COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

A STUDY GUIDE FOR STUDENTS
for the improvisational theater style "Comedy of Skills"

COMMEDIA DELL'ARTE

Introduction

Commedia dell'arte translates as "comedy of skills": an improvisational style of theater which began in sixteenth-century Italy and flourished in Europe for 200 years.

Traveling companies of professional actors performed outdoors in public squares, using simple backdrops and props. Each member of the company played a particular stock character – the tricky servant, the greedy old man, the young heroine – wearing masks and costumes that defined the character's personality.

The actors worked from a basic outline, improvising the dialogue and incorporating jokes and physical comedy "bits" as they went. The performers always played the same characters, changing only their situations (for example, in one scenario the greedy old man might be the young heroine's father, keeping her away from her sweetheart; in another, he might be her elderly husband.)

The translation "comedy of skills" refers to the skills that the professional comic actors developed: they each had a repertoire of jokes, funny speeches, comic insults, and physical stunts to draw from in their performances.

The great silent movie comedians Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd drew on the acrobatic physical comedy of *commedia* in their films. The energetic, improvisatory humor of the *commedia* troupes is similar to the work done by contemporaय improv comedy groups such as Second City, the Groundlings, and the Upright Citizens Brigade.

The stock characters of *commedia dell'arte* live on in modern sitcom characters (such as the lovable but dumb husband, the know-it-all next door neighbor, the wisecracking best friend) who deal with changing situations each week.
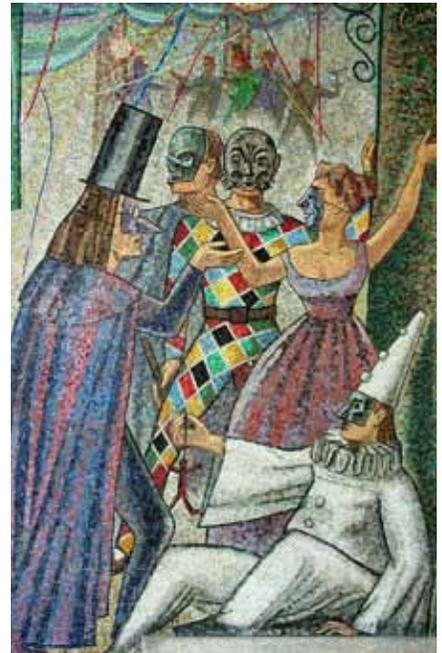
A theater mural featuring *commedia dell'arte* characters

The Rise of *Commedia Dell'Arte*

The exact origins of *commedia dell'arte* are unclear. Most scholars believe it was influenced by ancient Roman and Greek comedy and by the medieval traditions of carnival acrobats and jugglers.

The first recorded *commedia dell'arte* performances took place in Padua, Italy in 1545. At the time, Italian society was swarming with literary, scientific and scholarly academies, which had names like the Illuminati ("the enlightened"), Intrepidi ("the intrepid"), or the Animosi (the animated). Performing troupes gave themselves similar names: the Gelosi ("the zealous"), the Uniti ("the Union"), or the Confidenti ("the Confident").

Troupes were usually run by a single leader, although the leading players also had a say. A company consisted of anywhere from ten to fifteen performers, each with his or her specific character to play. The actors wore elaborate half-masks that exaggerated facial features to convey their character's personality: a mask might have sunken cheeks and a long, pointy nose or chubby jowls with a pig-like snout.

The plots ("scenarii," scenarios) were simple: two young lovers (the *innamorati)* were kept apart by *il vecchi* (the old men – fathers/guardians, elderly suitors, etc.) The *zanni* (servants) helped to outwit the old men and bring the lovers together.

Commedia dell'arte troupes traveled with everything they needed: props, costumes, and simple, portable stages that they could set up in any outdoor public space. Most *commedia dell'arte* was designed to be performed in front of a basic backdrop representing a street lined with houses, or a public square. As troupes became more successful, they acquired wealthy patrons, who would sometimes provide theaters for the company to perform in. Even when they had a permanent home, *commedia* troupes kept the props and scenery to a minimum: the focus was on the comic performances.

By the end of the sixteenth century, popular *commedia* companies were traveling throughout Europe, performing in Spain, France, England, and Germany, as well as Eastern Europe. The boisterous comedy influenced writers and performers all over the continent, including William Shakespeare, his fellow English playwright Ben Jonson, and French dramatist and actor Moliere.

Before the rise of *commedia dell'arte,* women were not generally permitted to perform in the theater. Breaking with tradition, *commedia* troupes welcomed actresses, some of whom became famous for their comedic and improvisational skill. Isabella Andreini (1562–1604), a mem-

Il Gelosi *commedia* troupe

ber of il Gelosi, was probably the most well-known woman performing in *commedia dell'arte:* the character of the young lover "Isabella" was named after her. She and her husband Francesco became the leaders of the Gelosi troupe. However, after Isabella's death in 1604, the troupe disbanded.

Flaminio Scala, who worked with both Il Confidenti and Il Gelosi, published a collection of *commedia* scenarios in 1611 entitled *Il Teatro Delle Favole Representative (The Theater of Enacted Fables). Commedia* transformed throughout the seventeenth century: while the leading performers were still Italian, they found more success outside of Italy. The French kings Louis XIV and Louis XV both enjoyed *commedia dell'arte* (although Louis XIV banished all Italian performers from Paris when they mocked his mistress, the Marquise de Maintenon; they were later invited back by Louis XV).

The popularity of *commedia dell'arte* slowly began to fade; as the most skilled actors retired or died, companies dissolved and audience enthusiasm waned. Playwrights drew on *commedia* characters and situations; Carlo Goldoni's popular 1753 play *Arlecchino servitore di due padroni (The Servant of Two Masters)* was essentially a written-out *commedia dell'arte* scenario. But without actor improvisation, the play was not properly *commedia dell'arte* and left no room for the performers to display their full range of comedic skill.

Venetian aristocrat turned poet/dramatist Count Carlo Gozzi wanted to return to the traditional style of comedy. He gave one of the surviving troupes, the Sacchi company, financial support, writing new material to help them regain their former glory. Gozzi felt that playwrights such as Goldoni (who worked with the Sacchi company, getting ideas for his plays) were destroying *commedia dell'arte,* transforming it into ordinary scripted theater. Gozzi used material from fairy tales and folk stories, tailoring his material to the talents of his acting company (in the way that writers for comedy shows such as "Saturday Night Live" or "MadTV" will write for their specific performers, rather than a playwright who conceives his characters first and then finds actors to fit the roles).

"Harlequin," by Paul Cézenne
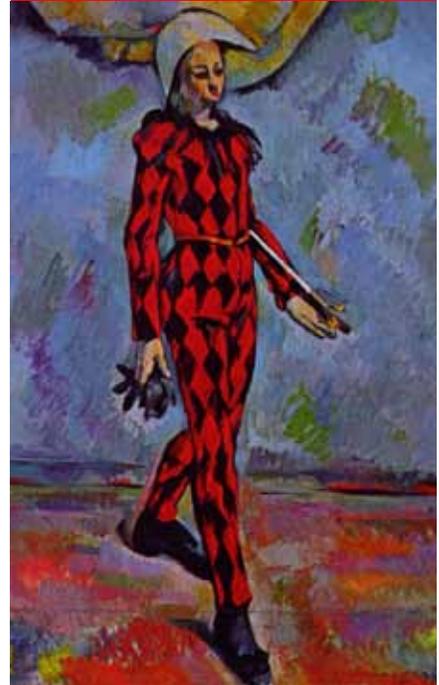
Commedia Dell'Arte: A Timeline

	Year	
First recorded performance by a *commedia* troupe, in Padua, Italy	**1545**	
	1558	Elizabeth I becomes Queen of England
	1564	William Shakespeare born
First record of the Gelosi *commedia* troupe	**1568**	
Gelosi company travels to Paris	**1571**	
Gelosi company plays for Henry III; first record of Confidenti troupe; *commedia* performed in England	**1574**	
First record of Pedrolino troupe; Henry III invites Gelosi to perform in Paris	**1576**	
Commedia troupes perform for royal wedding in Florence	**1589**	Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* performed
	1603	Elizabeth I dies
Gelosi disbanded	**1604**	
	1616	Shakespeare dies
	1642	English Parliament closes theaters
	1653	Charles II restored to the throne of England; theaters reopen
	1666	Great Fire of London
Italian performers thrown out of Paris for mocking Louis XIV's mistress	**1697**	
Louis XIV dies; Italian troupes invited back to Paris	**1714**	
Louis XV gives a theater to an Italian troupe led by Luigi Riccoboni; they perform in French	**1715**	
Antonio Sacchi, known for playing the Arlecchino character, forms his own company	**1742**	
Playwright Carlo Goldoni writes *Arlecchino servitore di due padroni (The Servant of Two Masters)*	**1753**	
	1756	Birth of Mozart
Count Carlo Cozzi tries to revive interest in *commedia dell'arte,* which has faded by this time	**1760**	

The Classic Characters of *Commedia Dell'arte*

Commedia dell'arte characters can be divided into three groups *Il Vecchi* (the old men), *Il Zanni* (the "zany" servants), and *Gli innamorati* (the lovers). *Il Vecchi* try to keep *gli innamorati* apart, while *il zanni* help one side or the other.

Il Vecchi

PANTALONE: His name means something like "Mr. Big Pants." A wealthy, miserly old man, usually lecherous.

Mask: a hooked nose, wrinkled face, bushy eyebrows.

Costume: baggy red pants (our word "pantaloons" comes from pantalone).

IL DOTTORE: "The Doctor," a smug, know-it-all professor, who really knows nothing.

Mask: a round, stubby nose like a pig, chubby cheeks, bushy eyebrows or a mustache.

Costume: A mortarboard (the square topped "graduation" cap) or a broad brimmed hat, black academic robes.

IL CAPITANO: "The Captain," a boasting, bragging macho soldier, who is actually a coward underneath. He usually has a long, absurdly pretentious name ("Generalissimo Glorifico Magnifico Terrifico the Third"). Tells tall tales of his victories in battle but easily frightened – shrieks in a high voice if he is surprised.

Mask: a long nose, wide eyes, sometimes an exaggerated handlebar mustache.

Costume: a fancy, exaggerated military uniform, with a plumed tricorn (three pointed) hat, along with a sword.

Usually Pantalone and Il Dottore worked as a pair (either as friends or sometimes rivals), while Il Capitano was new in town.

Il Zanni

ARLECCHINO: "Harlequin," the nimble, acrobatic, tricky servant. Childlike, sometimes not too bright, but usually wins out in the end.

    Mask: a sly, cat-like face, with a short nose.

    Costume: a tightfitting tunic and pants, with a pattern of multi-colored diamond patches.

BRIGHELLA: His name means something like "Brawler" ("Knuckles" or "Bruiser" – someone ready for a fight). The tough-guy servant, a good liar, always out for himself – Arlecchino's wise-guy older brother. Sometimes appears as a bartender, innkeeper, or shopkeeper.

    Mask: A green half-mask with a greedy expression.

    Costume: loose-fitting servant's uniform or smock. Carries a dagger or slapstick.

COLUMBINA: "Little dove." The wise-cracking maid, usually the smartest character. Flirtatious and playful, she was usually the servant/best-friend/confidante to the leading lady, and sometimes Arlecchino's girlfriend (in fact, she was sometimes known as Arlecchina).

    Mask: sometimes masked (with a small half-mask), sometimes not.

    Costume: a low-cut maid's uniform, carrying a tambourine.

Gli Innamorati

The lovers were known by various names – popular choices were Flavio for the boy, Isabella for the girl (after the actress Isabella Andreini who played this role with the Gelosi troupe). Young, graceful and attractive, they wore fashionable clothes and no masks. They could be slightly vain and not always bright – in love with themselves a bit too much – but they were sincere.
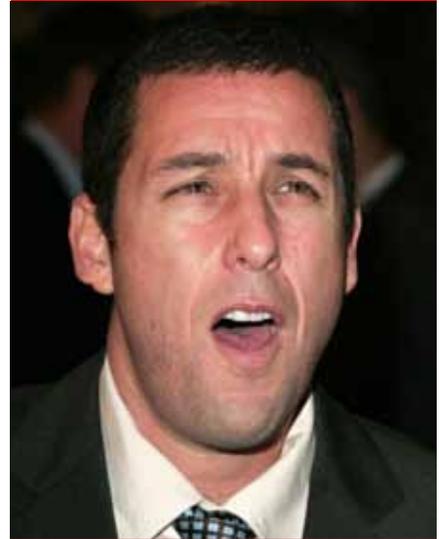
Adam Sandler

Mask of Brighella

Adam Sandler: Brighella

Adam Sandler's brand of angry, over-the-top physical comedy can be traced back to Brighella, the crafty servant who was always looking for a fight (but would sometimes pull out a guitar and sing a song). The title characters in *Billy Madison, Happy Gilmore,* and *The Waterboy* are all modern examples of Brighella.

Discuss: Playing themselves or playing a character?

Think of reality TV shows you've seen, like "Survivor," "Big Brother," or "The Amazing Race." What kinds of character types are there? Do you think the people on the shows are showing who they really are, are playing characters, or both?

Brighella

Columbina

Arlecchino

Il Dottore

Isabella

Pantalone

Lazzi: The Nuts and Bolts of Comedy

Lazzi (singular: *lazzo*) were jokes – a comic "bits" or gags. Each character had his or her own typical *lazzi;* a good *commedia* performer would have dozens of *lazzi* that they could draw on in any situation.

Some examples:

A pair of servants enter carrying a tall ladder, knocking into everyone as they try to set it up.

Mixed-up words. A servant carries a message between the lovers but mangles the words, causing confusion.

Pantalone has a comic "heart attack" reacting to bad news. His servants must revive him.

Il Dottore gives a medical exam to another character, pulling out exaggeratedly large instruments (like a large mallet to whack another character's knee, a painful looking dentist's drill, etc.)

Arlecchino tries unsuccessfully to swat an annoying fly: knocking things over, breaking things, and injuring himself in the process.

Il Capitano threatens to beat someone up but has a long list of excuses why he can't actually do it right now.

Arlecchino is so hungry he starts to eat his own shoes.

Pantalone keeps scooting close to Columbina, who manages to slip out of his grasp until he finally falls on his face.

Slapstick Comedy

A "slap stick" was made of two long thin flat pieces of wood fastened together at one end. When one character struck another with the slap-stick, the two pieces would make a loud "thwack" sound (so the performers seemed to be striking each other much harder than they really were).

Try It Yourself: A Sneeze!

Try creating your own *lazzo* – come up with a funny sneeze. Think about these three parts of the lazzo:

The buildup: Does it start with an itchy nose? Flaring nostrils? Is the character trying to stifle the sneeze? Is it a slow buildup, or does it happen quickly?

The sneeze: Is it loud? Surprisingly quiet? Explosive? Messy? Does it knock you over?

The aftermath: Are you embarrassed? Proud? Relieved? Covered with goo?

A slap stick

Chaplin, Keaton, and Lloyd: The Silent Film Comedians

The spirit of *commedia dell'arte* lived on in silent films. Since there was no dialogue, the comedy had to be visual. The most successful silent film comedians – Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, and Harold Lloyd – created their own recognizable comedic characters, which they played in every film. Each had a distinctive look, with a particular style of physical comedy, just like the classic *commedia dell'arte* characters.

Charlie Chaplin (1889–1977)

His character was known as the "Little Tramp": he wore baggy pants, oversized shoes, a bowler hat, a toothbrush mustache, and carried a bamboo cane. Outside the United States, the character was known as "Charlot" – a clear descendent of Arlecchino.

Chaplin directed his own films. He did not write out a script; instead, he came up with the basic idea for a scene ("Charlie comes into a store") and would improvise hundreds of variations until he felt it was right. He insisted that his casts work together to polish their improvisation skills, just like a classic *commedia* troupe.

Buster Keaton (1885–1966)

Keaton got the nickname "Buster" when he fell down a flight of stairs as a child but was unhurt. His parents made use of his natural acrobatic skill in their vaudeville act, tossing him around or knocking him over.

Unlike Charlie Chaplin, whose "Tramp" character was emotionally expressive, Buster Keaton was always completely deadpan (in Spanish, he was called *Cara de palo* – "Wooden Face"). His lack of reaction to extraordinary events added to the comedy.

The classic Keaton "gag" took place in *Steamboat Bill, Jr.:* He stands in front of a house frame, which falls over, apparently about to crush him. Luckily he's standing in exactly the right spot – the opening for the attic window passes over him and he is unhurt. He keeps his poker face and shows no reaction.

In his early films, he teamed up with Roscoe "Fatty" Arbuckle. The contrast of Arbuckle's big-and-clumsy character with Keaton's acrobatic deadpan was a classic "Brighella and Arlecchino" combination.

Charlie Chaplin

Buster Keaton

Harold Lloyd (1893–1971)

At first Harold Lloyd tried imitating Charlie Chaplin's "tramp" persona, playing a character named "Lonesome Luke." Realizing he needed to find his own style, he developed "The Glasses Character" (sometimes known as "Harold"). "Harold" was a earnest go-getter who wore horn-rimmed glasses and usually a suit. He was an "everyman" who always found himself in precarious situations – dangling from a skyscraper.

Harold Lloyd always performed his own stunts. Ironically, he escaped injury doing his dangerous stunts, but lost a thumb and finger during a photo shoot when a prop bomb exploded in his hand.

Harold Lloyd

Try It Yourself!

A performer doesn't need words to communicate a character's personality: they tell an audience who they are just by how they stand and move.

Try walking across the room like someone who is . . .

– bossy
– mopey
– arrogant
– very, very shy
– incredibly happy
– very clumsy
– exhausted

Classics of the Silent Film Era

Harold Lloyd: *Safety Last!* **(1923)**

Harold Lloyd plays "The Boy," who goes to his job at a store in the city determined to become a success so his sweetheart, "The Girl," will be impressed. He sees his chance when the store manager offers a $1,000 prize to anyone who can bring the store the most publicity. "The Boy" gets his friend to agree to climb the building but ends up having to do it himself. On the way up, he goes through a series of *lazzi:* a window swings out and almost knocks him off the building; a mouse crawls up his trouser leg; a kid tosses peanuts on him. Eventually he finds himself clinging precariously from the hands of a clock at the top of the building: one of the most famous shots in silent film.

Buster Keaton: *Sherlock, Jr.* **(1924)**

Buster Keaton plays a film projectionist who wants to be a detective. He tries to impress a girl by bringing her a box of candy, but his rival – "The Sheik," an Il Capitano type – brings her a bigger box of candy. The sheik has stolen a pocket watch belonging to the girl's father to pay for the candy and blames it on the projectionist, who is tossed out of the house.

Back in the movie theater, the projectionist falls asleep; his dream self steps through the theater screen and becomes part of the movie. In the film, he is "Sherlock, Jr." solving a mystery of stolen pearls, outwitting his rival, engaging in daring stunts, and winning the love of the girl.

When he wakes up from his dream, he finds the girl he loves there in the projection booth with him. She has solved the mystery of the pocket watch herself; they kiss.

Charlie Chaplin: *Modern Times* **(1936)**

This was Charlie Chaplin's last appearance as his character "The Little Tramp." He decided that, although movies now had synchronized sound, "The Tramp" should not speak. The film is mostly silent, with mechanical sound effects and a few mechanized voices (coming from loudspeakers, etc.).

"The Tramp" is an assembly-line worker in a huge automated factory. Through an escalating chain of mishaps, he loses his job and eventually lands in jail. He makes his way through a series of jobs – dockworker, mechanic, waiter – each time getting fired and ending up in jail. Mean-
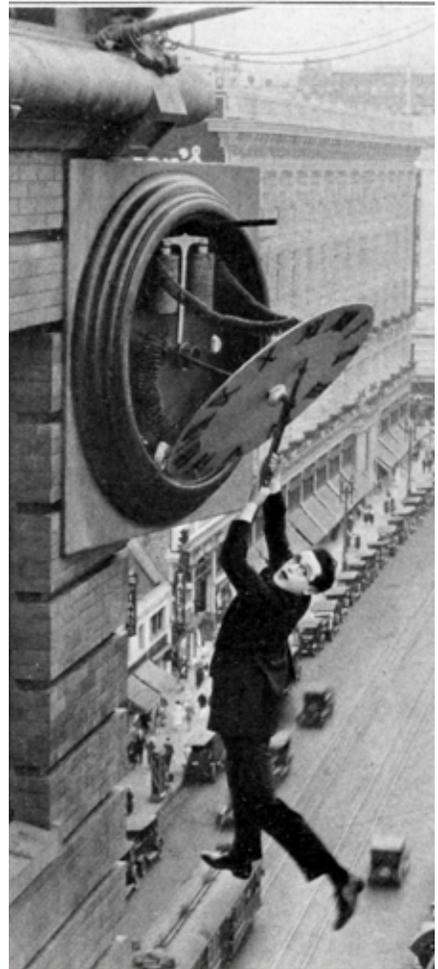
Safety Last!

Sherlock, Jr.

while, his orphaned street-urchin sweetheart, "The Gamin," struggles to steal food for her brothers and sisters. In the end, after they've both lost their jobs yet again, the girl despairs. "The Tramp" manages to cheer her up, and together they walk down a dusty country road toward their future together.

In *Modern Times,* "The Tramp" encounters some classic *lazzi:* when he works on an assembly line, whenever anything distracts him from the unstoppable conveyor belt, he causes chaos for everyone else further down the line. (This "conveyor belt" *lazzo* was later used in the classic "I Love Lucy" episode set in a candy factory.)

When "The Tramp" is working as a waiter, he gets confused between the swinging "In" and "Out" doors of the restaurant kitchen, crashing into his coworkers and again causing chaos.

The Resurgence of Improvised Comedy

Second City

In the 1950s, actor/producer David Shepherd became interested in reviving the traditions of *commedia dell'arte.* He founded the Compass Players in 1955, asking noted director Paul Sills to develop the group's improvisational skills. Sills was the son of Viola Spolin, who had developed a collection of theater improvisation exercises during her time working with underprivileged children and adults as a drama instructor in the late 1930s. Her theater games, which emphasize the development of the creative imagination, are still used in actor training programs all over the world.

The Compass Players performed in a small theater attached to a bar. When the bartender asked the group to make the show longer so he could sell more drinks, the cast asked for suggestions from the audience to improvise from. Working from audience suggestions had never been done before; the audience was amazed to see how the actors created scenes on the spot.

The group evolved into the Second City Company (named after an article in the magazine *The New Yorker,* which dubbed Chicago the "Second City" after New York). As the group grew, they began performing in other cities and offering classes and workshops in comedic improvisation.

When producer Lorne Michaels launched his new show "Saturday Night Live" in 1975, the original cast included several Second City alumni: Dan Ackroyd, John Belushi, and Gilda Radner (joined by Bill Murray in the show's second season).

Second City alumni include Steve Carell, Tina Fey, and Amy Poehler.

The Committee/The Groundlings

In 1963, Alan and Jessica Myerson, two former Second City company members, founded their own improv troupe in San Francisco: The Committee. They were joined by fellow Second City member, director Del Close, who had been one of the original members of the Compass Players. The Committee was known for its political comedy; they were present at many protests and political rallies throughout the 1960s.

Committee member Gary Austin formed a troupe of his own, The Groundlings, in Los Angeles in 1974. He returned to basing the work on Viola Spolin's theater games. ("Groundlings" were the theatergoers of Shakespeare's time who paid a low admission price to crowd into the open space closest to the stage. They were usually the most vocal,
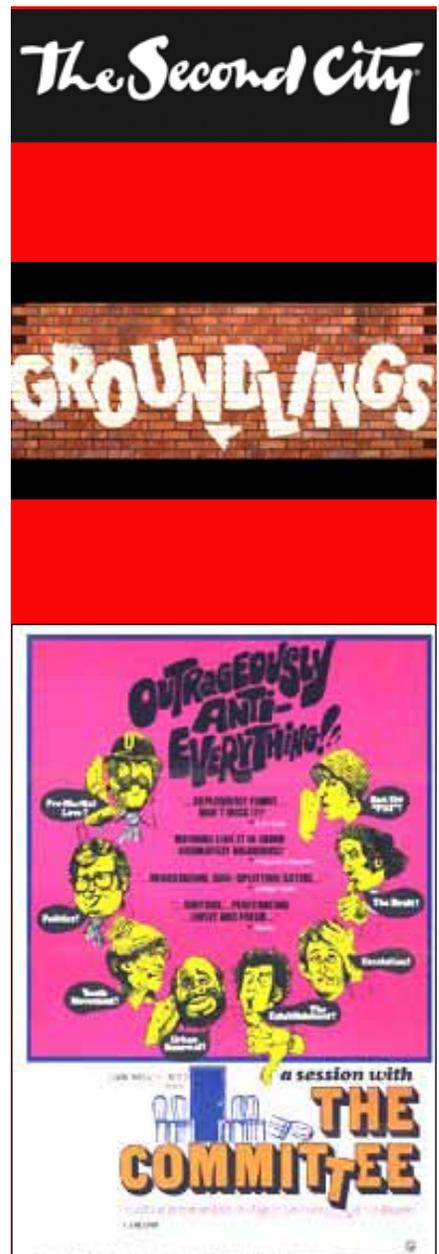
cheering or booing the actors; they loved the raucous comic elements of Shakespeare's plays).

Notable alumni of The Groundlings include Conan O'Brien, Mike Myers, and Lisa Kudrow.

The Upright Citizens Brigade

UCB founders Amy Poehler, Matt Besser, Matt Walsh, and Ian Roberts met in Chicago in the early 1990s when they trained under Del Close. In 1996, they relocated to New York, forming the Upright Citizens Brigade in 1998. The group specialized in an improvisation style known as "The Harold," a form developed by Del Close during his time working with The Committee in San Francisco.

"The Harold" was a method of organizing a thirty- to forty-minute improvisation. It was similar to the scenarios used by *commedia dell'arte* troupes, although it was less plot-oriented and more structural.

Sometimes called "3x3," the Harold is made up of the following sections:

- Taking a broad suggestion from the audience for the theme, the opening is an improvised scene or theater game using the entire company

- Three unrelated two-person scenes (A, B, and C) which each build off the opening in some way (similar location, similar theme, similar characters, etc.)

- Another group theater game for the whole company

- A return of the two-person scenes (A, B, and C), exploring the characters and plots further

- One last group game

- A final return to the two-person scenes, combining characters, details and themes from everything that has gone before

Upright Citizens Brigade alumni include Will Ferrell, Seth Rogen, Seth Myers, and Sarah Silverman.

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Try It Yourself: Two-Person, Two-Minute Improv

Create your own two person improv scene. Begin by choosing characters, environment and conflict.

Characters

Each person should start with a "character type." Remember that each of the *commedia* characters had a basic trait: Pantalone = being greedy, Il Dottore = being a "know it all," Il Capitano = bragging, Arlecchino = tricky, Columbina = clever, etc. What's your character's basic trait? The more exaggerated it is, the funnier it is.

What's the relationship between your two characters? Are they

- complete strangers
- friends
- enemies or "frenemies"
- enemies but only one recognizes the other
- boss and employee
- lifeguard and beachgoer
- store clerk and customer
- doctor and patient
- professor and student
- waiter and food critic
- ticket agent and passenger

Environment

Choose a location where people might encounter each other. For instance:

- Library
- Grocery store
- Mall
- Park or playground
- Beach
- Restaurant

Conflict

The conflict in a scene has two elements – what does a character want, and what is getting in the way? Usually the thing that's getting in the way is something physical.

One character wants or needs . . .	But he or she . . .
. . . to impress the other	. . . has unstoppable hiccups
. . . to convince the other to lend them some money	. . . keeps tripping over things
. . . a job from the other	. . . slips and falls
. . . to buy something from the other	. . . accidentally used itching powder instead of sunscreen or cologne
. . . to find out a secret from the other	. . . gets so nervous they just make sounds instead of talking
. . . a good grade or a promotion from the other	. . . can't stop exaggerating
. . . wants the food the other character has	. . . laughs at the wrong time
	. . . isn't wearing their glasses and can't see
	. . . keeps calling the other character by the wrong name, or thinks they are someone else

One of the major rules of improv is to always "say yes" – play along with whatever your partner is doing. Saying "no" or opposing what your scene partner is trying to do will stop the scene from progressing. The characters can disagree, but the actors are working together to create the scene.

For example:

"Saying no"

>   FOOD CRITIC: Waiter! Is this a grasshopper hiding in my salad?

>   WAITER: No it isn't.

(Now the person playing the food critic has to come up with another idea, which stops the momentum of the scene.)

"Saying yes"

>   FOOD CRITIC: Waiter! Is this a grasshopper hiding in my salad?

>   WAITER: Yes . . . but he's really very shy, and you're scaring him.

"Saying yes" (in a different way)

>   FOOD CRITIC: Waiter! Is this a grasshopper hiding in my salad?

>   WAITER: No it isn't . . . it's a slug. You didn't say "no slugs," that's a dollar extra.

When you have your characters, location and conflict chosen, start your scene. Set a timer for two minutes, and see what happens.

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