

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

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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. 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.