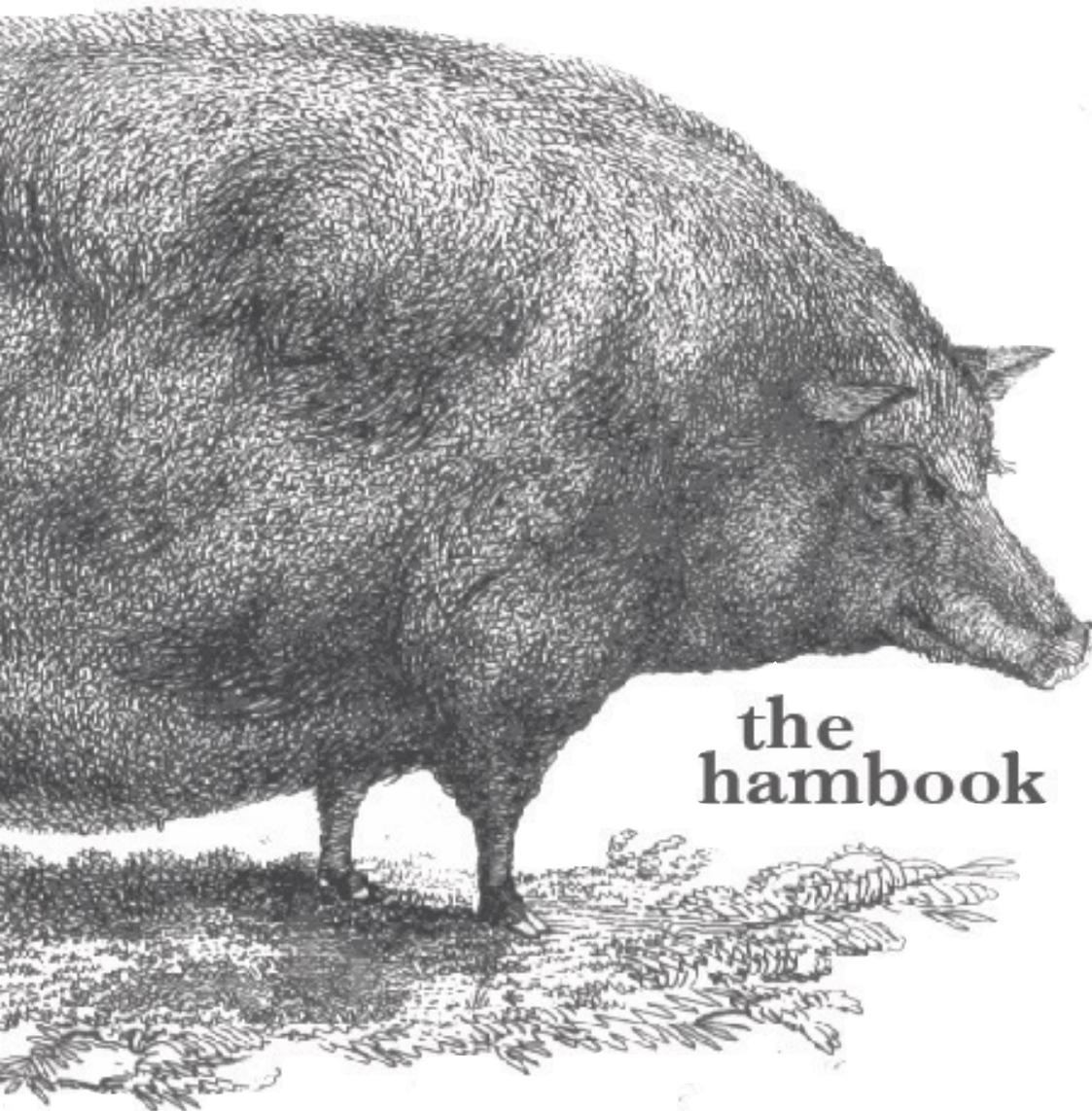


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# The Hambook

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Spring 2016



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*Cover Design by Natalie Peebles*

*Photographs on page 21, 28 & 40 by Joseph Gallagher*

*Photograph on page 11 by Evan Hanover*

# FOREWARD

LEE BENZAQUIN

**I**N December of 2015, I found myself sitting at the CIC Theater bar, engaged in a passionate discussion with my good friend and talented improviser Derek Shoemaker. The specifics of what we were whispering about are lost on me now, but generally we were discussing the theory of improvisation. It struck me that something about our conversation was strange; not the subject, as anyone who has ever spoken to Derek should not be surprised to find themselves knee-deep in theory. No, what was so odd about us was how we were talking—we were whispering. We were in a theater lobby, surrounded by fantastic improvisers, and I was too afraid to raise my voice for fear of... what? I couldn't tell.

Soon after it hit me that all of my passionate discussions about this art form have been held either in private, or kept just above a murmur in rooms filled with experts for fear of... again, what the hell have I been afraid of? Judgement? Being wrong? Talking the fun away? It is my belief that all good improvisers have their own personal philosophies and yet they are afraid to speak them out loud for an assortment of unfounded reasons. It is also my belief that if we want this art form to be taken seriously, the very first thing we *must* do is talk about it out loud.

That brings us to *The Hambook*. However you may be reading this— on a phone, a tablet, a computer, or paper— you are beginning a conversation. This magazine sets out to collect thoughts about the art form itself, along with its community and culture. It will always be free, and the hope is that it will continue on for as long as it can.

We begin our journey with four wonderful essays by four gifted and driven voices in the Chicago improv community. **Thomas Kelly** gives us a peek not only into his beautiful mind, but also his series of improv experiments that he conducted in the Summer of 2015. **Emma Pope** shares the lessons she learned on the course to becoming the improviser she is today. **Julia Weiss** tackles the subject of sexism in the comedy community with an eloquent fervor like I've never seen before. And **Harrison George** details his time spent in Chicago and why he chose to move away. I would be remiss if I did not mention how humbled I am to have these fine authors and improvisers contributing to this project.

Here it is; the first issue of *The Hambook*. If I may make a suggestion before we begin; read it slowly. Put the magazine down after each essay. Think about it, and then go out and talk with someone.

Make sure you talk loudly.

*April 2016*

# CAILLOU, CULTURE AND COMEDY

**JULIA WEISS**

**SO** you know that children's cartoon, Caillou? With the obnoxious little boy with the terrible voice and the stupid values? It's based on a series of French books - go figure - by H el ene Desputeaux. When I was a nanny, Caillou was an unfortunate part of my daily reality. I hated him with a passion most would reserve for actual humans who've hurt them or a loved one - real life people with skin and lungs, not ones dreamed up by a French woman. But despite being strokes of pen on paper, Caillou was my deepest abhorrence. Unable to contain my loathing, I did what any rational, American 20-something would do and I took to Twitter. But then I stopped myself. What if this fictional little prick had a terminal illness. You see, Caillou has no hair and I didn't want to make fun of a kid with cancer - even a made up kid. So I googled - "Does Caillou have cancer?"

Turns out this is a question a lot of people have asked.

The first question on Chouette Publishing's Caillou FAQ page was the very one I had. "Why is Caillou bald?" I thought I'd be relieved to learn that this fake kid wasn't suffering from a terrible

disease. But I wasn't. Because what I found was a little piece of casual white male supremacy.

“Caillou stands for all children. He doesn't have curly blond hair, a carrot-top, brown hair, glasses, or ethnic features, because he represents all children. We wanted to make Caillou universal so every child could identify with him. And they do! Caillou's baldness may make him different, but we hope it's helping children understand that being different isn't just okay, it's normal.”<sup>1</sup>

Caillou represents all children, so they chose to make him a white boy. That is our everychild. A white male.

Chouette has since changed their answer - stating that the series started with Caillou as a baby and they didn't want to confuse kids by adding hair. (They kept the part about helping children understand that it's okay to be different. So like good for them).

Of course Chouette didn't manifest this mentality. They didn't invent white male supremacy. They surely thought they were saying something really lovely by telling the world that a little able bodied white boy is the blank human canvas, and anything else would be too Other to be relatable. Chouette and Caillou merely express the values of the world in which they exist.

So why does this matter? I mean, we don't have to watch the show (and honestly you shouldn't - it's so, so bad.) It matters because this stuff doesn't exist in a vacuum. Nothing does. The reason H el ene Desputeaux made Caillou male is the same reason we

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<sup>1</sup> [Editor's Note] As of April 15, 2016, this quote could be found on Choquette Publishing's website, on the "Your Questions" page under the heading, "Why is Caillou Bald?" Choquette Publishing, n.d.

call women female improvisers instead of just improvisers. We've got real gender problem.

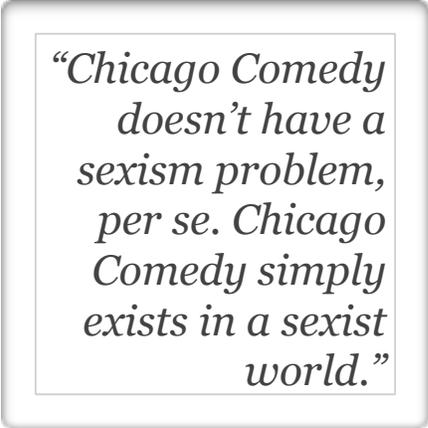
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In January, iO's Charna Halpern posted on Facebook to defend herself from allegations about an alleged phone conversation with a victim of harassment. In addition to her defense, she made several tone deaf and problematic statements about women, lying and her community. Several fed up members of the scene, many of whom don't work directly for Charna anymore, took to her page to educate her. It was a tense conversation, Charna was defensive and caught off guard - she really hadn't realized that there was anything wrong with what she said or with her theatre. That of course, is the problem.

Foot firmly in mouth, Charna had inadvertently sparked much needed conversation and revelation within the comedy community. Harassment policies were created, revised, reposted by theatres across town.

Many theatre and training center owners reached out to their communities to express their commitment to fighting some really ugly, destructive problems. This is great. Harassment, abuse of power, under-representation, intimidation are bad and it's valuable that we're taking action against them. But they're ultimately not the problem.

Sexism is what lays the foundation for bigger issues like the ones we've been navigating in Chicago comedy this year. But Chicago



*“Chicago Comedy doesn’t have a sexism problem, per se. Chicago Comedy simply exists in a sexist world.”*

Comedy doesn't have a sexism problem, per se. Chicago Comedy simply exists in a sexist world. And we can't just write up a policy to undo our programming.

When we shrug our shoulders and say, "It's a man's world," what we're really talking about is androcentrism. Peter Hegarty and Carmen Buechel, who studied androcentrism in 39 years of APA journals, define it as thinking which assumes "maleness to be normative and attributes gender differences to females" (hey, remember Caillou?).<sup>2</sup>

Androcentrism manifests on the most basic and pernicious level in our language. We use words like "he," "him," "his," "man," and "men" to cover either males or the collective of all people. For example:

"After an improviser learns to trust and follow his own inner voice, he begins to do the same with his fellow players' inner voices. Once he puts his own ego out of the way, he stops judging the ideas of others – instead, he considers them brilliant, and eagerly follows them!"<sup>3</sup>

Meanwhile we use "she," "her", "hers," "woman," and "women" to refer only to females. Limiting the use of female gendered words while allowing male gendered words broader use positions men above women.

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<sup>2</sup> Hegarty, Peter, and Carmen Beeches. "Review of General Psychology." *Review of General Psychology* 10.4 (2006): 377-89. Print.

<sup>3</sup> Halpern, Charna, Del Close, and Kim Johnson. *Truth in Comedy*. Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether Pub., 1994. Print.

Let's take another look at the passage above, but this time with female pronouns.

“After an improviser learns to trust and follow her own inner voice, she begins to do the same with her fellow players’ inner voices. Once she puts her own ego out of the way, she stops judging the ideas of others – instead, she considers them brilliant, and eagerly follows them!”

Note how it is no longer generic advice for any improviser. The use of female gendered pronouns has limited the audience. “He” has the power to define “she,” but “she” can never define “him.” “She” is other, different. “He” simply is.

Because the languages we speak have a strong impact on perception and cognition<sup>4</sup>, it follows that androcentric languages imbed<sup>5</sup> sexism<sup>6</sup> into the speaker’s worldview.

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## So what does that world look like?

The Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film found that in 2015, women comprised only 22% of protagonists and 33% of speaking roles in the top 100 domestic films.<sup>7</sup> Women

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<sup>4</sup> Boroditsky, Lera. "How Language Shapes Thought." *Scientific American Feb. 2011: n. pag.* Web.

<sup>5</sup> Gershaw, David A., Ph.D. "Our Androcentric Language." *A Line on Life. N.p., 15 June 1997.* Web. 21 Apr. 2016.

<sup>6</sup> Wesley, Alexis. "How Androcentricism Harms Women." *The Radical Notion. N.p., 10 Feb. 2015.* Web. 21 Apr. 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Lauzen, Martha. "Research." *Center for the Study of Women in Television and Film: SDSU. San Diego State University; 2016.* Web. 21 Apr. 2016.

make up only about a quarter of our elected officials at the state and federal levels.<sup>8</sup> On a cultural level we tend to devalue women's sports, even when our national women's soccer team consistently outperforms our men's. We tend to define women through their relationships to men, while allowing men identities of their own. A man is a Mr. regardless of marital status, but a woman is miss until she's a Mrs. Women are generally expected to take, and give their children, men's last names. Traits defined as feminine are valued below those defined as masculine.<sup>9</sup> We tend to trust men and distrust women. From infancy, we're are bombarded with messages of binary gender performance, from clothing to toys to parenting styles. Girls are encouraged to be passive, to be pretty, to be experienced by others. Boys are encouraged to be active, to be strong, to do the experiencing.

So there's an angle. An idea of where we are and of how we've gotten there. So how has culturally ingrained sexism influenced our community and comedy at large?

*"Female dominated shows have to be significantly better than male dominated shows to be considered as good."*

Because humor is considered a masculine trait<sup>10</sup>, we assume men's proficiency in comedy. We simultaneously assume

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<sup>8</sup> Jones, Heather, and Charotte Alter. "This Graphic Shows Why We Still Need Women's Equality Day." *Time*. Time, 26 Aug. 2015. Web. 21 Apr. 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Thériault, Anne. "We Need To Stop Devaluing Femininity." *Ravishly*. N.p., 21 Dec. 2015. Web. 21 Apr. 2016.

<sup>10</sup> [Editor's Note] Julia cites [this article](#) from the journal *Television*, written by Catherine Lyon.

women's deficiency. A mediocre man has an easier time making a team than a decent woman. Female dominated shows have to be significantly better than male dominated shows to be considered just as good. (The same is true for POC, LGBTQ people, and anyone else who doesn't meet the Caillou standard of humanity). Samantha Bee's new late night show is incredibly smart and funny, Jessica Williams is consistently the best part of The Daily Show, SNL's women are outperforming the men weekly - and yet - we're still inundated with articles, forums, and discussions about WHY women aren't as funny as men. We aren't even given the respect of "whether or not."



I was privy to a conversation among men from a prominent Harold team several years back. They were angrily discussing a woman on their team. "She pulls so much focus." "She plays for laughs too much." "She's a selfish player." These were dudes who cycled through sure-fire homoerotic gags every show knowing they'd hit. But this woman had the audacity to be FUNNY while they were being funny, and sometimes she was FUNNIER than they were. They compared her to another woman on the team, the one they liked to play with, the one who tended to be a more passive support player. Passive support players are valuable of course, but when we demand that women play that way and punish them for being active - that's our sexism showing.

This bias is often echoed in team selection and performer promotion. A man who is hilarious and goes for the joke may find himself on numerous teams within a theatre; a woman who is the very same may not even make it onto one.

As a performer, I've had coaches and teachers fail to see and note instances of sexism in rehearsals, shows and classes. Conversely, as a coach, I've had male performers talk and laugh through note sessions and actively refuse to participate in exercises I would bring into rehearsal.

We've all seen or experienced men shouting over women, negating women's choices, using derogatory language on stage. It's not surprising. People who don't want to have the more challenging conversation will dismiss that as "bad comedy" instead of unchecked sexism.

And that may seem small, but it's what makes us say - he's bad to women, but he's a good friend. He's kinda douchey, but he's funny. Our androcentrism, having positioned men as inherently more valuable humans than women, has kept us from holding these guys accountable for their actions.

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So let's go back to #Charnagate.

The stage has been set for something like this for a long time. We've been evolving beyond the limitations of language, and challenging the imbalances we've inherited from a forever of bullshit. This feminist fire has been burning in Chicago for a few

years now. And now, thanks to a dumb comment by a powerful woman, the community has been engulfed.

Women suddenly felt empowered to open up about experiences they'd kept secret, frustrations they'd only spoken about amongst themselves. We saw conversations once reserved for kitchen corners at house parties leap into the spotlight. Men were shutting up and listening and evaluating their behavior. Of course there were perhaps too many men who feared a "witch hunt," who searched their histories for any misstep an angry woman might use against them. There were a lot of "see? Not me!" white knight posts from well intentioned men who perhaps wanted to distance themselves from The Bad Guys. And The Bad Guys, for the most part, were noticeably silent. But overwhelmingly, the reaction was productive and lead to long overdue action in the community.

*"We need to break off our personal and professional relationships with our community's known predators."*

We've seen men and women take responsibility for their own prejudices and problems and start to grow and change. Men have been examining their own behavior, women have been speaking up. What a great start.

When news broke about Trailer Park Boys actor Mike Smith's arrest after assaulting a woman, co-star Lucy DeCoutere quit the show.<sup>11</sup> She won't work with a bad dude. Right now, that's what

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<sup>11</sup> Webber, Stephanie. "*Lucy DeCoutere Quits 'Trailer Park Boys' After Costar Mike Smith's Arrest: If 'Somebody Is Abusive, I Cut Them Out of My Life'*" *Us Weekly*. N.p., 4 Apr. 2016. Web. 21 Apr. 2016.

we as a community need to do. We need to break off our personal and professional relationships with our community's known predators, regardless of their talent. We need to hold people accountable for their behavior and comments on and off stage. That's the only way they'll grow and change. We need to stop compromising our values, our good hearts and our commitment to equality. We need to hold ourselves responsible for what this community and ultimately what this industry can be, instead of playing into the same old bullshit.

We're told not to be too sensitive. Not to sweat the small stuff. To have a thicker skin. But it's saying "he" when you mean "they" that perpetuates male superiority. And it's demanding that women be passive and pretty to be attractive to men that quiets us up and makes us stop being goofy when we're kids. And it's casual sexism that fosters the environment that protects and harbors predators, abusers, and harassers. Anton Chekhov put some very valuable words into a woman's mouth in his play *Uncle Vanya*. "The world won't be destroyed by war or fire, but by the petty little violences we inflict upon each other every day."<sup>12</sup> To paraphrase - Even I, a Russian man in 1896, can recognize that microaggressions are real. And they matter. And they'll be our undoing.

So let's stop. Let's change. It'll make for better comedy. And besides— this shit gave birth to *Caillou*. And isn't that reason enough to undo it?

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<sup>12</sup> Chekhov, Anton Pavlovich. *Uncle Vanya*. Trans. Curt Columbus. Chicago: I.R. Dee, 2002. Print.

# NOTES FROM THE LAB

THOMAS KELLY

**IN** October, I started a process I'm calling "Improv Lab." I host sessions where I and some friends can explore ideas about improv / comedy / performance. Can improv do more? Can we function better? Are there practices that are not helping us? I wanted and want to look at the way we operate on all levels and see if those operations are the best or healthy. Are things the way they are out of time-tested work or complacency? I've completed one round in a process that I would like to take years, so I don't really have concrete answers or stalwart results to report, but I've got a lot that I'm thinking about. I have a lot of questions, and I want to multiply those questions into more questions. I want to spend years messing around with ideas / thoughts / concepts without any pressures of deadlines or performance dates to show something. I love rehearsing. I love being in a room with people asking questions, exploring ideas, playing around and finding what works, and the surprises, joys, confusion, and discomfort that can happen there. Here's a little peak into how it went:

## Process

In each session, I would start with a discussion. We would talk about ourselves a little in a get-to-know-you way, and then I

would ask questions about performance or improv. Here are some examples:

What attracted you to improv?

How do you approach a scene?

Why do we have group scenes/work? Should we have them?

What improv structures or forms do you enjoy?

What does an audience want from an improv show?

What do you do when “a show goes off the rails”?

What do you need in order to take a risk on stage or to do something the audience might not want or understand?

As the conversations unfolded and evolved, there was a feeling of excitement which I did not expect, like something being expressed that hadn't been expressed in a while or maybe at all. I had two or three years when I thought about improv a lot. Anything was possible with it. I was inspired by it and what I could do in/with it. Slowly, I didn't think about it as much. I started doing it more; joining teams, rehearsing, having shows, and taking more classes. I would use my free time to think of anything other than improv and that habit stuck for a while and I slowly began to wonder again until it got so big that I needed to do something about it. I felt something similar to that in these talks that something was being unearthed. Opinions being shared for the first time in a while about the things they enjoyed or hated.

One thing that struck me about these conversations was the amount of phrasing and terminology that I remembered from classes and books ten years ago. Hearing them again, I didn't know if they meant what I thought they did, or if they meant any-

thing at all. Our history is built by people in the classroom refining their points of view and sometimes summing them up into short, memorable idioms. Making things up on stage is a tricky business and can seem very scary, so we welcome these tools that can help us navigate the blizzard. We can repeat these witty little catchphrases in our head as we try to improvise. It amazes me though how many of these there are floating around:

*Yes, And*

*Specificity Kills Ambiguity*

*Follow the Fear*

*Don't Think*

*Jump off the Cliff*

*Be More Grounded*

*Treat Each Other as if We are Geniuses*

*Not the First But the Third Idea*

*You Got to Know the Rules to Break Them*

Is there any other art form that has so many catchy defining phrases? I don't think so, and it's because people won't pay much for an improv show but they will pay a lot for classes. Thus, classes need to be a snappy and satisfying product. Ultimately, I think these idioms can be as hurtful as they are helpful. I wonder if they turn into judgmental rocks for us to throw ourselves on, rather than signposts that might help us get from point A to point B. I also wonder that once you say, 'We don't care if it works for the audience – it has to work for us,' to a group of 15 people if you don't have 15 different interpretations of whatever the hell that means. So when we repeat them is it what the person who said it first meant or what the teacher meant it in class or what it means to us?

After the discussion, we would do some exercises/experiments. I would journal about the things I was thinking about that day, and as I did that, what I wanted to explore or test would begin to take shape. Through this process, I would find questions to ask or exercises for that day, remembering or discovering improv ideas that I thought could be more used or that I didn't really know the point of. I would then come up with a process for how the time would go. Sometimes the plan would be one I had thought up

*"I feel like we have something really great on our hands that we are undervaluing."*

days or months in advance, and sometimes I thought of it on the walk over. In session, sometimes my thesis or intention would be stated beforehand and sometimes not. We would usually end the session talking about what had happened:

what worked, what was interesting, where people felt lost or confused. I really like the idea of a laboratory in regards to the other players I asked to join me. That I am not any higher than my peers but we are all scientists looking at a subject we know well and trying to find something of use. I'm sure the process will change as I begin to go deeper on ideas, but who knows.

## Philosophy: The Skateboard

What got the Improv Lab idea rolling for me came from watching a lot of skateboarding documentaries. When the skateboard first came out, it was seen as an extension of the surfboard. If spending time in the water wasn't an option that day, you could tool around on your skateboard in a similar way to how you would on the waves. Skateboard competitions were largely a

place to recreate the surf tricks on flat surfaces, but then a bunch of youths came along and changed the way we think about skateboarding. A drought made it too expensive for people to fill their pools, and one day someone took a skateboard in there and a whole new world opened up. They began to exploit the virtues of the board and different environments where it would thrive in ways no one had intended or imagined. A fruitful period followed where every aspect of the board was tested for innovation, and the two forms began to drift apart and develop their own separate personalities.

This is something I've been wondering about in relation to improv, where improv is the skateboard and traditional theater is the surfboard. My understanding of early improv was that it was more of a showcase for presenting plays without rehearsal or spontaneous satire based on the news of the day. These early developers of improv combed through theater's great history for ways this new form could work, pulling things from the world and commenting on them or recreating sitcoms, genres, plays, musicals, etc. It's not just theater that's being reproduced--you can find improvised versions of film, TV, popular sketch comedy styles, and other modern modes of entertainment--but improv is different, with different virtues and strengths than scripted work. We're trying to give the same experience as surfing (theater, film, and television) but without the waves (writing, sets, costumes, music, and scripts). I feel like we have something really great on our hands that we are undervaluing. I think this old guy can do a

lot more than what it's doing now. What ways can it go? I'm not really sure yet, but here are some ways I'm wondering about.

## Abstraction

In an online discussion, someone asked is improv art? I think the answer is yes, improv is art, and it deserves the credit/ laurels/ acclaim/ money of any of the other art form, When I think about Art, though, a myriad of images come to mind, a parade of different types of paintings, each belonging to a different -ism. With music, there are so many different artists and styles. When I think about improv, it all seems pretty similar. I'd say I haven't seen an improv show that would not fall under the genre of "Silly Realism." Improv is an art form that can be anything, but it seems like it's mostly one thing. I don't think that is its natural state though.

*"Sometimes in Chicago you're just performing for a bunch of other performers. Sometimes grim, but sometimes the best shows I've had."*

What does it mean to be "art"? People often say "oh, that's art" when they mean "I don't immediately understand it" and it's this open ended bafflement that I wonder about. Can improv be mysterious or undefinable? Can we as performers make something that we don't understand until after or years later? What does abstraction even mean? I thought about it a lot and talked about it in the lab but I don't have a good answer. I wonder if elements, feelings, or characters could be pushed farther or opened up. Can it still be entertaining or funny?

## Malleability

One of improvisation's biggest virtues is its ability to change and bend. We can imagine anything in a moment and be taken away to any place with any person past or present. I always wonder how satisfying is it for an audience to see a long form show where in the beginning, we lift the fourth wall for an instant and engage them to provide a one word suggestion of something that they care nothing about to inspire our show. How satisfied is the lucky person who said "pineapple" the loudest? Is what was then presented drastically different based off their input? Will he or she go home happy or proud that their pineapple was acknowledged? Will he or she tell their friends or family about how they inspired a piece of performance?



Shortform is an audience's delight. They know what's going to happen, and they have many opportunities to shape the game's outcome. Longform is a performer's delight. We can follow our impulses like never before, our imagination is king, and we can play play play according to our hearts' desires. We're engaging an audience's imagination when we don't have a set or props or costumes, but can that engagement go farther? Can their imagination be invited to the table and be able to order from the menu? Is there any way to use the strengths of both shortform and longform so that audience and performers share more equally in the

delight? Sometimes in Chicago, you can't get people to come to your shows, so you're just performing for a bunch of other performers. Sometimes grim, but sometimes the best shows I've had. We're going wilder on stage because there are no strangers to play to and our friends in the audience are wilder yelling and screaming at us. We are wild apes and they are apes. We are all wild apes provoking and changing each other, but then the time runs out. We have to calm down and return to the formalized roles in our next show. Tradition returns and we are either performing or watching.

What is the role of live performance in our world? There's entertainment everywhere. We have a window into an infinite source of digital entertainment in our pockets. We live so much of our life in front of screens, and we're removed from the people we interact on a regular basis with through these screens. That alone points to live performance becoming more important as our electronic lives transform. People being around people, not on a train or in a movie theater, but with each other, interacting and sharing. What's your opinion? What's mine? What's ours? When we

*"I think there's something amazing and inspiring about a group of people working together and the selflessness that comes from that."*

merely watch something, we are getting other people's opinions of what we want or their opinion of how the world is. Experience shows are popular right now. Shows where you can walk around and follow what story you want, or shows where you have to solve a puzzle as a group, but the outcome is still deter-

mined for you. The only control we have is what we decide to give our attention to, and that feels a little passive to me! What is it like to really affect the course or outcome of a piece of performance? I know I feel a sense of pride when I'm a part of something that goes well. I feel gratified when I am listened to.

## Group Work?

What's the point of group games or big group scenes? I feel like group work is the bitter pill of improv, but two person scenes are great. Everyone loves two persons scenes. They are extremely satisfying. If your friends or family come see you in an improv show, and you have a good two person scene, then everyone is satisfied. You did well and you were seen doing well. Two person scenes take the least amount of learning time to get the most results. I can shine with my character or my wit, even if I'm sharing the stage with a complete idiot. Group work is more difficult. Each person has to listen more, and leadership has to be shared. We don't have as much reference for it. I wonder if there used to be more resources in other places for what this could be. What do we see on TV where more than two people do something together? Dance? Sports? Reality TV? The only one that claims to be unscripted is reality TV, but in those shows it seems they only use group work in order to make people fall apart and yell at each other. We laugh at the impossible task it is to work with other people! If we saw eight people working well together on stage, wouldn't it be so damn exciting? I think there's something amazing and inspiring about a group of people working together and the selflessness that comes from that.

Working as a group is difficult and frustrating. It's hard to do well, but I think those are the parts of life that are the most rewarding! What shapes can these moments take? We have a lot of old models that feel really bad for us and for anyone who is watching. What are the new shapes that could make this time easier or fun or dazzling? No matter what, it will take time to work well. It will also be bad/awkward/uncomfortable during that time. It can feel bad and awkward to learn any creative skill, and even more so when those skills are as personal as the ones required for group work: selflessness, listening, giving, trusting. It can create problems, both creative and social, that a group will have to work through together. So why try it? Scenes will always be easier and more accessible, but I wonder what's on the other side of group work.

*“Recently, I’ve watched a lot of student shows. The shows are so different to the ones I normally watch.”*

## Failure

What is the role of failure today? How willing are we to be vulnerable? It seems pretty unacceptable or vulgar, so we try to prevent it like a virus, with a vaccine; we create a weak failure, a “safe” vulnerability that can be controlled and overcome. Our demands are high, and it seems possible to do a great many things but a lot harder to do many things great. Failure (miscommunication, forgetting, fear, complacency) is inevitable in improv, but we still judge ourselves on mistakes and bad moves. There is a “right” way to make things up, and there is a “wrong” way that is bad when we choose to do it. The ideal seems to be

where the mistakes are seamlessly woven into the rug so one could not tell what was intentional and what happened by accident or mistake. When we were discussing theater versus improv, someone commented that theater often strives to seem natural, like it is actually happening spontaneously in the moment, and improvisation often strives to appear rehearsed and intentional like theater. I think that's rather silly.

Recently, I've watched a lot of student shows. These men and women have gone through a year-long training program, and these shows are their time to show what they have learned. What they show is sometimes awkward, loud, excited, quiet, funny, but the shows are so different to the ones I normally watch.

The alchemy was so strange; performers who are good, performers who will be good, performers who are drunk, young people, old people, cocky people who know they're doing it right, people who really want to get it right, performers who are so scared they don't know what to do, ones who are so scared they do everything, people who will never perform again, etc, and they're all on the same stage. The style of the city and the style of the theater are present but not clear. They are trying to use the tools they've been given the way they were intended. The way the pieces are trying to move are familiar, but are peculiar and don't go where they seem like they're headed, careening off in one or many directions. It's different. It's not yet formed. People are making "mistakes." Things are happening that are not being paid off. Two people are on stage having their own individual scenes with each

other. The characters are strange. The scene work is mysterious and confusing. Rules are being stepped on and broken. If they were having fun in the chaos, it could be something really electrifying. What if all these things we think are bad are opportunities to do something different?

Shows like this won't happen after the run is over. The "right way" will become clear. People will pick other people that share their point of view or sense of humor. They will try to find the style of the city mixed with who they are as people. They will learn to listen better, and they might find something that excites / unites them. The oddballs will disappear, only to be seen on trains and buses years later. The misunderstandings will become anecdotes. I wonder, though, about this time when things aren't yet formed, or when we really have to play with someone who's not our first or second choice, and these misunderstandings we call mistakes.

How can they be a part of the experience in an intentional way? Could they be highlighted or sought after? Can we laugh with the audience at ourselves? Our limits, faults, our humanity maybe

*"My study of improv and performance has been like building a car from scratch."*

highlighted, digested and presented. We failed. We fail. We don't understand each other. Whether or not we acknowledge it, it's there. We face our internal censor and judgements every

time we walk on stage. In one Improv Lab, I asked, "How do you approach a scene?" After some hesitation, one performer said,

“Well, do you want to know what I wish I do, what I’m trying to do, or what I actually do?” No matter how practised or open we are, sometimes these little gremlins hold us back. We fail and judge! We pretend it’s not happening and try and snap the door shut and play it off as intentional, but is there some other way? Do we have to bridge the gap within ourselves or between our scene partners or can we keep it and celebrate it?

So,

These are some of my thoughts that I’m just beginning to turn into action. I have bunches of them. They are my starting points, a place for us to start from or push against. I haven’t talked about what happened in the lab at all really, because I don’t think it’s ready to talk about. My study of improv and performance has been like building a car from scratch. It took me a while to understand the mechanics of what goes where and why and for the engine to start and move me forward. Now that I have something that can take me from here to there, I want to see what this car can do! If anything speaks to you, feel free to experiment with it. If you have any thoughts about any of this, I’d like to hear about them. Improvisation is accessible to everyone. It doesn’t take a lot of time to understand the fundamentals and to be able to apply them. The gap between someone doing it for a year to someone who’s been doing it for twenty years is minimal and there is so much excitement around us to be discovered.

# THE INVITATION

EMMA POPE

**W**hen I was a kid, I felt embarrassed by how much I loved to replicate movie scenes that moved me. I would stand, all 86 pounds of ribs and elbows, next to the bathtub, the ceiling heater blasting to mask my voice from the rest of my family, and imitate dramatic performances that I felt I would have been perfectly capable of doing on screen, had life dealt me the hand of an aggressive 4th grade drama teacher and pushy stage parents. I would have loved to have been a child actor; to slip into someone else's skin and speak their words, to wear an outfit I never would have chosen for myself, to intentionally disguise who I was and confidently become someone new. But alas, my parents were educators, encouraging my sister and I to find our voices through reading, community, music, sports and school. And instead of a pushy drama coach, I had a 4th grade teacher who truly changed my life through her compassion, guidance, and love of great books. The life I lead for 21 years was fulfilling and interesting, full of love and happy family dinners, good friends and exciting vacations. In no way did I want-for anything on paper, and yet a nagging tug remained. A tiny flicker, an un-



recognized pull, an unspoken wish tickled something deep in my belly.

The belief I held at my core (which I've only been able to put words to in the last couple of years) was that everyone wants to

*“This was the moment when I first allowed myself to recognize how badly I had quietly wanted to be a performer.”*

be an artist, but only a few select people are chosen to do it. The rest of us, I assumed, were sentenced to live perfectly content lives without the passion that a career in the arts would have

brought. I honest-to-goodness thought that if it were meant to happen to me, I would be stopped outside of the Limited Too by a talent agent (a New York type, someone with moon-sized sunglasses and a bag full of headshots), and this person would see beneath my shy exterior to the true, shimmering actor I was underneath. The Christina Riccis, the Jena Malones of the world, they were separated from me only by the luck of being in the right place at the right time, and then ushered into situations where their talent could blossom. The idea of actively pursuing an artistic lifestyle where you could live out your wildest dreams seemed self-indulgent, especially in a world where there is such a for social workers. When I feel this way today, I remember a Howard Thurman quote that means so much to me: “Don't ask yourself what the world needs. Ask yourself what makes you come alive and then go do that. Because what the world needs is people who

have come alive.”<sup>1</sup> Being onstage makes me feel alive. I want to perform. Even to say the words now feels selfish. But I did, and I do.

In 2010, I was living in Jackson Hole, Wyoming, when a friend of mine asked me to sit in a rehearsal with his improv team, thus ushering me into a world I no longer wanted to ignore. He had a lot of experience in the theater, and I loved being around him—feeling that osmosis would send some of his on-stage confidence my way. We would spend our time together wading through creeks during the Wyoming spring, practicing our Australian accents and making each other laugh with nonsense bits. I was 25 years old, and when he suggested that I sit-in for a few improv rehearsals, I became nauseous in a way that made me feel that this might be worth pursuing. I very much recognized that this invitation was what I had been waiting for, and with as clear a sign as that, I was unable to talk myself out of it. That first rehearsal, which truly I cannot remember one minute of (kind of a panic, black-out situation), spiraled into what is now my “how did you end up in Chicago?” answer, but more importantly, this was the moment when I first allowed myself to recognize how badly I had quietly wanted to be a performer my whole life.

There were a few key thought barriers that I (as well as, I imagine, many new improvisers) needed to break down as I learned to navigate the world of long form. I had finally gotten to a place where I could realize this secret dream of mine, but my brain had

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<sup>1</sup> [Editor's Note] This quote is attributed to Howard Thurman by Gil Bailey in the forward of his book *Violence Unveiled: Humanity at the Crossroads*. New York: Crossroad, 1995. Print.

constructed some structures over two decades that initially worked against me. The first year of living and studying in Chicago is filled with some of the most important lessons and failures that I have experienced as a performer. A few of these lessons, garnered from teachers, experience, and observation, have stuck with me over the years, enriching work that I do in new and interesting ways as I continue to grow.

The first of these was the expectation I had set for myself as a comedic performer. Having been quieted for so many years, my now-active passion for the stage set some lofty goals for my immediate success in Chicago. I envisioned myself, punch line after punch line, throwing my audiences into fits of uncontrolled mania. My initial scenes and pieces were one long attempt at getting laughs. Pre-planned bits, funny one-liners, silly voices, I did them all. I wanted to make people laugh all the time. But guess who can smell someone trying to be funny? EVERYONE. I hold a place in my heart for teachers who watch a new group of students make the same mistakes time and time again, and with patience, guide them to greener pastures. My iO intensive teachers were certainly of this variety, lucky for me.

My thirst for instant comedic stardom initially lead me astray from the principles our teachers kept reiterating: be believable, stay in the moment, connect with each other, DON'T WORRY ABOUT BEING FUNNY. I remember being coached by a fantastic and brilliant woman through a scene where I spent 4 minutes describing the hilarious things a pair of birds were doing in a tree

near by. “That’s really cool,” she said afterwards, “but I’m more interested in what’s going on between the two of YOU.” Agree to disagree, I thought. Different strokes. Who would want to watch two people on a park bench talk about their relationship where there were imaginary birds telling each other to “talk to the hand” nearby?

I wish I could say this was an easy lesson to learn, that I took the note once and let go of the belief that a funny accent trumps whatever you are saying.

*“Learning what I don’t know continues to be one of my biggest challenges.”*

But there was a decent amount of ego wrapped up in my ideologies, and part of me wanted to believe that I had driven 1,000 miles from Wyoming to a dark theater in Wrigleville because I knew something that other people didn’t know. My all-or-nothing outlook from earlier in life had inadvertently given me the belief that once I was “recognized,” the talent that had been churning beneath the surface would be so great that there would be little left to learn. Learning what I don’t know continues to be one of my biggest challenges. It’s like walking backwards through your brain until you’re at the simplest seed of an idea, knocking down everything you’ve assumed. Yes, I am passionate about performance and comedy and yes, I should pursue them but no, I might not know it all yet. It is hard to tamp down a confidence that is born of 21 years of killer solo bathroom material, but tamp down we must. There are still times today when I find myself playing in a way that is born from the need for a laugh, the fear of a quiet audience; for me, there is a very specific stomach discomfort that

comes along with this this sort of play, the same feeling that accompanies cheating at a family board game to beat your cousin and dad. For the most part, we are all here to have fun, to grow and learn, and by winning that round, I have cheated myself out of the good monopoly there is to be played. I try to be in constant check that what I'm doing is born from my own inspiration, and nothing else.

*“What is there is there, and it’s enough.”*

There is another way that ego can knot up an improvised piece and that’s involved in the principle of agreement. Our lifelong motto as improvisers is “yes, and,” as in “yes, what you have said is true AND here’s a little more information to add detail to our situation.” This two bit phrase packs quite a little punch, and there are layers to it that I couldn’t see right away. Initially, the struggle is to accept the reality set forth by your scene partner without question. My ego hurdle on this one involves a lot of letting go: of what I had planned, of what I want, of what I think is “right” or “best,” of what I can change to make the scene “better.” I remember doing scene after scene and feeling panicked by the simple conversation that was taking place between, say, roommates, and introducing a secret drug addiction or an argument over lovers to fuel the fire of the scene. Ironically, this is usually when the scene takes a loud nose-dive, and we miss seeing what could have been a very interesting interaction between people who know and love each other. Even in a “transaction scene,” where the characters are strangers to each other, the scene can

live and thrive without a frenzied confession coming into the mix 1 1/2 minutes in. What is there is there, and it's enough.

There are many reasons this philosophy is needed in order for a scene to move along, and I find these reasons compelling enough to use in my day-to-day life as well. We have to trust each other, as performers. If I am initiating a scene with the idea that we are in an office break room, and a teammate denies that by saying something that contradicts what I've set up (ie: "Boss, you wanted to see me?" met with "What are you talking about? I'm your cousin and we're in a pizza parlor!"), what am I to believe about what I've just done? That it wasn't good enough? That there is a "correct" way to do this imaginary play form? If we as a team value finding the "best" idea over anything else, we are doomed never to find it. Best ideas come from anything, and are amplified by our collective enthusiasm to grow them together. Furthermore, our lack of cohesive collaborative thinking robs the audience of any opportunity to invest in what we have established, knowing that at any moment, it might no longer be true. Of course, this is one opinion, and not an across-the-board rule, but for my money, this type of play is satisfying in a way that nothing else is.

There are, however, times when this "yes" has its limitations. When I first started improvising, I took this motto as biblical truth, unquestioned and unwavering. Of course, being the basis for all of long-form improvisation, this has given me the gift of feeling trusting enough to make moves that I know my teammates will enthusiastically join in on. That has been such a gift,

especially as a slow beginner to this game. Unfortunately, it also has, on occasion, left me in scenes that I would much rather have not been in, forced to play out whatever someone set forth, regardless of my comfort. Recently, in the Chicago community, there have been discussions about the discomfort that people of color and women have felt in the improv scene. I think that this can be, unfortunately, a symptom of the idea that we must always agree with what is set forth, even when it is hurtful, inappropriate, uncomfortable, racist, etc. The trust that is required for “yes, and” to work doesn’t do its job if it is the basis of a scene where an actor feels isolated and betrayed, forced to play along in a game they didn’t ask for. It doesn’t seem like we have collectively figured out how to address this issue and still remain true to our team motto, my hope is that our credo will end up morphing into something along the lines of “yes, (when it’s ok) and...” I personally can’t imagine a scenario where good work is done if any one person involved feels uneasy or attacked. In my mind, we either work together to celebrate our humanity as individuals with love and respect, and make way for our comedy through that, or we shouldn’t do it at all. To paraphrase Howard Thurman: What the world does not need is more mediocre jokes. What the world needs is people working together to create comedy that reflects humanity. But maybe that’s just what makes me come alive.

*“In my mind, we either work together to celebrate our humanity as individuals with love and respect, and make way for our comedy through that, or we shouldn’t do it at all.”*

The third lesson, another one that I continue to grapple with to this day, is that what you have is enough. One day, in the summer of 2011, my teacher had us do an exercise called “Non-Sequiturs,” where scene partners say nonsense, non-related sentences, words, or sounds back and forth. “Everything is right!” he said, “Stop thinking- there are infinite things to say!” What we communicated to each other, then, was not contingent on the words we said, but the emotion that was behind them. Words were second in importance, and my brain could shut down the need to find the next and best thing to say. The moves we made, the words we say, the way we look is more powerful when it is driven by our guts, our feelings, rather than by what we have invented in our head.

What a gift that long-form has given me. Before the scene starts, everything in the universe is at your disposal. The empty improv stage is a vibrating, jiggling machine of raw potential. If you want it, it is there. Everybody feels it, knows what it means to come out to a blank canvas, to have infinite possibilities at your fingertips. I had felt that potential my whole life, vibrating softly in my bones, ready to burst at the seams. We take our lessons with us in our pockets- the ones that have resonated deeply with us. They sit in our subconscious, lightly pulling the reins this way and that. When I take the stage now, as I tell my mind to be clear, I am so grateful to be here.

# WHY I LEFT CHICAGO

or; *You Really Only Get to Do Something Once*

**HARRISON GEORGE**

I first started doing improv in high school back in Kansas. The team was called “Quirks!” and we met once a week after school in the drama room. All of our games were lifted directly from “Whose Line Is It Anyway”. A lot of the kids on the team were already really interested in theater, or were just there to pass time after school till their parents could pick them up. For me, it was the start of something very important, something that would completely dominate the next 12 years of my life.

*“I was overwhelmed at the idea that I could be anyone I wanted, I just couldn’t be everyone.”*

Before I started doing improv I didn’t have a lot going on, honestly. I had few to no hobbies, I played zero sports, and I didn’t have a lot of friends. I was painfully shy as a child, and a severe speech impediment discouraged me from meeting new people. Even after I got over my speech impediment and into high school, I never felt comfortable around most people. It’s not shocking to say that a person’s teenage years are tough; I was overwhelmed at the idea that I could be anyone I wanted, I just couldn’t be everyone. At some point during your adolescence you have to make some decisions about the kind of person you want to grow up to be. The

million dollar question is, how does one learn to be a person? I think that's why you have to latch onto something when you're young; sports, a hobby, music, anything. You need a framework to set your own beliefs against (I was in the Boy Scouts for one day, and remember thinking everyone there was too loud, so I never went back). I knew a kid who was completely lost in the world until he joined the robotics team at school and it completely straightened him out; taught him responsibility, team-work, all of that. Skills like that can be taught a million different ways, but man, if you don't do anything, those lessons have no way of reaching you.

The only thing I did care about was school. I loved being at school with all my heart. I had smart, academic parents who raised me to worship teachers and respect public schools. We were not a religious family at all (another great way to learn values and meet others, I later learned) but we were radically devoted to reading and learning. The two primary personality traits my parents passed down to me were politeness and a strong sense of curiosity. And in school, curiosity is a perpetual motion machine. Questions lead to answers which immediately lead to more questions, and so on and so on. For the first 10 years of my life, the only problem I had with school was it only last so many hours a day.

And then I got to high school and found out that kids my age weren't supposed to like school; you were, in fact, suppose to hate it. All the cool kids in school hated being there, disliked reading, and didn't show any respect for teachers. At first I tried to play

along when my fellow classmates would complain about homework, or boring subjects, or whatever. But that strain of shitting on something that you love so much to me was too hard to bear. I discovered at an early age how exhausting it is trying to conceal your enthusiasm. Trying to hold back how much you love something, how important you think it is, not just for you but for the whole world, is a floodgate that won't hold forever. I became anxious at school, embarrassed to raise my hand in class and ask too many questions.

*“Improv helped me get out of my shell”*

When I discovered improv, I knew right away this was something I could pour myself into fully. First of all, it was an art form; a creative pursuit built around creating something, and that always took energy and dedication. Being super enthused about sitting and reading was one thing, but being excited about something that required a lot of energy and focus seemed to make more sense. Second, it was a group activity; the idea of being around other people who possibly love it as much as I do was very appealing to me.

I performed throughout the rest of my time in high school, and when it came time to pick a college, I made sure to pick one with an improv team. At this point I had been doing improv for 3 years, and I felt like I had become a completely different person; I was more outgoing, driven, organized, and far less anxious around people. Improv helped me by getting me out of my shell,

but, more importantly I finally had a “thing”; a central object of interest through which I saw the world.

Overcoming some of my anxiety allowed me to branch out and try a lot of new things in college; I stayed busy and joined a lot of different clubs and met a lot of people my



younger self never would have thought possible. But improv remained my main focus. My college improv team (it was called “Zoiks!”, like the Scooby Doo expletive minus the N) rehearsed 3 times a week for 2 hours at a time, but only performed once a month for an hour and a half show. We had no coach, and most of us had never seen actual improv performed anywhere but on Drew Carey's TV show. It was all short form, and the students on campus absolutely loved it. I distinctly remember once during our show seeing an audience member clutch their sides while laughing, a self-hugging gesture I didn't know people actually did outside of the audiences in the old *America's Funniest Home Videos* reruns. On the weekends, I'd drive to Kansas City, which was 2 hours away, to play in shows up there. It was a 4 hour drive round trip to do a 20 minute show.

Things changed when we were introduced to long form improv. Like most college improv teams, this came in the form of 3 things: “*Trust Us, This is All Made Up*”, “*Truth In Comedy*”, and

the UCB *Asssscat* DVD. I had those things memorized from start to finish, especially the TJ and Dave one. It was as if the universe had suddenly unfolded upon itself, and everything I thought I knew about improv comedy vanished. The transition from short form to long form was one of the most exciting experiences of my young adult life. Once I realized there was more to improv than 3 minute games, I decided to move to Chicago. The rest of my time in college was just killing time until I graduated and had enough money to move. What free time I had away from rehearsals or class was quickly consumed with grand daydreams about what life in Chicago as an improv student would be like. It appeared to me as a Mecca for the world of comedy, a place where the most dedicated, the most curious about comedy's inner workings, could go to seek a true understanding of what makes humor work. I thought it'd be a modern day Paris or Vienna, an oasis for hungry artists, especially as someone from the Midwest where calling yourself an artist was almost as alienating a gesture as coming out of the closet or telling people you're a vegetarian. I was ready for Chicago to welcome me with open arms and for my real education into improv to begin.

I moved to Chicago in the spring of 2011, and started classes within 3 weeks. I decided to take the plunge and sign up for multiple classes at once. I took classes at iO and Second City, and a few months later at Annoyance, too. I was proud and excited, and probably a little cocky, to be taking in as many different ideas as possible. After waiting 3 years I was finally there.

I honestly don't remember a lot about my time as a student at iO, except that the teachers were great and my fellow students were very kind and fun to do scenes with. At Second City, it didn't take long for me to realize that wasn't the place for me. I got the sense from my classes that improv was best used as a tool to create something else—namely, sketches. Being totally in love with improv and terrible at sketches, I quickly decided that wasn't going to be a good fit for me long term.

*“I still believe you learn more from watching improv than from doing it.”*

What I really remember about that time was being an intern. I interned at all 3 theaters tearing tickets, bussing tables and cleaning bath-

rooms. I cannot over-estimate the impact being an intern had on my early Chicago experience. Not only did it make my classes fiscally possible, it gave me a deep understanding of the buildings and community. I met so many people that weren't in my normal circle, from the bartenders and wait staff to the featured performers who closed on the weekends.<sup>1</sup> The best part about being an intern was that if there wasn't any work to do, you could watch the shows. I still believe you learn more from watching improv than from doing it—it might be one of the only art forms where that's true. By not being on stage you have the ability to watch the audience, which is just as important as what's happening on stage

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<sup>1</sup> Side note—you learn a lot about a performer by the way they treat the theater's staff. Some of the funniest people in the city were assholes to the staff on a regular basis. Conversely, one of the first pieces of lore I heard about TJ Jagodowski was that he would still show his iO ID to interns at the front door when coming in, in case they didn't know who he was.

—what kind of stuff makes them laugh, what kind of stuff makes them reach for their phones or get up and go to the bathroom.

Eventually I found other ways to work behind the scenes within the community. Instead of using all my time and energy trying to book shows with my independent team like most of my classmates were doing, I was focused on furthering my comedy education before setting my sights on performing. I interned for the Improv Nerd podcast with Jimmy Carrane and for the Late Live Show, a live talk show hosted by Joe Kwaczala. In both cases, I just reached out to them by email and basically said, “Hi, I just moved here, can I work for your show?” Both were very kind and found things for me to do, and in exchange I saw their shows for free every week. Again, I was learning about how the community operated and meeting a lot of new people.

Let me say something about social anxiety and idolatry, two things I suffer from. Talking to people has always made me nervous, especially talking to new people, and most especially talking to new people I look up to. And Chicago was full of people I looked up to who I didn’t know. If improv was the most important thing in the world to me, then the people who were good at it were the second most important. I idolized anyone who was on a house team at iO. I would get tongue-tied after the shows trying to make small talk with any improviser I came across. I was fascinated by the surrealness of it all; these were people who, to the rest of the world, were normal, everyday humans but as soon as they stepped inside an improv theater, they were treated like

gods. I knew it was silly to put them on a pedestal as much as I did, but I had no idea how to stop it. It turned out the best thing I could do was just be around them and talk to them. I was eventually able to just start seeing them as regular people with lives and interests outside of improv. I still absolutely worshipped some of them, but at least I was able to make small talk.

Eventually classes ended and I was put on a team at iO. I was over the moon, thrilled and honored to be performing at iO. It was, and remains, one of the proudest achievements of my life so far. But my experience during the first two years of performing at iO was fraught with tension and disappointment, brought on by a variety of things. One, the inevitable learning curve that hits once you leave classes- not just for improv, but for all things. Less learning can mean less progress, and less of those “a-ha” moments that made the classroom experience feel so special. The first few months after I finished classes I felt like I was performing in molasses- I was making unenjoyable choices that I wasn't making in classes which forced me into boring, stressful scenes. I also went from some of the oldest, most experienced teachers in the city to some of the youngest coaches available, and while they did a good job at providing enthusiastic support and guidance, concise notes on what to focus on were lacking. Also I was completely uneducated as to how the building worked. I thought there'd be some onboarding/welcome-to-the-family style meeting to explain what the Harold Commission was, who was on it, how or why teams were cut. I had a million questions and no idea where to go for answers, so I just shut up and listened and tried

to take in as much information from passing conversations as I could.

The team experience was also different than I expected. I thought I'd be around the best of the best who rose to the top through their classes and graduation shows through hard work and dedication. What I found was that, just like in classes, team attendance was largely not enforced, and it was surprisingly hard—even from the start of my first team—to get everyone in the same room. Suddenly everyone was busy with other shows, teams, auditions and projects, and rehearsals took a back seat. There's a weird thing that happens when you're going through classes; you just want to make a team. You tell yourself, "If I could just get on a team, I'd be happy. That's all I need." You go to class and see shows and have, like, 5 nights a week completely free. But then, while you are waiting you make indie teams or branch out to other art forms or get put on other teams in other buildings. And then Harold teams are rehearsing on Sunday nights from 10pm to midnight just to accommodate people's' schedules. And that sucks. Good comedy can happen just about anywhere, but it cannot and does not happen in a tiny rehearsal space on a Saturday morning at 10am. People missed rehearsals for all kinds of reasons; once a teammate said they would be missing because they wanted to see a Second City show. It was hard not to show my frustration when it felt like my teammates weren't making the team a priority.

Looking back, if I'd been a stronger performer I'd have focused on the things I could change; my attitude and my performance, mainly. But I was, and remain, a performer that's only as good as the people I play with. In standup and sketch you have a lot more control; over content, quality, when and how rehearsals are structured. But I was adamant that I could only be as good as my team, and vice versa. My goal was never to be a singularly good improv performer. What I really wanted was to be on a great team. One that operated with speed and fluidity and could work together like we were reading each other's minds. Any one person can be funny, but real magic is found when teams work together. But my team and I didn't view improv in the same way and as a result, we never really felt like we were on the same page.

I'm going to make a strong statement here and say that one of the reasons, and there were a bunch, people were not prioritizing improv was because of the rise of The Upstairs Gallery<sup>2</sup> and its performers. The Upstairs Gallery was just coming into itself as I got to Chicago. Whole essays could be written trying to properly capture this theater's impact on the community, but I'll just make three points:

1. The most obvious take-away is the importance of making your own opportunities instead of waiting around for others to give them to you. The theater was founded in rejection and carried this anti-establishment punk rock vibe that no other performance space had at the time. It was the only place that had its

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<sup>2</sup> [Editor's Note] *The Upstairs Gallery was an independent comedy theater run by and for Chicago Comedians. It opened in September 2010 and closed in August 2014. [UpstairsGallery.Tumblr.com](http://UpstairsGallery.Tumblr.com)*

own unique style of comedy—the theater itself affected how people played until an “Upstairs Gallery” genre was created. Which leads me to point two;

2. The comedy of Upstairs Gallery was primarily about being cool. Playing the in the manner of Upstairs Gallery meant being above and apart from what was happening on stage. The characters and situations created were usually so absurd and ridiculous it was like watching a live-action cartoon. Performers did not take on characters as much as wear them as a light outer jacket; they knew they were being ridiculous and they wanted the audience to know they knew. I rarely laughed at the characters being created, instead laughing with the actor playing the character as they seemed to say, with a knowing smirk, “*Isn’t this guy nuts?*” This was just part of what made the place so successful—it captured the honest feeling of friends making each other laugh at a dinner party. The pretense of “audience” and “performer” was razor thin, and we all laughed at what was in front of us, whether we had helped create it or merely sat and took it all in.
3. The problems arise, then, when younger performers start to ape that style of play. And not caring on stage usually lead people to not care off stage too, when it was most important. Most of my favorite performers at UG, people like Annie Donley, Carmen Christopher, Gary Richardson, etc, played like they didn’t give a fuck about improv but had actually put in years of hard work by the time I got to Chicago- I was seeing

them operate, on stage and off, in a completely different phase of their comedy career than my own. But you watch them get up and play zany, random characters and see it get huge laughs and think it's that easy.

But there's more to it than that- there's an "it" factor, that dark matter-esque quality that just makes some people funny and others not, that let John Reynolds just be John Reynolds on stage. The city was suddenly awash with young performers doing their best John Reynolds/Devin Bockrath/Connor O'Malley impressions in every scene.<sup>3</sup> And they thought they didn't need to rehearse, they could just show up, walk on stage and kill it. The truth is that all art takes attention and focus and thought, and even the dumbest improv scenes in the world still have to rely on basic, fundamental good group work. Upstairs Gallery did a whole lot of good for Chicago, but damn if it didn't fuck up the next couple of generations of comedians that came after it.

I was now in the lowest point of my improv career. I wasn't fulfilled on any of my house teams, and instead of actively trying to change it, I just sent passive aggressive reply emails when people said they'd be an hour late to rehearsal. I had determined decidedly that a traditional "career path" in comedy was not for me—I knew I wouldn't do well at Second City, I had no interest in fighting the other million comedians in the city for a shot at SNL, I was a terrible actor who regularly embarrassed myself at com-

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<sup>3</sup> Side note—remember when Connor O'Malley's *Vines* blew up big time, and you couldn't walk through an improv theater without hearing someone say, "Hell Yes Pimp!" for like the next 3 months?

mercial auditions, and didn't possess the willpower or consistency to write for TV. It was right around this time that the a great exodus occurred of Chicago comedians; people moved en masse to New York and LA. The city felt like a ghost town, like all the enthusiasm and energy was zapped out over the course of a few months. Performers from multiple generations, from Main Stagers to recent graduates, all jumped ship and left the rest of us looking around for a sense of structure and normalcy. Moving on to LA or New York had never been a goal for me, but once I realized how limited the options were in Chicago for a full time comedian, I felt stuck. I was too "old" to go through more classes, which I sorely wanted, and too young to start teaching, which I really wanted to do. I looked around at the people left in Chicago, talented incredible people and saw what they were doing; performing regularly once or twice a week, sometimes booking commercials, slowly making gains at Second City. I looked at the people above me and wondered if I'd be happy at 40 working my same dead end customer service job, playing the midnight show on a Friday night to 12 people. I just see didn't much of a path for real artistic performance in Chicago. And to top it all off, I had gained a reputation of being super into improv, which while not untrue, can be a death sentence for your comedy potential. One thing I've learned over the years by seeing it first hand is that whatever your passion is, you have to succeed at it more than you

*"Whatever your passion is, you have to succeed at it more than you love it. The worst thing you can be is seen as someone who is just okay at the thing they love."*

love it. If someone's asked what they think about you as a performer and the first thing they say is "Harrison? Well, he's super dedicated. That guy really loves improv.", you're sunk. The worst thing you can be is seen as someone who is just okay at the thing they love. The city was full of these people- I called them "Austins" after the kid at my college who tried out 6 times for our college improv team and never made it. He still showed up to every show to watch and was always the first to track me down on campus to "talk shop" about comedy. For whatever reason, and I never figured out why, the world despises over-eagerness. It recoils from it like a foul stench. Maybe it's the inherent tragedy of loving something you're just not great at.

So, with all this swirling in my head, I gave up on trying to be on the perfect team and just focused on making progress individually, any way I could. I signed up for more classes, first at CIC and then at the Chicago Improv Studio with Bill Arnett. The classes were incredible (I cannot recommend *CIS* classes enough- Bill Arnett is a genius<sup>4</sup>), but I could never find a way to bring what I was working on in class to my shows. The vagueness of lessons in gift-giving and physical characterization immediately dematerialized in my brain the minute I stepped on stage, and I found myself doing the same old stuff I was always doing in scenes; standing, talking, relying on my cleverness to get through scenes. I looked deeply into my favorite artists, both comedic and non, for inspiration; people like David Lynch, Frank Zappa, Yoko Ono,

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<sup>4</sup> [Editor's Note] Bill Arnett's improv blog was a tremendous inspiration for the Hambook. Read it here: <http://blog.chicagoimprovstudio.com>

*“The only thing that frustrated me more than the community was my own lack of personal progress.”*

James Brown. I loved them for their confidence, for the way they revolutionized the world of art and music, and I tried to carry over their world view to my scene work. If you’ve never entered an improv scene and thought to yourself, “What would Yoko Ono do?” I don’t recommend it. Comedy does not spring forth from such open-ended prompts.

During this period, I was consumed with getting better. I let all other aspects of my personal life completely slip away- I stopped returning phone calls from friends, I neglected the news and politics, my diet was poor, I let all personal relationships slip away. I stayed out late and drank too much and blew all my money on overpriced, bad bar food. I skipped a family reunion to do a 1 day workshop with an ex-cast member from SNL. This was my nadir. I became bitter and judgmental about all things “comedy.” I couldn’t make it through an episode of SNL or The Daily Show without scoffing loudly to those around me. I performed a handful of tirades at *Spitballin*<sup>5</sup> about what “real” comedy is. I was told by friends I was no longer allowed to sit in the front row of improv shows, because if I didn’t like what was happening on stage, if I didn’t think they were doing improv right, I had no problem with showing my displeasure. I was some self-appointed hall monitor of comedy in charge of defending the fragile princi-

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<sup>5</sup> [Editor’s Note] *Spitballin*’ is a variety show in Chicago running every Monday night at Quencher’s Bar & Saloon. It is hosted by Sand, an improv team featuring fellow Hambook contributor Thomas Kelly.

ples of improv comedy from lazy, hack performers. The only thing that frustrated me more than the community was my own lack of personal progress.

Beyond my own hangups, I started to notice some disappointing facts about the community as a whole. The improv community has never been a culturally diverse place, filled mainly with white, middle class men from the Midwest (me). But I never thought it was against diversifying—in fact I thought we all could see that at its core, improv required a diversity of thoughts and experiences to keep it fresh and alive. As more people spoke out for the need for more people of color, people of the LGBTQ community and women both in places of power and on stage, I was disheartened to witness so much resistance—mostly from white, middle class men from the Midwest (not me). I was ready to see a revolution take place within the community, but instead was met with calls for slow progress and incremental changes. Also, I was totally blown away there were so many performers who didn't think, or didn't care if, improv performers should get paid. Absolutely they should, no questions asked. While it's true, big picture questions arise,<sup>6</sup> the simple truth is that if someone is profiting off your work, you are entitled to a fair share. It was devastating that so many performers were against creating a working wage for performers.

Thankfully, 3 things happened that brought me out of my funk. First and foremost, I started seeing someone. I had let multiple

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<sup>6</sup> *Does getting paid affect how you play/should it?, the intricate economics of paying 200+ performers in a building, etc...*

relationships fall apart in the past as soon as I was forced to pick between improv and the other person. But Lindsey loved comedy just as much as I did, and when we weren't watching each other do shows, we were at the theater watching them together. She brought me back to life by reminding me I was more than just a comedy-doing robot.

I had also been asked to start coaching at iO. Coaching was everything I had possibly dreamed it would be, and so much more. I had no idea how satisfying it could be to watch a team grow and come together. Coaching absolutely 100% saved me from forever hating myself for falling in love with improv. I finally had an outlet I could pour all my love and passion for comedy into, and it would be safely dispersed between the 10 members of the team. My mood began to lighten and I found myself enjoying performing again. The founding of the Flat Iron Comedy theater was also instrumental in pulling me out of my artistic depression.<sup>7</sup> Starting that space with those people, and getting to see the shows there saved me as a performer. They performed with the commitment and zeal I had been looking for. I had more fun watching the Tuesday night shows there for 6 months straight than I did my first year playing at iO.

I came to peace with where I'd reached as a performer, and decided that I'd be happy just being a coach full time. Even more than that, I wanted to be a teacher. Specifically, in my mind, I wanted to be a kind of improv guidance counselor—I wanted to

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<sup>7</sup> [Editor's Note] Flat Iron Comedy takes place in the Collaboraction Theater in the Flatiron Arts Building in Chicago's Wicker Park district. The show happens every Tuesday and Wednesday night.

be able to sit down with new improv performers and just ask them some open ended questions to help figure out what they wanted to get out of improv and how they expected to achieve it. All I wanted to do was help other performers become the best possible versions of themselves. Sadly, that job didn't exist, and the reality of teaching or coaching as a way of full time employment was still realistically another 5 years off. I could either wait around, keep performing, and hope to get hired as a teacher eventually, or move on. I decided to move on.

I don't know if there is a grand lesson to learn from all this. I've spent the last 6 months since leaving Chicago trying to find out what it was. Maybe it's *Don't Let Your Hobbies Turn into Obsessions*. Or that *There's More to a Person than What They Do, and How Good They Are at It*. Maybe the lesson is that, while it does possess a handful of positive virtues, *Comedy is Not Something You Should Build Your Entire Life Around*. But then again, and maybe this is only because I'm the main character in the story I'm telling and I want it to all be worth something, maybe the lesson is this: *You Really Only Get to Do Something **Once***. Like improv, there's no run through in life, no practice; you just do it and hope for the best. And if you love something, the worst thing you can do is bury your love for fear of what others will think.



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