Seth Rogen,” *SuicideGirls.com*, December 13, 2005.

³⁸⁵ Halpern, et. al., 15.

³⁸⁶ Halpern, et. al., 43.

Year Old Virgin. As Friend notes, most contemporary comedy “strives for an orchestrated spontaneity.” Scripted shows like *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Community*, *Parks and Recreation*, *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, and *Modern Family* all aim to achieve an unscripted mood, “engineering scenarios that feel like life minus all the boring parts.”³⁸⁷ This same “real-life” aesthetic has cropped up time and again in contemporary comic films, and the style of humor is markedly different. *Forgetting Sarah Marshall* (2008) directed by Nicholas Stoller and produced by Apatow, was heavily improvised. Stoller went on to say that “the movies we’re trying to make, which have a hard laugh every minute, could not be made without improv.”³⁸⁸ In the film there is less reliance on the joke of a written script, and more on the ability of actors to mine humor from character, situation, and relationships. This style has manifested itself in a slew of relaxed buddy-films, like the improv infused hits *The Hangover* (2009) and Best Original Screenplay Oscar-nominee *Bridesmaids*.

Yet some, like Nathan Rabin argue that improvisation is becoming a crutch and leading to more mediocre scripts and movies. Rabin argues that instead of focusing on creating solid scripts “it feels like the studio starts off with a really weak script that they figure an Owen Wilson or Will Ferrell can single handedly save via improvisation. The result is an endless parade of half-assed, kinda-okay movies with a smattering of good ideas and funny scenes that would benefit greatly from a few more drafts and a lot more discipline.”³⁸⁹ He argues that the recent increase in comic performers trained in improv has led to a de-emphasis on screenwriting in general because the actors can save the

³⁸⁷ Friend.

³⁸⁸ Tad Friend, “First Banana: Steve Carell and the Meticulous Art of Spontaneity,” *The New Yorker*, July 5, 2010.

³⁸⁹ Nathan Rabin and Scott Tobias, “Crosstalk: Is Improvisation Ruining Film Comedy?,” *The Onion A.V. Club*, June 8, 2007.

script, pointing to films like *Dodgeball* (2004) that have several funny ideas and improvisational moments but never fully come together. Scott Tobias argues, however, that we are only in the first phase of improv-based filmmaking, and that given time this style of filmmaking will actually help movies become funnier. The biggest issue he sees reflects Libera's notion of the left and right brain: currently filmmakers are relying too much on improvisation without also using analytical screenwriting tools to shape and tighten (*The 40-Year Old Virgin* and *Knocked Up* both run well over two hours). An improvised scene that gets a laugh is all well and good, but if it doesn't serve the structure or story then ultimately it makes a lousy film.

Yet when improvisation is really working, it is marked by its efficiency, spontaneity, and specificity. Mike Meyers, again an iO trained actor, typifies this in *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery* (1997). The "shush" scene between Dr. Evil and his son Scott is a prime example of an improvised scene completely working. Harold training focuses on justification and reincorporation based in slow comedy. In the 1980s and 1990s the Harold was pushing the one-liner out the door in favor of more nuanced and richer humor based in relationships, connections, and character. Actors and directors like Mike Nichols, Bill Murray, Harold Ramis, Mike Meyers, and Chris Farley carried their improv training with them. Murray's famous "Cinderella story" monologue in *Caddyshack* (1980) came out of gentle prodding from director Harold Ramis, who encouraged Murray to imagine he was talking to himself like a sports announcer.

The traditional Hollywood system puts a screenplay through arduous revisions, often sending it to numerous writers and focus groups before painstakingly revising the script so that often times it hardly resembles the original screenplay or idea. In

contemporary comic screenwriting, often the original script is turned over to a creative team of actors, writers, and directors that work in a sort of comedy cabal. Most of them know each other from their improv backgrounds, and even if they don't, they all have a shared improvised-based comic language. Apatow is perhaps the best known of the comedy cabal, working with his Bucket Brigade. Coming from television writing where he worked on *The Larry Sanders Show* and *Freaks & Geeks*, Apatow was used to the idea of group writing. While each film ultimately belongs to the director and actors, in the early stages anyone's comments are welcomed, which is an obvious outgrowth of the yes-and philosophy based in agreement. For example, for *Pineapple Express* (2008), which Apatow produced, an early version of the script went to the cabal. Ian Roberts, formerly of the Family and Upright Citizens Brigade, pinpointed the story he thought the movie was trying to tell, and Apatow and his team seized upon it. Ferrell observes that "it's almost a think-tank approach, and it gives you about thirty per cent more options. There are still a fair number of people who don't work this way—which we kind of don't understand."³⁹⁰

The result has been films with a greater emphasis on the ensemble, which can be directly traced back to Close and Halpern's maxim that the duty of an improviser is to support his or her partner—to do everything in one's power to make his or her partner look good. Improv actors want to work together because they like the support and trust that other improv actors provide. This philosophical shift has led to a change in comic movies. In the 1970s, 1980s, and most of the 1990s comic films were often led by one actor, an Eddie Murphy, Chevy Chase, Steve Martin, Robin Williams, Jim Carrey, etc., who would carry the film based on their own jokes and persona. With the advent of

³⁹⁰ Qtd. in Friend.

improv based filmmaking, in contemporary comedy the ensemble becomes more important than the lead or star. Most of the major characters are funny, and often times the “side-kick(s)” is funnier than the lead. Zack Galifianakis’ off-kilter Alan in *The Hangover* provides some of the funniest moments of the film without being the star, as does Will Ferrell’s Frank in *Old School* (2003), and Melissa McCarthy’s Oscar-nominated performance as Megan in *Bridesmaids* (2011). Of course there are still star driven comedies that are both funny and financially successful, but they are outnumbered by ensemble-based films.

This shift has also changed the way films are made. Improv based films tend to be shot with multiple cameras running simultaneously so that they can capture every moment. Traditionally a scene is filmed with two cameras, one shooting wide and the other close up, both focused on one actor. The scene is then reshot with the cameras focused on the other actor and so on. In improv, the scenes are cross shot so that everything, including reactions is captured. Because the script is always changing traditional shooting won’t work. Therefore the cross-shot system not only captures the “realistic” feel, but also helps to avoid issues of continuity in editing. Since the scene is rarely going to be done exactly the same way twice, it’s important to capture each scene from multiple perspectives. Another Apatow production, *Bridesmaids*, featured a lot of improvisation. Director Paul Feig, who also directed episodes of *The Office*, *30 Rock*, *Arrested Development*, and *Parks and Recreation*, said that “you have these amazing moments that happen and if you’ve only got one side of it, it’s impossible to re-create it

again on the other side; you lose that first time magic. This type of comedy is never the same when you say it twice.”³⁹¹

While cross-shooting does tend to lower the overall production values, most comic films are given more leeway in terms of cinematography. Most cinematographers, however, “just despise it and refuse to do it.”³⁹² In part because of the way they are shot and the improv process, improv based films tend to rely heavily on editing, often shooting two-to-three times as much film as a traditional scripted comedy. Roach said that “it’s a sloppy approach. One out of ten moments is great, and you watch the nine others go by and hope.”³⁹³ The idea is to maximize creativity and output, and to utilize the medium at hand. Film can eliminate some of the more unreliable aspects of improvisation because it can simply edit them out.

It’s important to note, however, that these films are not completely improvised and they still have a script. As we’ve seen, the script is often heavily influenced and even created out of improvisation, but most films still don’t begin shooting until they have a script. The performers are all trained improvisers and they utilize improv in their dialogue, but they aren’t creating their characters or the plot on the spot. Melissa McCarthy, who trained with the Groundlings improv group, plays the tough as nails and not all there Megan in *Bridesmaids* and has been widely hailed by critics for her performance, says that “you can want something odd, but don’t be crazy.”³⁹⁴ Her truthful approach is a direct result of her improv background, and echoes Close and Flicker’s similar philosophy espoused with the St. Louis Compass Players. Feig commented that

³⁹¹ Peter Caranicas, “‘Bridesmaids’ caught improv on film,” *Variety*, May 17, 2011.

³⁹² Caranicas.

³⁹³ Qtd. in Friend.

³⁹⁴ George Pennacchio, “‘Bridesmaids’ cast has improv background,” *KABC-TV*, May 12, 2011.

while they may use improv in a scene, they never film a scene without knowing its “emotional roadmap... We have the basic idea, like, ‘You’re meeting this person for the first time and by the end you’re weirded out by him.’ And when you cast actors with an improv background, in every take they come up with something new.”³⁹⁵ Kristen Wiig, who co-wrote the screenplay for *Bridesmaids*, said that “we shot it the way it was written and people went on tangents. We’d let them go for 10 minutes, so it’s a combination.” An example would be the character Megan suggesting a *Fight Club* themed bridal shower during a scene where the friends are trying to decide what sort of shower to throw for the bride-to-be, as Wiig says, “Yeah, that wasn’t in the script.”³⁹⁶

What these contemporary comedies have done is essentially supplement the isolated screenwriter with actor-writers and director-writers. Because so many actors have training in improvisation many of them are knowingly (or not) writing on their feet. For the film *50/50* (2011), Rogen commented that “actors have a lot of perspective. Many of them could be writers themselves—Joe [Gordon-Levitt] and Anna [Kendrick] and Bryce [Dallas Howard] could all be doing it—if they had a desire to sit down at a computer for months and months and write a script. But most of them don’t.”³⁹⁷ Improvising on film, much like on stage, however, is much more involved than simply winging it or making a bunch of jokes. Actors are working within a very limited structure and much like the Harold provided a structure for free form improvisation, improv on film also needs structure and limitations in order to be effective. Actors need to understand the plot and their character’s function in the story, but also need to deeply

³⁹⁵ Carnicas.

³⁹⁶ Amy Chozick, “Kristen Wiig on ‘Bridesmaids,’ Improv, and Funny Women,” *The Wall Street Journal – Speakeasy*, May 6, 2011.

³⁹⁷ Qtd. in Clint O’Connor, “Seth Rogen Talks ‘50/50,’ movie improv and making cancer funny,” *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*, September 25, 2011.

understand the film-making process in order to effectively utilize improvisation. As

Rogen explains:

First and foremost, what is most valid in an improviser is a knowledge of how movies work...Lots of times, people will improvise funny stuff and it's just completely unusable. They don't understand that technically it's not going to work. They're saying it at the wrong time, during the wrong coverage, or bringing up a new line of thought that we didn't have on the wide shot so there's no way we can use it. That happens a lot. A truly skilled improviser isn't just someone who says funny [expletive]. It's someone who says funny [expletive] in a way we can actually put it into the movie.³⁹⁸

As Rogen suggests, improv on film is not just playing around and making up jokes, it is now a serious part of the process and actors and directors need to understand how to utilize it in order for it to work both aesthetically and practically. Thanks in part to the Harold and the importance of improv training to creative work, actors are now so well versed in improvisation, and have ingrained themselves so heavily into the writing process through improvisation that Friend argues "comedies, once the province of writer-directors like Preston Sturges, Woody Allen, and John Hughes, now belong to the writer-actor."³⁹⁹

All of this is not intended to signal the end of traditional dramatic writing. Instead it is demonstrating the influence of the Harold beyond the niche of improvisational theatre, and to offer traditional writers, directors, and actors a new tool for their toolbox. While improv has not replaced traditional writing, its influence on the process of creation in contemporary comedy is undeniable. The Second City and other improv theatres have been using improv as a writing tool for over half-a-century, so it should come as no surprise that improv can work as a writing tool. The success of films like *Anchorman*, *Knocked Up*, and *Bridesmaids*, and television shows like *30 Rock* and *Curb Your*

³⁹⁸ Qtd. in O'Connor.

³⁹⁹ Friend.

Enthusiasm demonstrate not only the Harold's viability as a writing/creative tool, but also reveals the profound influence that the Harold has had on contemporary comedy.

Whether improv on film and television will follow a similar evolution as theatrical improvisation and the iO of film will emerge is yet to be seen, but the Harold's influence on contemporary comedy on the small and silver screen is only increasing.

CONCLUSION

It's rather rare for a theatrical structure to totally revolutionize not only a genre of performance, but an entire system of thinking. The Harold did just that. The Harold transformed improvisational theatre, ushering in the concept of long form scenic style improvisation based not on games, but on relationships, connections, and support. As the Harold evolved and more and more performers learned the structural and philosophical underpinnings of the form, there has been a paradigm shift in comedic style, creation, and aesthetic from a system and style dominated by stand-up comedy, joke-punch line, and "star" performers, to an ensemble style comedy based on the idea of "support your partner." While there are certainly still stand-up comics—and some that are doing quite well—comedy in the early twenty-first century is transforming from a comedy of one to a support your partner comedy underpinned by the theoretical and philosophical tenets of the Harold. The growing use of improv training in leading business schools and Fortune 500 companies, for instance, points to the fundamental shift in thinking that the Harold helped create.

Improvisers, filmmakers, actors, writers, businesspeople, philosophers, and others have come to realize that working with one another and treating each other like artists,

poets, and geniuses not only leads to more collaborative and effective working relationships, it also is an excellent way to generate comedy at the highest level. The Harold teaches us that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts, demonstrating that a group of talented performers working together toward a common goal can achieve anything. And the same can be said of the Harold itself, that over the half century of its development it has become greater than the sum of its parts, with its vast influence stretching beyond the walls of iO, to network television, Hollywood, Fortune 500 companies, philosophy, and even religion.

While the Harold has evolved beyond its initial three-by-three structure and continues to move in new directions, the Harold's influence on improv and comedy continues to grow. Harold trained improvisers and comedians seek one another out, looking to work with people who treat them with the utmost artistic respect... what a novel concept. The snowball effect is readily apparent in the makeup of the writing staffs of *Late Night with Conan O'Brien*, *Community*, *Parks & Recreation*, *30 Rock*, and others. When a writing spot opens up, the Harold trained people in the room seek out those with a common background, vocabulary, and support system. They remember playing with their Harold teams and the way their teammates supported their ideas, so naturally they seek those people out to work with again, whether it be on another improv team, a television writing staff, or a feature film. With the growing success of Harold trained comedians onstage and onscreen, the Harold hopefully will begin to receive the respect and attention that it deserves and push improvisational theatre over the edge so that it is no longer "percolating near the edge of being the next big thing."

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Books

- Adams, Kenn. *How to Improvise a Full-Length Play: The Art of Spontaneous Theater*. New York: Allworth Press, 2007.
- Anderson, Walter Truett, ed. *The Truth About the Truth: De-Confusing and Re Constructing the Postmodern World*. New York: J.P. Tarcher, 1995.
- Aronson, Arnold. *American Avant-Garde Theatre: a history*. New York: Routledge, 2000.
- Belgrade, Daniel. *The Culture of Spontaneity*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998.
- Bennett, Susan. *Theatre Audiences: A Theory of Production and Reception*. New York: Routledge, 1990.
- Best, Steven, and Douglas Kellner. *Postmodern Theory*. New York: The Guilford Press, 1991.
- Boal, Augusto. *Theatre of the Oppressed*. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1985.
- Boyd, Neva Leona. *Play and Game Theory in Group Work: A Collection of Papers*. Chicago: University of Illinois at Chicago Circle, 1971.
- Brecht, Bertolt. *Brecht on Theatre*. Ed. and trans. by John Willett. New York: Hill & Wang, 1964, 1992.
- Brown, Shona L., and Kathleen M. Eisenhardt. *Competing on the Edge: Strategy as Structured Chaos*. Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 1988.
- Carrane, Jimmy and Liz Allen. *Improvising Better: a guide for the working improviser*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006.
- Carson, Shelley. *Your Creative Brain: Seven Steps to Maximize Imagination, Productivity, and Innovation in Your Life*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2010).
- Chin, Jason. *Long Form Improvisation and the Art of Zen: a manual for advanced performers*. Bloomington, IN; New York: iUniverse, Inc., 2009.

- Christiansen, Richard. *A Theater of Our Own: A History and a Memoir of 1,001 Nights in Chicago*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004.
- Chudnow, Richard. *ComedySportz Franchise Owner's Manual*. Milwaukee, WI: Self Published, 1988.
- Coleman, Janet. *The Compass: the improvisational theatre that revolutionized American comedy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.
- Diggles, Dan. *Improv for Actors*. New York: Allworth Press, 2004.
- Eagleton, Terry. *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Oxford: Blackwell Publishers Ltd., 1996.
- Fey, Tina. *Bossypants*. New York: Reagan Arthur Books, 2011.
- Fisher, James. *The Theatre of Yesterday and Tomorrow: Commedia dell'arte on the modern stage*. Lewiston: E Mellen Press, 1992.
- Fortier, Mark. *Theory/Theatre: An Introduction*, 2nd ed. New York: Routledge, 2002.
- Foster, Hal, ed. *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*. New York: The New Press, 1998.
- Foreman, Kathleen, and Clem Martini. *Something Like a Drug: An Unauthorized Oral History of Theatresports*. Red Deer, Alberta, Canada: Red Deer College Press, 1995.
- Frost, Anthony, and Ralph Yarrow. *Improvisation in Drama*, 2nd Ed. New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2007.
- Goldberg, Andy. *Improv Comedy*. New York: Samuel French, 1991.
- Goodman, Katie. *Improvisation for the Spirit: Live a More Creative, Spontaneous, and Courageous Life Using the Tools of Improvisation*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc., 2008.
- Gordon, Mel. *Lazzi: the comic routines of Commedia dell'arte*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1983.
- Griffin, Dustin. *Satire: A Critical Reintroduction*. Lexington: University of Kentucky Press, 1994.
- Griggs, Jeff. *Guru: My Days with Del Close*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005.

- Gwinn, Peter and Charna Halpern. *Group Improvisation: The Manual of Ensemble Improv Games*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 2003.
- Halpern, Charna. *Art by Committee: A Guide to Advanced Improvisation*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 2006.
- Halpern, Charna, Del Close, and Kim “Howard” Johnson. *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 1994.
- Harris, Neil. *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.
- Hassan, Ihab. *The Postmodern Turn: Essays in postmodern theory and culture*. Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987.
- Hazenfield, Carol. *Acting on Impulse: the art of making improv theater*. Berkeley: Coventry Creek Press, 2002.
- Henderson, Diana. *Collaborations with the Past*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006.
- Hicks, Margaret. *Chicago Comedy: A Fairly Serious History*. Charleston: The History Press, 2011.
- Hill, Doug, and Jeff Weingrad. *Saturday Night: A Backstage History of ‘Saturday Night Live.’* New York: Beach Tree Books/William Morrow, 1986.
- Horn, Delton T. *Comedy Improvisation: Exercises & Techniques for Young Actors*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 1992.
- Hutchins, Robert. *The Conflict of Education in a Democratic Society*. New York: Harper, 1953.
- Izzo, Gary. *The Art of Play: the new genre of interactive theatre*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1997.
- Jenkins, Ron. *Subversive Laughter: The Liberating Power of Comedy*. New York: The Free Press, 1994.
- Johnson, Kim “Howard.” *The Funniest One in the Room: The lives and legends of Del Close*. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008.
- Johnstone, Keith. *Impro: Improvisation and the theatre*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- . *Impro for Storytellers*. New York: Faber and Faber, 1998.

- Kercher, Stephen E. *Revel with a Cause: liberal satire in postwar America*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006.
- Kotis, Greg, and Mark Hollmann. *Urinetown, The Musical*. New York: Faber & Faber, 2003.
- Kozlowski, Rob. *The Art of Chicago Improv: Shortcuts to long-form improvisation*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2002.
- Lanier, Douglass. *Shakespeare and Modern Popular Culture*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002.
- Leep, Jeanne. *Theatrical Improvisation: Short Form, Long Form, and Sketch-Based Improv*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008.
- Libera, Anne. *The Second City Almanac of Improvisation*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2004.
- Lynn, Bill. *Improvisation for Actors and Writers: A Guidebook for Improv Lessons in Comedy*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, Ltd, 2004.
- Lyotard, Jean-Francois. *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*. Trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.
- Madson, Patricia Ryan. *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up*. New York: Bell Tower, 2005.
- McCrohan, Donna. *The Second City: A Backstage History of Comedy's Hottest Troupe*. New York: Perigee, 1987.
- McKnight, Katherine S., and Mary Scruggs. *The Second City Guide to Improv in the Classroom: Using Improvisation to Teach Skills and Boost Learning*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2008.
- McLeod, Elizabeth. *Original Amos 'n' Andy: Freeman Gosden, Charles Correll and the 1928-1943 Radio Serial*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2009.
- Nachmanovitch, Stephen. *Free Play: Improvisation in Life and Art*. New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1990.
- Napier, Mick. *Improvise: Scene from the inside out*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004.
- Nevraumont, Edward, Nicholas Hanson, and Kurt Smeaton. *The Ultimate Improv Book: A Complete Guide to Comedy Improvisation*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 2002.

- Patikin, Sheldon. *The Second City: Backstage at the world's greatest comedy theatre*. Naperville, IL: Sourcebooks, Inc. 2000.
- Peters, Gary. *The Philosophy of Improvisation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2009.
- Pollack, Michael and Jason Alexander. *Musical Improv Comedy: creating songs in the moment*. Gardena, CA: SCB Distributors, 2004.
- Raphael, Amy, Ed. *Mike Leigh on Mike Leigh (Directors on Directors)*. New York: Faber & Faber, 2008.
- Roose-Evans, James. *Experimental Theatre – From Stanislavsky to Peter Brook*. New York: Universe Books, 1984.
- Rudlin, John, and Olly Crick. *Commedia dell'arte: a handbook for troupes*. London: Routledge, 2001.
- Sahlins, Bernard. *Days and Nights at the Second City: a memoir, with notes on staging review theatre*. Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001.
- Salinsky, Tom and Deborah Frances-White. *The Improv Handbook: The Ultimate Guide to Improvising in Comedy, Theatre, and Beyond*. New York: Continuum International Publishing Group, 2008.
- Sarup, Madan, and Tasneem Raja. *Identity, Culture and the Postmodern World*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd., 1996.
- Scruggs, Mary and Michael Gellman. *Process: An improviser's journey*. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008.
- Seham, Amy. *Whose improv is it anyway?: beyond second city*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.
- Smith, Tom. *The Other Blocking: Teaching and Performing Improvisation*. Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt Publishing Company, 2009.
- Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theatre, 3rd edition*. Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1999.
- Stanley, Susan. *Drama without script: the practice of improvised drama*. London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1980.
- Strindberg, August. *Miss Julie and Other Plays*. Trans. Michael Robinson. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.

- Sweeney, John, and The Brave New Workshop. *Innovation at the Speed of Laughter: 8 secrets to world class idea generation*. Expert Publishing, Inc., 2004.
- Sweet, Jeffrey. *The Dramatist's Toolkit: The Craft of the Working Playwright*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 1993.
- . *Solving Your Script: Tools and Techniques for the Playwright*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2001.
- . *Something Wonderful Right Away: An oral history of The Second City and The Compass Players*. New York: Avon Books, 1978.
- Terkel, Studs. *Touch and Go: A Memoir*. New York: The New Press, 2007.
- Thomas, Mike. *The Second City Unscripted: Revolution and revelation at the world-famous comedy theater*. New York: Villard Books, 2009.
- Vorhaus, John. *The Comic Toolbox: How to be Funny Even if You're Not*. Los Angeles: Silman-James Press, 1994.
- Weitz, Eric. *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009.
- Wirth, Jeff. *Interactive Acting: Acting, Improvisation, and Interacting for Audience Participatory Theatre*. Fall Creek, OR: Fall Creek Press, 1994.

Journal Articles & Book Chapters

- Auslander, Philip. "Comedy about the Failure of Comedy: Stand-up Comedy and Postmodernism." *Critical Theory and Performance*. Eds. Janelle G. Reinelt and Joseph R. Roach. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992.
- Casson, John W. "Living Newspaper: Theatre and Therapy." *TDR: The Drama Review* 44.2 (2000): 107-122.
- Fox, Hannah. "Playback Theatre: Inciting Dialogue and Building Community through Personal Story." *TDR: The Drama Review*. 51:4 (Winter 2007): 89-92, 95-105.
- Gunning, Tom. "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy," Eds. Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins. *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 1995, 87-105.

- Henderson, Diana. "From Popular Entertainment to Literature." *The Cambridge Companion to Shakespeare and Popular Culture*. Ed. Robert Shaughnessy. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007.
- Jameson, Fredric. "Postmodernism and Consumer Society." *Modern Drama: plays/criticism/theory*. Ed. W.B. Worthen. Cambridge: Heinle & Heinle, 2002. 1130-1139.
- Kvale, Steinar. "Themes of Postmodernity." *The Truth About the Truth: De-Confusing and Re-Constructing the Postmodern World*. Ed. Walter Truett Anderson. New York: J.P. Tarcher, 1995.
- Mittell, Jason. "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television." *The Velvet Light Trap*. 58, no. 1 (2006), 29-40.
- , and Steven Johnson. "Is Popular Culture Good for You?" *MIT Communications Forum*. 6 October 2005. http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/popular_culture.htm. Accessed 9 July 2009.
- Quinn, Ruth. "The Performative Self: Improvisation for Self and Other." *New Theatre Quarterly*. 19, no. 1 (2003): 18-22.
- Romano, Allison, and Paige Albinak. "Funny Business." *Broadcasting & Cable*. 134, no. 26 (Jun 28, 2004): 1, 58.
- Sawyer, R. Keith. "Improvisation and the Creative Process: Dewey, Collingwood, and the Aesthetics of Spontaneity." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. 58, no. 2 (Spring 2000): 149-161
- . "Improvisation and Teaching." *Critical Studies in Improvisation*. 3, no. 2 (2007). <http://www.criticalimprov.com/article/view/380/626>.
- . "The Improvisational Performance of Everyday Life." *Journal of Mundane Behavior*. 2, no. 2 (2001). <http://www.mundanebehavior.org/issues/v2n2/sawyer.htm>.
- . "The Semiotics of Improvisation: The Pragmatics of Musical and Verbal Performance." *Semiotica: Journal of the International Association for Semiotic Studies*. 108, no. 3-4 (1996): 269-306.
- Salopek, Jennifer J. "Improvisation." *Training & Development*. 58, no. 5 (May 2004): 116-118.
- Zaunbrecher, Nicolas J.. "The Elements of Improvisation: Structural Tools for Spontaneous Theatre." *Theatre Topics*. 21, no. 1 (March 2011): 49-59.

Dissertations & Theses

- Charles, David Alfred. "The Novelty of Improvisation: Towards a Genre of Embodied Spontaneity." Ph.D. diss, Louisiana State University, 2003.
- Patton, David. "The Pedagogy and Ethics of Improvisation Using the Harold." MFA Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007.
- Seham, Amy. "Chicago-Style Improv Comedy: Race and Gender, Rhetoric and Practice." Ph.D. diss, University of Wisconsin, 1997.

Magazines, Newspapers and Internet Sources

- "About Octavarius." Octavarius.com. Accessed 5 June 2011.
- Adler, Tony. "Company Finds Art in Improv." *Chicago Tribune*. May 11, 1993. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1993-05-11/news/9305110053_1_improv-deliveryman-teachers. Accessed 19 June 2011.
- . "The 'How' of Funny: Chicago's New Wave of Improvisation Aspires to More than a Punchline." *American Theatre*. Dec. 1993, 14-19, 63.
- . "In Your Face." *Chicago Magazine*. March 1992.
- . "Love & Money: Second City at a Crossroads." *Chicago Reader*. November 11, 1993. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/love--money/Content?oid=883215>. Accessed 1 June 2011.
- Alston, Joshua. "Funniest TV Comedies: #1 '30 Rock.'" *Newsweek.com*. December 7, 2009. <http://2010.newsweek.com/top-10/funniest-tv-comedies/nbc-30-rock.html>. Accessed 1 July 2011.
- Alter, Alexandra. "Two Protons Walk Into a Black Hole, And Other Jokes Physicists Tell." *The Wall Street Journal*. September 4, 2008. <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB122048206487796841.html>. Accessed 4 March 2011.
- Austin, Gary. "Improvisational Theatre – It's in the DNA." *ImprovisationNews.com*. September 2, 2011. http://improvisationnews.com/index.php?option=com_k2&view=item&id=98:E2%80%9Cimprovisational-theatre-it%E2%80%99s-in-the-dna%E2%80%9D&Itemid=35. Accessed 14 October 2011.

- Bebb, Bruce. "Improv: Where did you come from and what are you doing in my living room?" *Hollywood Reporter*. January 26, 1988. The Spolin Center. http://www.spolin.com/where_did_Hollywood-Rep.html. Accessed 4 November 2004.
- Belcher, David. "Meeting Harold." *The Herald (Glasgow)*. August 5, 1995. Accessed 9 October 2011.
- Caranicas, Peter. "'Bridesmaids' caught improv on film." *Variety*. May 17, 2011. <http://www.variety.com/article/VR1118037164?refCatId=13>. Accessed 19 January 2012.
- Caro, Mark. "This Bunch Can't Get Enough of the Bradys." *Chicago Tribune*. November 2, 1990. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1990-11-02/features/9003310893_1_real-live-brady-bunch-three-very-lovely-girls-annoyance-theatre. Accessed 28 March 2012.
- Chonin, Neva. "Truthiness to Power." *San Francisco Chronicle*. May 7, 2006. <http://www.sfgate.com/cgi-bin/article.cgi?f=/c/a/2006/05/07/PKGNSGU5LT1.DTL>. Accessed 9 November 2011.
- Chozick, Amy. "Kristen Wiig on 'Bridesmaids,' Improv, and Funny Women." *The Wall Street Journal – Speakeasy*. May 6, 2011. <http://blogs.wsj.com/speakeasy/2011/05/06/kristen-wiig-on-bridesmaids-improv-and-funny-women/>. Accessed 14 January 2012.
- Combe, Rachael. "Funny Girl: The Power of Improv Comedy." *Elle Magazine*, January 5, 2012. <http://www.elle.com/Life-Love/Society-Career-Power/Funny-Girl-The-Power-of-Improv-Comedy/Improv-Comedy-Tina-Fey-and-Amy-Poehler-on-ELLE>. Accessed 28 January 2012.
- Craig, Pat. "Improv is a Great Way to Enjoy Raw Theatre." *Contra Costa Times*. August 27, 2004.
- DeSimone, Jim. "J-improv." 2001. <http://www.collectiveimprov.com/mouth/jimprov.htm>. Accessed 2 December 2004.
- Edelstein, David. "Tap Into Folk." *Slate.com*. April 16, 2003. http://www.slate.com/articles/arts/movies/2003/04/tap_into_folk.html. Accessed 14 November 2011.
- Engelman, Liz. "Talkin' Turgy: Structure as a Catalyst for Creative Output." July 18, 2004. *The Playwright's Center*. <http://www.pwcenter.org/ebulletin/TalkinTurgy7-28-2004.htm>. Accessed 5 January 2005.

- Fey, Tina. "Lessons from Late Night." *The New Yorker*. 87, no. 4. March 14, 2011. 22-28.
- Ford, Anne. "Life Without a Script: How funnyman TJ Jagodowski fell into improv—and the mysterious affliction that keeps him from leaving it." *Chicago Reader*. June 5, 2008. <http://m.chicagoreader.com/chicago/life-without-a-script/Content?oid=1109666>. Accessed 15 October 2008.
- Friend, Tad. "First Banana: Steve Carell and the Meticulous Art of Spontaneity." *The New Yorker*. July 5, 2010. http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2010/07/05/100705fa_fact_friend. Accessed 1 August 2011.
- George, Doug. "Cheer up at 5 funny fall shows." *Chicago Tribune*. October 3, 2008. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2008-10-03/entertainment/0810010457_1_improv-norm-macdonald-conan-o-brien. Accessed 16 October 2008.
- Glab, Michael G. "Class Clowns." *Chicago Reader*. February 21, 2002. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/class-clowns/Content?oid=907790>. Accessed 18 May 2011.
- Hamid, Kabir. "So Long, Second City." *Chicago Reader*. March 10, 2005. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/so-long-second-city/Content?oid=918184>. Accessed 21 September 2011.
- Heisler, Steve. "Major Annoyance." *TimeOut Chicago*. October 10, 2007. <http://timeoutchicago.com/arts-culture/comedy/52539/major-annoyance>. Accessed 21 May 2011.
- Helbig, Jack. "Mick's Bunch." *New City Chicago*. August 16, 1990.
- Hogarth, Marie-Anne. "Laughing Matters: Where would Frances Collier be without improv?" *Chicago Reader*. April 8, 1999. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/laughing-matters/Content?oid=898863>. Accessed 1 June 2011.
- Hubbard, Ryan. "Best of Chicago 2008: Best Improv Group." *Chicago Reader*. July 1, 2008. <http://www1.chicagoreader.com/bestofchicago08/comedy/improvgroup/>. Accessed October 12, 2008.
- Jevens, Darel. "Harold isn't enough for improv inventors." *Chicago Sun-Times*. February 17, 2002.

- Jones, Chris. "They're Ba-aaack." *Chicago Tribune*. July 7, 2006. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2006-07-07/entertainment/0607070299_1_improv-cool-kids-theater. Accessed 18 April 2011.
- Kogan, Rick. "Playing the Adventurous Improv Tune." *Chicago Tribune*. June 10, 1990. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1990-06-10/entertainment/9002270332_1_charna-halpern-improvisational-comedy-team-contest. Accessed 21 May 2011.
- Leopold, Todd. "Roboticist sees improvisation through machine's eyes." *CNN.com*. February 3, 2012. <http://www.cnn.com/2012/02/03/living/creativity-improvisation-intelligence-heather-knight/index.html>. Accessed 4 February 2012.
- Massa, Robert. "Much More Than a Hunch." *Village Voice*. October 8, 1991.
- Miner, Michael. "Annals of Crime: Chicagoans Steal 'Improv'!; Self-Made Media Critic." *Chicago Reader*. June 23, 1988. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/annals-of-crime-chicagoans-steal-improv-self-made-media-critic/Content?oid=872375>. Accessed 13 June 2011.
- Molloy, Tim. "How Jim Rash Went From Improv to 'Community' to a 'Descendants' Oscar Nomination." *The Wrap*. February 17, 2012. <http://www.thewrap.com/tv/column-post/how-jim-rash-went-improv-community-descendants-oscar-nomination-35513?page=0,0>. Accessed 27 February 2012.
- Napier, Mick. "Director's Notes." *Co-Ed Prison Sluts* Program. Obtained January 8, 2009.
- Obejas, Achy. "Comedy Guru Charna Halpern Carries On." *Chicago Tribune*. April 3, 2001. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2001-04-03/features/0104030038_1_charna-halpern-improvolympic-new-students. Accessed 19 May 2011.
- . "Ed." *Chicago Reader*. December 20, 1990. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/ed/Content?oid=876842>. Accessed 28 May 2011.
- . "Ed Always Balances on the Edge of Improv." *Chicago Tribune*. January 7, 1994. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1994-01-07/entertainment/9401070362_1_improv-sexes-joke. Accessed 28 May 2011.
- O'Byrne, Brendan. "Cannon talks role of improv in '30 Rock.'" *The Stanford Daily*. May 20, 2011. <http://www.stanforddaily.com/2011/05/20/cannon-talks-role-of-improv-in-30-rock/>. Accessed 12 August 2011.

- O'Connor, Clint. "Seth Rogen Talks '50/50,' movie improv and making cancer funny," *The Cleveland Plain Dealer*. September 25, 2011. http://www.cleveland.com/moviebuff/index.ssf/2011/09/seth_rogen_talks_5050_movie_im.html. Accessed 30 January 2012.
- Paolelli, Matt. "Eugene Levy is 'Not a Comedian.'" *Northwestern News Center* – Northwesetrn.com. April 13, 2011. <http://www.northwestern.edu/newscenter/stories/2011/04/eugene-levy-at-northwestern.html>. Accessed 12 November 2011.
- Pennacchio, George. "'Bridesmaids' cast has improv background." *KABC-TV*. May 12, 2011. http://abclocal.go.com/kabc/story?section=news/hollywood_wrap&id=8127934. Accessed 18 January 2012.
- Prescott, David. "Slowdown Takes Improv One Step Beyond." *Chicago Tribune*. September 28, 1984.
- Rabin, Nathan, and Scott Tobias. "Crosstalk: Is Improvisation Ruining Film Comedy?" *The Onion A.V. Club*. June 8, 2007. <http://www.avclub.com/articles/crosstalk-is-improvisation-ruining-film-comedy,1951/>. Accessed 19 August 2011.
- Rae-Dupree, Janet. "Can Executives Learn to Ignore the Script?" *The New York Times*. March 2, 2008. <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/03/02/business/02unbox.html?pagewanted=all>. Accessed 3 March 2011.
- Raftery, Brian. "And...Scene." *New York Magazine*. September 25, 2011. <http://nymag.com/arts/comics/features/upright-citizens-brigade-2011-10/>. Accessed 26 September 2011.
- Rodrick, Stephen. "Judd Apatow's Family Values." *The New York Times Magazine*. 27 May 2007. <http://www.nytimes.com/2007/05/27/magazine/27apatow-t.html?pagewanted=all>. Accessed 1 November 2011.
- Savage, Israel. "Is 'The Harold' for Improv Cheaters?" *ImprovisationNews.com*. July 3, 2011. https://improvisationnews.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&Itemid=41&id=545. Accessed 8 August 2011.
- Smith, Nick. "The Reckoning puts a thespian spin on improv comedy." *Charleston City Paper*. May 26, 2010. <http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/the-reckoning-puts-a-thespian-spin-on-improv-comedy/Content?oid=2008774>. Accessed 14 September 2011.
- Snead, Elizabeth. "'The Brady Bunch' stages a hit revival in Chicago." *USA Today*. July 25, 1991, 1D.

Spitznagel, Eric. "Much Ado about Mick Napier." *Third Word*. 1, no. 4. (January-February 1994).

Sweet, Jeffrey. "Improvisation as a Playwriting Tool." *The Spolin Center*. http://www.spolin.com/playwriting_tool.html. December 20, 2004. Accessed November 2004.

Thayer, Kate. "Suburban Natives See Success with Improv Group." *Chicago Tribune Local – Schaumburg*. June 8, 2011. <http://triblocal.com/schaumburg/2011/06/08/suburban-natives-see-success-with-improv-group/>. Accessed 2 November 2011.

Time Out New York. <http://ioimprov.com/chicago/io/shows/tj-and-dave>. Accessed 29 September 2008.

Toppmann, Lawrence. "Charlotte native wins Oscar for 'Descendants' adapted screenplay." *The Charlotte Observer*. February 26, 2012. <http://www.charlotteobserver.com/2012/02/26/3049545/charlotte-native-wins-oscar-for.html>. Accessed 27 February 2012.

Valeo, Tom. "ImprovOlympic." *Chicago Reader*. July 12, 1990. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/improvolympic/Content?oid=875986>. Accessed 8 September 2011.

Performance Reviews

Adler, Anthony. "Second City E.T.C. Company." *Chicago Reader*. June 28, 1990. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/second-city-etc-company/Content?oid=875928>. Accessed 4 June 2011.

Boeker, Tom. "Kuwait Until Dark; or, Bright Lights, Night Baseball." *Chicago Reader*. June 9, 1988. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/kuwait-until-dark-or-bright-lights-night-baseball/Content?oid=872320>. Accessed 28 May 2011.

Buscani, Lisa. "Review: Sodomites!!! A Musical of Biblical Proportions." *NewCityStage.com*. June 22, 2009. <http://newcitystage.com/2009/06/22/review-sodomites-a-musical-of-biblical-proportionsannoyance-productions/>. Accessed 19 May 2011.

Costello, Brian. "Almost Atlanta." *Chicago Reader*. July 22, 2011. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/almost-atlanta/Event?oid=4466696>. Accessed 3 December 2011.

- . "Octavarius: So Nefarious." *Chicago Reader*. November 1, 2010. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/octavarius-so-nefarious/Event?oid=2871991>. Accessed 2 November 2011.
- Del Signore, John. "Opinionist: TJ & Dave." *Gothamist.com*. February 18, 2007. http://gothamist.com/2007/02/18/opinionist_tj_d.php. Accessed 10 October 2008.
- Ecker, Keith. "Swear Jar." *ChicagoTheaterBeat.com*. April 6, 2010. <http://chicagotheaterbeat.com/2010/04/06/swear-jar-review/>. Accessed 3 May 2011.
- Green, Nick. "Georgia Pacific." *Chicago Reader*. April 21, 2005. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/georgia-pacific/Content?oid=918593>. Accessed 1 September 2011.
- . "Helix." *Chicago Reader*. April 17, 2003. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/helix/Content?oid=911805>. Accessed 1 September 2011.
- . "Original Message." *Chicago Reader*. January 3, 2002. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/original-message/Content?oid=907390>. Accessed 1 September 2011.
- Hayford, Justin. "Fuck You, I Love You, Bye: The Rahm Emanuel Story." *Chicago Reader*. September 18, 2011. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/fuck-you-i-love-you-bye-the-rahm-emanuel-story/Event?oid=5081451>. Accessed 21 May 2011.
- Heidemann, Jason. "Live Review: Octavarius So Nefarious at the ComedySportz Theatre." *TimeOut Chicago*. September 13, 2010. <http://timeoutchicago.com/things-to-do/out-about-blog/120607/live-review-octavarius-so-nefarious-at-the-comedysportz-theatre>. Accessed 1 November 2011.
- Heisler, Steve. "Shadow of a Doubt." *Time Out Chicago*. Issue 146. December 13-26, 2007. <http://timeoutchicago.com/arts-culture/comedy/53789/shadow-of-a-doubt>. Accessed 9 September 2008.
- . "No holds Bard: ISC frees its group mind with highbrow ideology." *TimeOut Chicago*. May 24-30, 2007. <http://timeoutchicago.com/arts-culture/comedy/49489/no-holds-bard>. Accessed 11 October 2009.
- Helbig, Jack. "Annoyance: Happy Song Fun Time." *Chicago Reader*. August 23, 2007. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/annoyance-happy-song-fun-time/Content?oid=925748>. Accessed 18 April 2011.

- . "Brainwarp: The Baby Eater/Dumbass Leaves the Carnival." *Chicago Reader*. July 15, 1993. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/brainwarp-the-baby-eaterdumbass-leaves-the-carnival/Content?oid=882340>. Accessed 10 April 2011.
- . "Calendar Girls." *Chicago Reader*. February 11, 1999. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/calendar-girls/Content?oid=898388>. Accessed 2 November 2011.
- . "Coed Prison Sluts." *Chicago Reader*. September 22, 1994. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/coed-prison-sluts/Content?oid=885520>. Accessed 20 April 2011.
- . "Dawn Toddy/Dysfunctional Family Night." *Chicago Reader*. November 25, 1993. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/dawn-toddydysfunctional-family-night/Content?oid=883278>. Accessed 12 June 2011.
- . "The Filmdome." *Chicago Reader*. September 3, 1992. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-filmdome/Content?oid=880371>. Accessed 12 June 2011.
- . "The Gods Must Be Lazy, or, There's More to Life Than Death." *Chicago Reader*. March 23, 1989. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-gods-must-be-lazy-or-theres-more-to-life-than-death/Content?oid=873566>. Accessed 17 July 2011.
- . "Jazz Freddy." *Chicago Reader*. April 1, 1993. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/jazz-freddy/Content?oid=881675>. Accessed 15 June 2011.
- . "Jazz Freddy/Every Speck of Dust That Falls to Earth Really Does Make the Whole Planet Heavier, #3." *Chicago Reader*. August 6, 1992. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/jazz-freddyevery-speck-of-dust-that-falls-to-earth-really-does-make-the-whole-planet-heavier-3/Content?oid=880211>. Accessed 12 June 2011.
- . "J.T.S. Brown." *Chicago Reader*. April 22, 1999. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/jts-brown/Content?oid=899008>. Accessed 12 September 2011.
- . "Pinata Full of Bees." *Chicago Reader*. July 6, 1995. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/pinata-full-of-bees/Content?oid=887869>. Accessed 10 July 2011.
- . "Splatter Theatre/Ancient History." *Chicago Reader*. October 8, 1992. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/splatter-theatreancient-history/Content?oid=880626>. Accessed 23 March 2012.

- . "T.J. and Dave." *Chicago Reader*. November 21, 2002.
<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/tj-and-dave/Content?oid=910506>.
 Accessed 9 October 2008.
- . "Upright Citizens Brigade." *Chicago Reader*. April 30, 1998.
<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/upright-citizens-brigade/Content?oid=896217>. Accessed 29 September 2011.
- Hubbard, Ryan. "The Improvised Shakespeare Company." *Chicago Reader*.
 March 31, 2006. <http://m.chicagoreader.com/chicago/the-improvised-shakespeare-company/Content?oid=921684>. Accessed 21 October 2009.
- . "T.J. and Dave." *Chicago Reader*. June 1, 2006.
<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/tj-and-dave/Content?oid=922288>.
 Accessed 9 October 2008.
- Kogan, Rick. "Competing for Laughs, 'Harold' Fills House." *Chicago Tribune*.
 August 16, 1985. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1985-08-16/entertainment/8502230418_1_improvisational-harold-audience. Accessed 8 June 2011.
- Langer, Adam. "Dynamite Fun Nest and ImprovOlympic." *Chicago Reader*. March 17,
 1994. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/dynamite-fun-nest-and-improvolympic/Content?oid=884031>. Accessed 18 July 2011.
- . "Improv Games." *Chicago Reader*. March 3, 1994.
<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/improv-games/Content?oid=883933>.
 Accessed 18 June 2011.
- McElroy, Steven. "'TJ & Dave' and 'Two Men Talking.'" *The New York Times*.
 March 28, 2008.
<http://query.nytimes.com/gst/fullpage.html?res=9D00E0D91630F93BA15750C0A96E9C8B63>. Accessed 12 October 2008.
- Morgan, Scott. "Theatre Review: Sodomites!!! A Musical of Biblical Proportions."
Windy City Times. July 1, 2009.
<http://www.windycitymediagroup.com/gay/lesbian/news/ARTICLE.php?AID=21706>. 19 May 2011.
- Oberlander, Marissa. "Oprah! A Comedy! Live Your Best Laugh." *Chicago Reader*.
 February 17, 2011. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/oprah-a-comedy-live-your-best-laugh/Event?oid=4432449>. Accessed 29 April 2011.

- Reid, Kerry. “‘Underwater’ Drowns, the Bard Inspires Fun Improv.” *Chicago Tribune*. October 13, 2006. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/2006-10-13/entertainment/0610130232_1_jennie-fender-bender-ghosts. Accessed 10 October 2009.
- Scheck, Frank. “One Act, One Hour Wonders.” *New York Post*. February 1, 2007. http://www.nypost.com/p/entertainment/theater/item_mXnDxebYSEHTuMTQU31tyK. Accessed 12 October 2008.
- Sharbaugh, Patrick. “Elizabethantown: Chicago’s Improvised Shakespeare Company hones its Piccolo Fringe act to a fare thee well.” *Charleston City Paper*. May 31, 2006. <http://www.charlestoncitypaper.com/charleston/comedy-zwnj-elizabethantown/Content?oid=1105300>. Accessed 8 October 2009.
- Spinrad, Diana. “Honor Finnegan Versus the Brain of the Galaxy.” *Chicago Reader*. April 16, 1987. <http://m.chicagoreader.com/chicago/honor-finnegan-versus-the-brain-of-the-galaxy/Content?oid=870514>. Accessed 8 June 2011.
- Smith, Sid. “Beyond the Fringe: Annoyance Theatre Unabashedly Lives Up to its Name.” *Chicago Tribune*. April 7, 1991. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1991-04-07/entertainment/9101310783_1_rocky-horror-hypnotic-music-new-theatergoers. Accessed 19 April 2011.
- . “In ‘Piñata,’ Troupe Takes Daring Step, Breaks out of Second City Mold.” *Chicago Tribune*. June 23, 1995. http://articles.chicagotribune.com/1995-06-23/news/9506230221_1_pinata-troupe-revue. Accessed 10 July 2011.
- Stanley, Brian. “Curtains for Drew Peterson? Case is Subject of Chicago Play.” *Chicago Sun-Times*. May 17, 2011. <http://naperville.sun.suntimes.com/news/5412525-418/curtains-for-peterson-will-county-case-is-subject-of-chicago-play.html>. Accessed 17 May 2011.
- Thompson, Zac. “Sodomites!! A Musical of Biblical Proportions.” *Chicago Reader*. June 24, 2009. <http://events.chicagoreader.com/chicago/Event?oid=1090919>. Accessed 19 May 2011.
- Tucker, Ernest. “2nd City Sheds Tradition, Finds its Sting.” *Chicago Sun-Times*. June 23, 1995.
- Vanasco, Jennifer. “Trois and Panties Happy!” *Chicago Reader*. January 10, 2002. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/trois-and-panties-happy/Content?oid=907456>. Accessed October 12, 2008.
- Williams, Albert. “Comic Abandon.” *Chicago Reader*. August 25, 1988. <http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/comic-abandon/Content?oid=872652>. Accessed 18 June 2011.

---. "ImprovOlympic." *Chicago Reader*. December 1986.
<http://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/improvolympic/Content?oid=871520>.
Accessed 7 June 2011.

Wyatt, Nelson. "Improvised Shakespeare adds fresh, comedic turns to Bard's turf."
The Canadian Press. July 21, 2009.
http://www.breitbart.com/article.php?id=cp_e072179A.xml&show_article=1.
Accessed 12 October 2009.

Interviews & Oral Sources

Adsit, Scott. Qtd. in Louis Virtel. "Scott Adsit Talks *30 Rock*, Improvisation, and Alec Baldwin's Big Ideas." *MovieLine.com*. April 29, 2010.
<http://www.movieline.com/2010/04/29/30-rocks-scott-adsit/>. Accessed 28 January 2012.

Aimone, Lauren. Personal Interview. 23 October 2011.

Apatow, Judd. Qtd. in Ivana Redwine. "Judd Apatow Interview." *About.com*.
December 13, 2005.
<http://homevideo.about.com/od/dvdsvideosbydirector/a/JuddApatowIntva.htm>.
Accessed 8 November 2011.

Barrosse, Paul. "The Practical Theatre Company." Presented at the *Chicago Theatre Capital of America: Past. Present. Future*. Conference at Columbia College Chicago. May 21, 2011.

Bowman, Ben. Personal Interview. 1 December 2008.

Bozic, Joe. Personal Interview. 4 December 2004, 20 March 2005.

Bruin, Karisa. Personal Interview. 4 December 2008.

Cackowski, Craig. "JTS Brown description by Craig Cackowski." *ImprovInterviews.com*.
Ed. Josh Fult. November 15, 2006.

Castellvi, Matt. Personal Interview. 23 October 2011.

Churchwell, Rob. Personal Interview. 2 December 2008.

Colbert, Stephen. Qtd. in Charlie Rose. "A Conversation with Comedian Stephen Colbert." *Charlie Rose*. December 8, 2006.
<http://www.charlierose.com/view/interview/93>. Accessed 1 December 2011.

Cusick, Sean. Personal Interview. 29 November 2004.

- Cutri, Gianni. Personal Interview. 4 December 2008.
- Day, Charlie. Qtd. in Laremy Legel. "An Interview with Charlie Day of 'It's Always Sunny in Philadelphia.'" *Film.com/tv*. September 12, 2007. <http://tv.ign.com/articles/819/819634p1.html>. Accessed 9 November 2011.
- DeBruyne, Cal. Personal Interview. 22 November 2008.
- Duncan, Becky. Personal Interview. 22 Nov 2008.
- Flicker, Ted. Personal Interview. 18 May 2011.
- Fotis, Michael. Personal Interview. 20 March 2005, 1 November 2011.
- Habersberger, Keith. Personal Interview. 23 October 2011.
- Halpern, Charna. Personal Interview. 21 May 2011.
- Halpern, Charna. "Charna Halpern – 6/4/07 – Part 2," *Improv Interviews.com*. Ed. Josh Fult. June 4, 2007. <http://www.ImprovInterviews.com/2007/06/Charna-halpern-6407-part-2.html>. Accessed 10 September 2011.
- Hausman, Nick. Personal Interview. 2 December 2008.
- Herzau, Matt. Personal Interview. 23 October 2011.
- Hogan, Scott. Personal Interview. 8 December 2008.
- Hollister, Bob. Personal Interview. 13 November 2004.
- Huack, Ben. Personal Interview. 1 December 2004.
- Guest, Christopher, and Eugene Levy. Qtd. in Peter Canavese. "Christopher Guest & Eugene Levy – For Your Consideration." *GrouchoReviews.com*. November 10, 2006. <http://grouchoreviews.com/interviews/191>. Accessed 14 November 2011.
- Jagodowski, T.J. Personal Interview. 3 February 2012.
- Jagodowski, T.J., and Dave Pasquesi. "Q&A – Post Show Discussion." Performance at the University of Missouri. 3 February 2012.
- . "T.J. Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi, Interview." Ed. Will Litton. *Wag's Revue*. Issue 4. (Winter 2010).
- Johnson, Kim "Howard." Personal Interview. 21 May 2011.

- Killam, Paul. Personal Interview. 19 November 2004.
- Kossar, Natalie. Personal Interview. 1 December 2008.
- Landry, Shaun. Personal Interview. 13 November 2004.
- Leonard, Kelly. "The Second City: Anatomy of an Artist-Driven For-Profit Theatre in Chicago." Presented at the *Chicago Theatre Capital of America: Past, Present, Future*. Conference at Columbia College Chicago. May 21, 2011.
- Libera, Anne. Personal Interview. 25 May 2011.
- Mason, Rachel. Personal Interview. 26 November 2008.
- McEwen, Caleb. Personal Interview. 5 January 2005.
- Messing, Susan. "Level 3 Improv Class." ImprovOlympic. 19 July 2001.
- Mikula, Nick. Personal Interview. 22 Nov 2008.
- Metroff, Kenny. Personal Interview. 3 December 2008.
- Muszynski, Marc. Personal Interview. 23 October 2011.
- Rifai, Adal. Personal Interview. 20 November 2008.
- Roberts, Ian. "Ian Roberts Part 1 – 2/16/07." *Improv Interviews.com*. Ed. Josh Fult. 19 February 2007. http://www.ImprovInterviews.com/2007/02/ian-roberts-part-1-21607_19.html. September 17, 2011.
- Rogen, Seth. Qtd. in Daniel Robert Epstein. "Seth Rogen." *SuicideGirls.com*. December 13, 2005. <http://suicidegirls.com/interviews/1800/Seth-Rogen/>. Accessed 14 November 2011.
- Stack, Brian. "Brian Stack 3/13/06 Part 2," *Improv Interviews.com*. Ed. Josh Fult. November 15, 2006. <http://www.ImprovInterviews.com/2006/11/brian-stack-31306-part-2.html>. Accessed 9 September 2011.
- Stroth, Miles. "Miles Stroth 11/16/06 Part 1," *Improv Interviews.com*. Ed. Josh Fult. November 16, 2006. <http://www.ImprovInterviews.com/2006/11/miles-stroth-111606-part-1.html>. Accessed 9 September 2011.
- Walsh, Matt. "Matt Walsh 7/19/06 Part 2." *Improv Interviews.com*. Ed. Josh Fult. November 15, 2006. <http://www.improvinterviews.com/2006/11/matt-walsh-71906-part-2.html>. Accessed 30 September 2011.

Wohl, Brian. Personal Interview. 23 October 2011.

VITA

Matt Fotis is originally from the Chicagoland area. He was first introduced to improvisation at Monmouth College, where he was a member of Scotch Tape and Anvilhead Theatre. He has been performing and teaching improv for fifteen years, and has studied at iO and The Brave New Workshop. He has performed improv professionally in Chicago and Minneapolis, and served as the head writer and director for several critically acclaimed sketch comedy shows in Chicago. He received his MA in Theatre from Illinois State University, winning the James L. Fisher Outstanding Thesis Award for “Improvisational Theatre: In the Vanguard of the Postmodern.” He is also the founder and artistic director of MU Improv. Along with teaching and performing improv, he conducts improv workshops and seminars for teachers, corporations, and anyone looking to apply the basic principles of improv to their life or career. His articles and essays have appeared in *Theatre Journal*, *Theatre Topics*, and *The Journal of American Drama and Theatre*, among others. Fotis is also a published and award winning playwright. He is happily married and the father of three.