California State University, San Bernardino

CSUSB ScholarWorks

Theses Digitization Project

John M. Pfau Library

2009

# Improvisation, truth, and archetyping: Establishing the tools and precepts of comedic acting

Ann Marie Johnston-Brown

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project

Part of the Acting Commons

Recommended Citation

Johnston-Brown, Ann Marie, "Improvisation, truth, and archetyping: Establishing the tools and precepts of comedic acting" (2009). *Theses Digitization Project*. 4415.
https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd-project/4415

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the John M. Pfau Library at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Theses Digitization Project by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

# IMPROVISATION, TRUTH, AND ARCHETYPING: ESTABLISHING THE TOOLS AND PRECEPTS OF COMEDIC ACTING

---

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

---

In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Master of Arts

in

Theatre Arts

---

by

Ann Marie Johnston-Brown

December 2009

IMPROVISATION, TRUTH, AND ARCHETYPING:

ESTABLISHING THE TOOLS AND PRECEPTS

OF COMEDIC ACTING

---

A Thesis

Presented to the

Faculty of

California State University,

San Bernardino

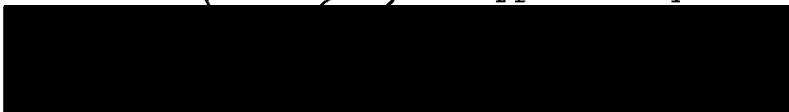
---

by

Ann Marie Johnston-Brown

December 2009

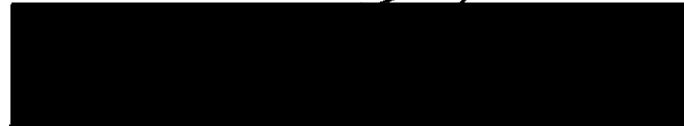
Approved by:



Margaret Perry, Chair, Theatre Arts

11-18-09

Date



Kathy Ervin

Tom Provenzano

ABSTRACT

This research set out to prove that truth and archetyping are the primary precepts of comedic acting, and that improvisation is justifiably the most prevalent pedagogical tool for instilling these precepts in the comedic actor. To prove this theory, a comprehensive study of the history of the genre was conducted. It was determined that the defining factors which distinguish comedy from tragedy are found in the elements of comedic incongruity and the message of human survival. The archetypes—as they are psychologically defined—were analyzed for their relevance to comedy. This relevance was ultimately corroborated through the testimonies of Carl Jung, Allan G. Hunter, and a host of others. It was concluded that—as art represents life, and as life is represented through the archetypes—there is an unconscious expectation on the part of the audience for art to represent the archetypes, however, only as they are "truthfully" depicted. This research validated improvisation as the most efficient comedic pedagogical tool for its promotion of truth and archetyping—specifically, through the use of "circumstance"—and, from the findings, further recommendations were made.

To Fred

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT .................................... iii

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

Transformation in Improvisation ............... 1

Freud and the Wit ............................ 3

Acting on Truth .............................. 5

Improvisation, Incongruity, and Intuitive ..... 6

Improvisation in Comedic Acting Pedagogy ...... 8

Introducing Fred Willard ...................... 10

Fred Willard and Archetyping .................. 11

A History of Archetyping ...................... 13

Statement of the Problem ...................... 15

Purpose of the Study .......................... 17

CHAPTER TWO: THE COMEDIC GENRE ................. 19

Aristophanes .................................. 20

Plautus ....................................... 22

The Adaptation of Comedy ...................... 26

Aristotle on Comedy ........................... 27

Laughter Doeth Good ........................... 29

The Functions of Humor ........................ 31

Defining the Genre ............................ 44

Wit's Relation to Comedy ...................... 49

CHAPTER THREE: ARCHETYPES IN COMEDY

Carl Jung .................................... 56

The Six Archetypes ......................... 61

The Stock Characters and Their Masks .......... 69

CHAPTER FOUR: THE COMMEDIA DELL' ARTE

The Atellan Farces ......................... 74

The Byzantine Era .......................... 77

Comedy Resurrected ......................... 78

The Commedia Types ......................... 80

Molière .................................... 83

The Commedia on Tour ....................... 84

The End of an Industry ..................... 86

CHAPTER FIVE: THE IMPROVISATION REVOLUTION

Constantin Stanislavski .................... 88

Viola Spolin ............................... 92

The Compass Players ........................ 94

Second City ................................ 96

ImprovOlympic .............................. 98

The Components of Improvisation ............. 101

Archetyping and Truth in Improvisation ........ 104

Contemporary Comedic Acting Pedagogy .......... 106

The Unique Call of Improvisation ............. 110

CHAPTER SIX: CONCLUSIONS

Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations ...... 113

APPENDIX A: IMPROVISATION GROUPS .................... 120

APPENDIX B: DEFINITIONS .............................. 123

APPENDIX C: FRED WILLARD INTERVIEW (ABRIDGED) ...... 126

APPENDIX D: PERFORMING ARTS SCHOOLS ................ 132

WORKS CITED .......................................... 137

# CHAPTER ONE

# INTRODUCTION

## Transformation in Improvisation

Over the course of the past century, there have been many books written on the subject of comedic acting, and, upon cursory examination, three unifying components are nearly always found: truth, archetypes, and the use of improvisation. Pioneer Viola Spolin inspired a whole generation with her innovative approach to the art of improvisation, consequently influencing such renowned groups as The Compass Players, The Committee, Second City, ImprovOlympic, The Groundlings, and, most recently, The Upright Citizens Brigade (see APPENDIX A).

*Improvisation* is defined by Merriam-Webster as "to compose, recite, play, or sing extemporaneously," with extemporaneous defined as those dramatic performances which are "carefully prepared but delivered without notes or text" (see APPENDIX B). In improvisational comedy, the dialogue and actions of the players are usually performed spontaneously; however, the definition of improvisation explicitly allows for prepared (or "structured") formats to

also exist, as in the case of improvised outlines (or "scenarios").

Spolin's technique, as outlined in her book, Improvisation for the Theater, relies on the use of contrived situations, in which the "where," "who," and "what" have been pre-established. The actors are required to perform spontaneously and unscripted in order to solve a situational "problem." As a result, comedy often and inevitably ensues. However, soliciting audience laughter, or exhibiting "cleverness" (Spolin 40), is never the objective of the exercise.

Regardless of its inherent disassociation with the intention of creating comedy, improvisation has long been considered one of the most preferred comedic styles amongst contemporary audiences. As a result, improvisation has become a prevalent method for helping young actors hone their comedic skills. This is because it inspires the "intuitive" (Spolin 3) and compels the actor toward "transformation" (Spolin 39).

Merriam-Webster defines *intuitive* as "quick and ready insight" or "immediate cognition," which is considered a fundamental function of the wit (see APPENDIX B). As the intuitive is connected to the wit, so, too, is the wit

connected to transformation and, therefore, improvisation. For this reason, improvisation is often considered a useful tool for liberating the creative, as well as the comic, wit.

## Freud and the Wit

Sigmund Freud, who wrote extensively on the subject of humor in his book, Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious, refers to the wit as a "sub-species of the comic" (288). Merriam-Webster defines *wit* as an individual's "mental capability and resourcefulness" (see APPENDIX B). As such, it is universally believed that a fine-tuned wit can be a very powerful tool in the comedic actor: "...wit occasionally reopens inaccessible sources of the comic" (Freud 289), and these sources are evidenced by the actor's ability to transform in order to solve an improvisational problem.

In addition to acknowledging the elemental precondition of the comic's wit, Freud also accounts for the psychological basis of situational humor, upon which improvisational comedy is intrinsically built:

> Thus arises the comical situation, and this knowledge enables us to make a person comical at

will by putting him into situations in which the conditions necessary for the comic are bound up with his actions. (303)

These actions on behalf of the actor, which are born of the actor's wit, are the manifestations of transformation—a vital component of improvisation. Spolin wrote, "The heart of improvisation is transformation" (39). Improvisation requires the actor to intuitively transform into a character and adapt that character to the circumstances specific to the dramatic situation. Thus, the ability to access the intuitive allows the improvisational actor the provisions to create spontaneously, or "in the moment."

But transformation is not unique to improvisation; rather, transformation is the process by which all actors *become* their characters, adapting and justifying their actions in response to those conditions imposed by the dramatic circumstances. The spontaneous transformation necessitated by improvisation specifically promotes the "intuitive" (or unconscious) function of the wit. Conversely, the "cerebral" (or conscious) function of the wit is principally avoided in improvisation, as it is thought to stifle spontaneity. This imposed restriction

often accounts for the commonly-perceived complexity of the style.

The *cerebral* is defined by Merriam-Webster as "of or relating to the intellect," with intellect defined as "given to study, reflection, and speculation" (see APPENDIX B). Spolin maintained that the cerebral is the area of the intellect that *pre*conceives rather than *per*ceives (22). According to Spolin, preconception is a contradictory function to the perceptive demands of improvisation. For this reason, cerebral creativity is avoided in improvisation, and the intuitive is reserved as the exclusive creative outlet.

## Acting on Truth

Improvisation demands the actors' commitment to the circumstances, as well as the relationships created by those circumstances. According to Spolin, "Improvisation is not an exchange of information between players; it is communion" (45), but such communion can only occur when the players treat the circumstances and the relationships with a legitimate sense of truth. Spolin taught that the truth of the situation can never be denied: "Creativity is not rearranging; it is transformation" (42). In other words,

an actor should never manipulate the truth, but should transform himself in an effort to solve the problem existing within truth's constraints.

Charna Halpern, co-creator of the famed ImprovOlympics and author of Truth in Comedy, in discussing truth as the basis of all comedy, simply states, "The truth is funny" (15). In his book, Why is That so Funny, John Wright agrees with Halpern, referring to the truth in comedy as essential because it presents commonality, or something the audience can relate to: "We laugh because we can see ourselves in that situation" (9). Thus, transformational skills and the element of truth are considered vital components of the comedic actor's training regimen.

## Improvisation, Incongruity, and Intuitive

Improvisation, as originally set forth by Spolin, does not set out to be funny. Comedy occurs out of the audience's "connection" (Halpern 29) to the situation and the incongruity derived from the dramatic conflict. As the actors intuitively transform to resolve the conflict, the conditions which predicate comedy are instinctively created, and the audience is, therefore, compelled to laugh. Thus, the audience's laughter is an organic

response to the actor's transformation for counteracting the conditions of incongruity.

In non-improvisational (or scripted) comedy, the actors are not compelled to create spontaneously, since the storyline has already been created. Therefore, the actors are less likely to naturally draw from the intuitive; rather, they will alternatively rely on the cerebral function of the wit. Nevertheless, the intuitive is commonly considered the most bountiful resource for the actor, harboring a multitude of unconscious creative instincts. For this reason, many contemporary comedic acting teachers turn to improvisational exercises as stimulus for unleashing the unconscious resources of their student-actors.

John Wright, improvisational master and respected authority on the art of teaching comedy, underscores the use of "play" in his curriculum:

> Comedy thrives in an atmosphere of irreverence and pleasure: we need to think that we're in a space where we can do anything. Good acting needs exactly the same conditions....It's fun, it's liberating, it's empowering and it gives us that compelling combination of engagement and

objectivity that enables all of us to generate meaning, take risks and find things. (80)

Wright accentuates the need for his comedic actors-in-training to loosen their hold on their unconscious instincts, and he uses improvisational exercises for this purpose. According to Wright, the adaptation and justification requisites of comedy thrive in an atmosphere of mental freedom, and it is "play" that emancipates the intuitive and accommodates such freedom. Through improvisation, Wright's actors are invited to experiment with different states of tension, circumstance, reaction, and rhythm—which instincts are thereby made available to the actor for artistic application.

## Improvisation in Comedic Acting Pedagogy

As improvisation has become a prevailing style of comedy in twentieth and twenty-first century America, its correlative techniques have, accordingly, been adopted as standard devices within contemporary comedic acting training. Even the great masters, Stanislavski and Copeau, whose methods of acting are revered as the paradigms of the industry, enthusiastically encouraged improvisation in their teachings; however, their advocacy of the style was

principally promoted for its stimulation of the imagination and not necessarily for the development of comedic instincts:

> Improvisations which they work out themselves are an excellent way to develop the imagination.... Student actors who have been trained on improvisation later on find it easy to use their imaginative fancy on a play where this is needed. (Stanislavski 78)

Regardless of the universal appeal of improvisation within the acting community for its function as a conduit to the imagination, it is specifically the genre of comedy that has attached itself to the art of improvisation in the most intimate way. In fact, nearly every book that has been written on the subject of comedic acting over the past century has prominently included a section on improvisation or, at minimum, incorporated improvisation into its core doctrine, usually in the form of acting games and exercises.

Most improvisation groups in twenty-first-century America consider themselves primarily comedic—with the obvious exception of the Theatre of the Oppressed—giving credence to the notion that comedy and improvisation are

inimitably connected. Additionally, of the plethora of comedic actors to emerge into the popular mainstream over the past century, most of them proudly tout improvisation as a major component of their comedic acting training.

Improvisation has, therefore, quickly become the most predominant pedagogical tool for inspiring comedic instincts, and, although not exclusively yoked with the genre, the benefit of improvisational training has proven invaluable to the contemporary comedic actor. One such reputed actor to have emerged from the improvisation movement is the great, Fred Willard.

## Introducing Fred Willard

For nearly fifty years, Fred Willard has cultivated and sustained a thriving comedic career in television, stage, voiceovers, and film. He is most eminently known for his roles in the Christopher Guest movies, including <u>This is Spinal Tap</u> (Embassy, 1984), <u>Waiting for Guffman</u> (Sony, 1996), <u>Best in Show</u> (Warner Bros., 2001), <u>A Mighty Wind</u> (Warner Bros., 2004), and <u>For Your Consideration</u> (Warner Bros., 2006). He is also noted for his role as Hank MacDougall in the television sitcom, <u>Everybody Loves Raymond</u> (CBS, 1996-2005). As his comedic reign has spanned

nearly five decades, to list his many references here would be an environmental crime—several trees were saved by their omission—but it is safe to say that Fred Willard has achieved outstanding comedic clout.

Willard's "big break" into comedic acting occurred in 1965 when he was invited to join Chicago's illustrious Second City, which was, at the time, only in its infancy. It was then that improvisation began to play a vital role in Willard's ascendance into the upper echelon of comedic masters. As a result of his improvisational training, Willard's personal comedic acting method was ultimately refined to include the study of archetypes as a conduit to "truthful" characterization.

## Fred Willard and Archetyping

Since 2004, I have worked with Mr. Willard as a member of his sketch-comedy troupe, The MoHos (see APPENDIX A). Recently, he sat down with me to discuss his comedic acting method and to offer his advice on teaching comedy to young actors (see APPENDIX C). Willard says, "Comedy comes from being an outsider and observing other people." For this reason, he places highest priority on archetypal study.

Through archetyping, an actor seeks to represent "life" on stage, since this is how the audience will recognize themselves in the dramatic situation. In discussing his personal study of archetypes, Willard says, "I'll sit at a party and just observe people. I just love it. And I'll see someone do something, and I'll say I've got to remember to do that." This method of character-observation was instilled in Willard early in his career and would eventually be the means by which he would glean "material" for his improvisational masterpieces.

Willard's method is as old as the genre, essentially supporting an archetypal "registry" of the qualities associated with the various personality types existing in society. These qualities are used by the actor in the process of "characterization"—a term that refers to the actor's dramatic expression of a character's definable traits. Willard believes that archetypal study for the purpose of characterization should not simply focus on the observation of "real" people, but should also center on the study of accomplished comedic actors who have already mastered the art of characterization. When asked what he would do if given the task of teaching comedy to young actors today, he says, "I'd have them watch or listen to as

much comedy as possible." Willard also believes—as previously put forth by Spolin, Halpern, and Wright—that character study is useless when not accompanied by the element of truth: "...even my characters that are kind of exaggerated, I still feel that it's coming from a real person."

Willard proposes that the core components of comedic acting can, therefore, be narrowed down to two primary precepts: characterization and a commitment to truth. Accordingly, he suggests that these principles are best explored through archetypal study and experimentation (or improvisational games and exercises).

## A History of Archetyping

The theory behind archetyping is an ancient one: the Greeks, Romans, Commedia dell' Arte, Shakespeare, Molière, and other playwrights prominently framed their plots around a standard set of archetypes, also known as "stock" characters. From Plato to Carl Jung and beyond, the study of archetypes, as represented in visual art, literature, and the performing arts, has notably found its way into the writings of many of the world's greatest philosophers.

The use of archetypes (or "ideal prototypes") in all genres of art and literature is accepted, and even expected, by the human unconscious. According to Jung, it is our plight as human beings to confront "our own shadow" in those archetypes which are reflected within the world: "But if we are able to see our own shadow and can bear knowing about it, then a small part of the problem has already been solved" (Jung 20). Jung suggests that the "anima" breathes "psychic life" into the human unconscious; however, it also resides outside the control of man's will (27). The anima is the "natural archetype" (27) within us, constantly seeking out other archetypes existing in nature. Under this assumption, then, man is unwittingly at the mercy of the anima's influence, relegated to satisfying its archetypal fetish and doomed to perpetually classify others.

By identifying archetypes, we effectively categorize those around us according to the preconceptions and prejudices inherent in our own experiences. These have become the familiar "stereotypes" which are often sadistically portrayed in "parody"—a satiric comedic style infamously used to ridicule the behavior of others. According to Plato, audiences who appeal to satirical

comedy are those who need to distinguish themselves from the "lesser" types existing in society—a compulsion that stems from the "aggressive function" (Ziv 4-5) of the human psyche. Plato referred to this as the "Superiority Theory" and considered it a "malicious and aggressive aspect" of the genre, though no less psychologically valid (Shelley 351). For this reason, archetypes are considered a necessary evil for creating comedy, and, as such, the process of archetyping is common to nearly all contemporary acting techniques and styles, including improvisation.

## Statement of the Problem

Archetypes have been a constant staple of comedy since ancient times. In fact, the research will show that the comedic genre was predicated upon the concept of satirizing the Greek archetypes of the day, and it is this underlying theme that dominates the genre still today. The pedagogy of comedic acting, as it is most frequently facilitated through improvisational games and exercises, relies on the archetype in the form of the "character," and the research will show that it is the archetype that has survived to become the most significant, native component of comedy.

In addition to the archetype, it is the consensus of the experts represented here that the precepts of comedic acting also include the element of truth. The components of truth and archetyping will, therefore, be corroborated by the research as the two primary precepts of comedic acting. Additionally, improvisation will be confirmed as the most predominant tool of contemporary comedic acting training in twenty-first-century America, and further recommendations to advance comedic acting training in this regard will, accordingly, be made.

To substantiate these claims, the following methodology will be used: First, an examination of the history of comedy and the psychological motivations behind the human compulsion toward humor will be conducted, with the functions of wit, incongruity, and Plato's Superiority Theory specifically addressed. Second, a review of the significant presence of archetypes, as they have been historically represented in literature, pedagogy, and theatre, will be established and their relevance to the genre of comedy substantiated. The six base archetypes will be identified according to Allan G. Hunter, and their application to comedic acting pedagogy will be validated.

Third, improvisation will be authenticated as the most popular method for creating and teaching comedy in twenty-first-century America. This will be accomplished through an investigation of the origin and evolution of improvisation, with special emphasis on the contribution of the Commedia dell' Arte and Viola Spolin to the further propagation of improvisation in art and pedagogy, respectively. An analysis of the structural components of comedy will be conducted, from which the essentials of the genre will be established. Consequently, archetyping and the element of truth will be legitimized as the most crucial precepts to inhabit the rule of comedic acting.

## Purpose of the Study

As a result of this study and the subsequent confirmation of the proposed comedic acting precepts, recommendations will be made as to how archetyping and the element of truth can be better applied to future pedagogical techniques, specifically through the use of improvisation. In doing so, more enhanced and productive comedic acting training may be achieved, and, thus, comedy as a performing art form may ultimately be improved. The overall benefits of this study will, therefore, serve to

advance the process of characterization and further proliferate comedic acting and comedic acting pedagogy in the future.

## CHAPTER TWO

## THE COMEDIC GENRE

Comedy as a performing art form is generally believed to have begun with the Greeks around 500 B.C. "out of the improvisations of the leaders of phallic songs" (Brockett 13). "They were lewd, lustful, unpredictable violent and destructive," writes John Wright of the satyrs, which were the early precursors to what eventually became comedy (253). He adds, "Satyrs were mythical figures, characterized in ancient Greek drama as creatures in transition: half-man and half-beast" (253).

As transitional figures, the satyrs were appropriately implemented to segue between performances of tragic plays as part of an annual competition held at the City Dionysia. The competition occurred under the guise of appeasing Dionysus, the god of wine and fertility, with playwrights submitting three tragedies and one comedy in pursuit of the grand prize (Brockett 16-17). Play content, however, was not restricted to Dionysus-focused subject matter; in fact, early comedic plays were usually political in nature and often contained sexual themes and overtones.

## Aristophanes

Aristophanes, arguably the most successful ancient Greek playwright (probably because his are the only works still preserved in extant form), used comedy to wage a defense against the Peloponnesian War. This was a fashionable motif of the inaugural period of the genre known as "Old Comedy." Although an anti-war message was usually interjected, Aristophanic plays allowed for the exploration of "deep-seated fantasies and fears in such a way that Athenians could draw both pleasure and moral instruction from the performances of comedy" (Gruber 14). Even the discriminating and distinguished Sigmund Freud harbored a certain degree of appreciation for the theatre and its cathartic contribution to the human experience: "Following Freud, we might speculate that people who repeatedly create for themselves identical situations are attempting to master something that troubles and baffles them" (Gruber 46). In this way, Greek audiences, like those of today, were drawn to the theatre for its purging and redemptive benefits. They looked to the theatre in their quest to understand themselves and their world a little better.

Aristophanes certainly set the bar, over which every comedic writer for the past twenty-five hundred years has attempted to leap. Although only eleven extant Aristophanic plays have been preserved—most notably, The Birds, The Frogs, The Clouds, Lysistrata, and Plutus—he is still considered one of the formative architects of the comedic play structure.

All of the early comedies were essentially composed according to the same format: a prologue sets up a "happy idea"; the chorus debates the merits of the idea; a scheme is proposed; a choral ode is directed to the audience regarding the line of action to be taken toward implementing the scheme; the results are reported; and, finally, revelry and celebration ensue (Brockett 16). The premise of the "happy idea" is deceptively simple, which is probably why the genre has endured, virtually unchanged, since Greek times. Nevertheless, as will be further explored, it is the more complex use of archetypes and the element of unconscious aggression which attribute most significantly to the genre's longevity.

Adapting the established format to suit their respective interests, many of the first Greek playwrights used the new foray to ridicule the notable philosophers of

the time, thereby creating one of the first styles of comedy known as "satire"—which term derives from the word, "satyr." According to Cameron Shelley, it is Aristophanes' play, The Clouds, which satirically "portrayed Plato's mentor and idol, Socrates, as a screwball sophist who teaches young men many foolish and even dangerous ideas about religion and politics" (351). Toward these accusations, Plato attributed Socrates' ultimate condemnation and execution. But it was not heresy that concerned Aristophanes most of all; his primary agenda centered on thwarting the looming threat of a Roman invasion (Brockett 16). Despite his efforts, Aristophanes' anti-war punditry would fall on deaf ears, and the Romans would eventually conquer the Greeks. However, another, even more prolific, writer would come behind Aristophanes to pick up the reins and change the face of comedy forever.

## Plautus

Plautus was unquestionably the most celebrated Roman, post-Aristophanic, comedic writer of his time, who not only picked up the reins left by the Greeks, but drove comedy home to new and interminable heights. Even though it is generally held that "all of the extant Roman comedies are

adaptations of Greek plays" (Brockett 45), the creative liberties taken by Plautus would dramatically affect the future of comedy and lay the foundation for characters, plotlines, and action, the likes of which had not been seen during Greek times.

According to William E. Gruber, "...Plautus' real contribution to the theatre was to provide plots which subsequent dramatists could 'revitalize' or 'greatly deepen'" (41). He broke new ground with the introduction of the "slave" protagonist, which—though conventionally unidentifiable to his Roman "bourgeois" audiences—was incredibly entertaining when placed in an antonymous context. Plautus' intent was not to pity the slave, but to illuminate the truth of Roman cruelty, while, contrary to reality, allowing the slave to be "victorious" over his master through the use of wit and clever retorts (Gruber 45). Under the theatrical cloak of protection, this normally unsettling premise was rendered palatable to Plautine audiences, clearing the way for Roman ideals to be brought into question for the first time by a new mirror of accountability.

The move toward the unidentifiable protagonist was in stark contrast to that of the Greek playwright,

Aristophanes, who typically wrote about "regular" people. Prior to Plautus, subject matter was generally geared toward those standard archetypes more readily recognizable to Roman audiences and usually focused on the daily life of the bourgeois sect. Due to his efforts of presenting "a kind of ritualized status reversal with powerful stabilizing or compensatory effects on its audience" (Gruber 43), Plautus was afforded the distinction of having given birth to a new trend of dramatic plotlines that would transcend the generations and become one of the most imitated formats to emerge from the genre.

In his book, Comedy in Space, Time, and the Imagination, Paul H. Grawe considers Plautus "the acknowledged master of classical comedy" (83), accrediting his play, Menaechmi, as the launching point from which all future comedy would spring. Plautus' writing style and uniquely-crafted comedic components—for example, solidifying a set cast of stock characters—would go on to influence nearly every comedic writer to come, including the Commedia dell' Arte, Shakespeare, Molière, and contemporary writers to date. Willard Smith purports that "the 'archetypes' are, of course, the comedies of the ancients" (116), and it is the archetypes which will be

shown in this essay to be the foundation on which all comedy is perpetually built.

Plautus not only sensationalized a fixed set of stock characters, but he is also responsible for cultivating a fledgling comedic style known as "farce" (Brockett 44). Grawe acknowledges Plautus' contribution to comedy—specifically, as it pertains to his play, Menaechmi—as follows:

> The thematic idea of mistaken identity that provides the whole complication of Plautus' Menaechmi has been used in a thousand guises throughout the history of comedy. The farcically exaggerated beatings have become a kind of comedy in themselves. And the parasite and henpecked husband character portraits of Menaechmi have provided stock comedic figures ever since. (83)

Menaechmi, in fact, would later be reworked by Shakespeare to become one of the Renaissance master's earliest achievements, A Comedy of Errors (McDonald 32). Thus, comedy writers and audiences alike owe a tremendous debt to Plautus. His inventions inspired the inspirational and began a trickling down of comedic ideals that would remain

immune to the mutation of the evolutionary process (Grawe 69).

## The Adaptation of Comedy

The comedic genre, as it was first introduced by the Greeks, is believed not to have evolved, but to have been socially adapted over the generations to appease the contemporary concerns of the day; in other words, all comedies represent the "histrionic strategy" (Gruber 2) of their modern playwrights. Nevertheless, according to Grawe, regardless of style, patterning, or technique, the same "message" (15) has been preached within the comedic forum since the onset of the genre. But to define this message, the most enigmatic of questions must first be answered: What is the purpose of comedy?

Comedy has been analyzed and delineated by countless scholars since the day it was debuted at the Great Festival. As comedy nearly always culminates in the response of laughter, one might conclude that the purpose of comedy is to prompt a biological reaction. But psychologist Patricia Keith-Spiegel believes that the purpose of comedy is to provide a physiological "release" (Kerr 11) for the audience, while others consider it more

psychologically therapeutic. Though few would deny this logic, many conflicting opinions still linger within the dramaturgical colloquy regarding comedy's most *essential* function within the human experience. It is, however, the appraisal of the great philosopher, Aristotle, which resounds most significantly in this regard.

## Aristotle on Comedy

Aristotle notoriously panned comedy and its accomplices through his few, but harsh, criticisms within his Poetics, referring to early comedic attempts as representing "lower types" partaking in "trivial action" (Grawe 4). This scathing critique was legitimized by the fact that the City Dionysia was celebrated by charismatic and often drunken revelers, whose actions were, no doubt, justified by the very nature of the god they worshipped: "Dionysus is the god who violates all ordinary boundaries, as do his devotees, who become satyr-like creatures, a grotesque hybrid of humans and animals" (Berger 16).

For this reason, Aristotle elevated tragedy above its sister-genre because it dealt with *serious* action, as opposed to the inconsequential matters of comedy. Since philosophers believe that "play" is a threat to order,

restricted to children undergoing the natural process of development, only that which is critically staid is deemed valid from a philosophical standpoint (Shelley 364). Interpreting the Aristolian concerns regarding the dangers of comedy, Berger writes:

> The comic experience is orgiastic, if not in the old sense of sexual promiscuity, in the metaphorical sense of joining together what convention and morality would keep apart. It debunks all pretensions, including the pretensions of the sacred. The comic, therefore, is dangerous to all established order. (16)

Though critics like Aristotle and his mentor, Plato, have screamed at comedy since the dawn of the genre, it has unabashedly sustained—perhaps with its fingers in its ears—to far surpass tragedy as the most popular genre. Grawe points out:

> Despite generally unappreciative and largely unperceptive criticism, comedy has shown an amazing resilience, far outstripping her more prestigious sister in terms of number of works produced, box-office receipts, and development into independently successful sub-genres. (7)

Refuting Aristotle's notion that all comedy is based in trivial action, Grawe insists that comedy, in fact, is the representation of "life," not action, which is why audiences are drawn to its format: they see a convincing depiction of themselves, facing an adversity that is similar to their own and confronting a familiar fear (Grawe 16-17). As the characters overcome—usually through the use of their own wit or by coincidence—the faith of the audience in their own survival is renewed. Such is the liberating power of comedy.

Laughter Doeth Good

Comedy as a literary art form is thought to have begun centuries before the Greeks. This claim is corroborated in the parables of the Old Testament:

> ...Balaam being rebuked by his ass is both amusing and deadly serious. So, too, is David calling down to Saul's camp and Saul looking down to notice the tear in the hem of his robe, and even Gideon, hiding behind the wine press and being greeted by the angel as a mighty man of valor. (Grawe 269)

It is intriguing to think that God, Himself, resorted to irony for appealing to man's sense of humor as a means toward a moral message. But it is also worth noting—as represented in the above Biblical passages—how comedy is nearly always manifested out of adversity. In fact, incongruity demands it, and, reciprocally, comedy demands incongruity. In these examples, the incongruity of fear—specifically, the fear of death—juxtaposed with an unexpected response, creates comedy. These examples also remind us that if we can laugh through adversity, we will survive. The Bible (King James Version) asserts: "A merry heart [laughter] doeth good like a medicine...." (Prov. 17.22). Here, medicine, an invention of man promoted for its healing properties, is likened to the healing effects of laughter. Therefore, by deduction, it would stand to reason that the prophets of the Bible believed that laughter was a *key* to man's survival.

Berger asserts that man's love for laughter is not merely arbitrary, but is an instinctive need, self-evident in all cultures—both civilized and not:

> The phenomenon of the comic as such is universal. Not only do all human beings laugh (and presumably have been laughing since homo sapiens

> mutated away from his simian relatives), but no human culture has been studied that does not have a concept of the comic. (39)

Man has relied upon comedy as a tool for expression, ridicule, relief, and rebuke since he first learned to communicate:

> Although evidence on which to base any judgment concerning the earliest of human ages is extremely scarce, it is safe to conclude from what scant remains have come down to us that comedy was already in existence in the most primitive times. (Feibleman 17)

As comedy has sustained, so, too, has its functions. Dr. Avner Ziv, in his book, Personality and the Sense of Humor, defines the five functions of humor and their psychological connection to the human personality, most of which originated before Aristophanes first set ink to parchment.

## The Functions of Humor

### The Sexual Function

According to Dr. Ziv, the five functions of humor are as follows: the sexual, the aggressive, the defense mechanism, the social, and the intellectual. He justifies

his classification of the "sexual function" based on Freud's theory that "sexuality controls everything human," and that one of the main purposes for humor is "the expression of sexual drive" (Ziv 15).

> Sexual humor enriches our sexual experience. Dealing with the subject of sex in the form of humor adds something to help satiate our hearty appetites. Both physical and social limits to the physical satisfaction of sexual needs exist, but sexual humor lets us add to our enjoyment on another level. (Ziv 19-20)

Sexual humor is popular amongst comedic writers even today. In fact, this function was integrated into the fabric of the comedic repertory at the time of its initiation. It will, no doubt, remain the most popular of humor's functions until the day man finally achieves his dream of attaining the everlasting orgasm. Under these conditions, we can only surmise that sexual humor is condemned to go on forever.

<u>The Aggressive Function</u>

The second of Ziv's humor functions is the "aggressive," originally proffered by Plato in his

Superiority Theory and referenced here by Michael K. Cundall:

> ...what causes us to laugh is a judgment about persons: a judgment that highlights our own superiority, moral or otherwise....Although it is true that comedy and laughter are useful in helping relieve problematic emotions in controlled environments, humor and laughter are acts of the vicious and give false illusions to those who use it that they are wise when they are not. (204-205)

Dr. Ziv believes that comedy is founded on the assumption that man has an implicit desire to prove his superiority over others (7-8). Building on this theoretical notion, Willard Smith suggests: "In a comedy, one feels less illusion; one watches consciously a show of life in which the principal character awakens our laughter by the lack of certain qualities which we feel ourselves to possess" (13). The illusion here refers to the contrast between reality and unreality, which Smith proposes is exactly how audiences assimilate the dramatic reenactment of life represented on the stage. Setting aside reality, audiences allow their egos to be metaphorically stroked by

the illusion that other people face adversity less gracefully than they would under the same circumstances. The integration of aggression into humor is never more pronounced than in the comedic styling of satire, which bases its entire schematic on the function.

*Satire*, defined by Merriam-Webster as "holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn" (see APPENDIX B), was considered such a powerful "weapon" that armies of the Middle Ages would trot out their best satirist to offend the morale of the opposing troops before instigating the confrontation (Ziv 5). The vanquishing side would, then, praise the satirist as the conquering hero.

Today, political satirists perform a similar function within the media and have been known to disrupt—even destroy—the careers of many a politician, simply by making them the butt of a joke. Contemporary satirists, like Jon Stewart and Bill Mahr, are loved or hated, depending on which side of their poison arrow you are standing. The influence of comics, such as these, is yet another boon to the rationale that buttresses the Platonic Superiority Theory.

> In the comic situation the victim is usually deprived of authority and dignity. This gives

> the onlooker a feeling of superiority....Pleasure in the comic arises from a more or less conscious comparison between the onlooker's perfection and the other person's obvious imperfection. (Grotjahn 17)

Stewart and Marh's audiences are, therefore, psychologically empowered by the comics' satire, contrasting the condition of their "victims," who lie metaphorically castrated and demoralized. Such, again, is the irrefutable power of comedy, and, like the sexual function, the aggressive function of humor can be expected to linger in the comedic aggregation as long as man continues to exact superiority over his counterparts.

The Social Function

Against the anti-social aspects of the aggressive function, the "social function" is a counterproductive notion. According to Ziv, prospective group members often exercise this form of humor as an agent for achieving social acceptance: "Humor can therefore be used as a key for opening up interpersonal relations. A person who wants to be accepted into an existing social group first goes through a stage of testing" (29). The "testing" Ziv refers to is an individual's use of humor to determine the group's

standpoints and convictions. If the individual tells a joke, and the group laughs, then his chances of acceptance are better. On the other hand, if the group does not laugh, then the individual has learned the boundaries of the group and can recalibrate and try again, now better-informed.

The social function of humor is also used to consolidate an already-established group and unify its positions:

> Private jokes are used, to a certain extent, as a defense against strangers. Because they originate from shared experiences, they strongly emphasize the group's uniqueness and effective superiority over the stranger who does not laugh, because only the good guys understand. (Ziv 33)

Here, Plato's Superiority Theory is demonstrated in yet another function of humor, intimating that man's quest for dominance festers in the substratum of most comedy. In light of this recurring substantiation of Plato's negative appraisal of comedy, one wonders if he saw any redeeming qualities of the genre which would counteract the slings he notoriously discharged in its direction.

Plato

Plato has been interpreted (and misinterpreted) for centuries, none the least of which speculations concern his views on comedy. His biased opinions were, no doubt, tainted by his devotion to his mentor, Socrates, who was effectively "murdered" by the genre (see Chapter One). Nevertheless, Plato, in his wisdom, saw a philosophical advantage for the incongruity that is intrinsically present within comedy.

Plato believed that the philosophical person seeks to create order out of chaos. In a comedy, chaos is represented through incongruity—the basis of all comedy (Ziv 91). Incongruity occurs through the playwright's assumption of the audience's expectations. This assumption, juxtaposed with a contradiction, creates a surprise effect, resulting in a psychological reaction. The process terminates in the physiological reaction known as laughter.

Willard Smith expounds on the human response to incongruity:

> Our nervous energy is concentrated upon a certain end which reason leads us to expect will result from the given circumstances. Suddenly there is

a collision between that massed nerve force and an end incongruous with, or in disproportion to, that expectation. The now superfluous nervous energy discharges itself by the spasmodic contraction of certain facial muscles which we call laughter. (63-64)

According to Ziv, incongruity is one of the three main rudiments of comedy: "There are many techniques for creating humor, but all involve surprise, incongruity, and a short time span" (91). Plato believed that the use of incongruity in this way creates social chaos and that the intellect is necessary for restoring order. Cameron Shelley attempts an exegesis of Plato's ideology on the subject:

> The love of knowledge is compatible with an appreciation of humor because humor alerts the philosophic person to a confusion in thinking. He may then enjoy the prospect of clearing the confusion up. Humor can thus be an aid in philosophical inquiry. (358)

Humor, however, is dangerous in the hands of the non-philosopher, as he will not have the intellect to employ moderation and may "overindulge" in laughter and satirical

scorn (Shelley 355). This Platonic notion was somewhat prophetic, if you consider the earlier example of the satirist "warriors" of the Middle Ages. Even today, comedy carries immense clout, inducing its audiences to revel in the maiming of whosoever may be the satirist's object of ridicule at the moment. Plato, therefore, believed that the average man cannot resist his natural compulsions, and, unless an individual possesses the intelligence to approach humor with the altruistic purpose of restoring order, it should be avoided altogether.

Although Plato saw this one—albeit discriminating—benefit to humor, he was generally against it. The Superiority Theory has, therefore, become predominantly associated with Plato as an explanation for man's persuasion toward the seductive powers of comedy. There is a second theory, however, that attempts to psychologically ratify the human fascination for humor—that is, The Relief Theory.

In his article, Humor and the Limits of Incongruity, Michael Cundall explores the various theories regarding comedy and human behavior as set forth by philosophers Plato, Hobbes, Freud, Spencer, and Morreall. Topics range

from the Superiority to the Incongruity to—as will be discussed now—the Relief Theory.

According to Cundall, Freud, who initially proposed the theory, believed: "...what leads us to laugh is a frustration of an expectation coupled with a reinforcement of our understanding of our own vulnerability" (206). When we see ourselves depicted within dramatic situations, through which tension is created by the infusion of conflict, we become sympathetic to the "hero" and expect a certain response—for instance, fleeing. When, in fact, that response is in opposition to what we expect—such as a witty retort—then our hero appears victorious over his fears, alleviating our tension and frustrating our expectations. This presents relief, thus giving rise to the term, "Relief Theory."

The Defense Mechanism

Ziv refers to the Relief Theory when assigning the fourth function of humor, which he calls the "defense mechanism" (Ziv 49-50). According to Ziv, this is a dramatic trick for separating the audience, as well as the comic, from its fears: "What happens in anxiety situations? When anxiety is created by observing an unpleasant situation, the disappearance of the situation brings

relief, which is expressed in laughter" (48). Therefore, treating tension with humor psychologically protects us from undesirable consequences. Such is the basis of the defense mechanism and the mitigating raison d'être of the Relief Theory.

Comic relief—a frequent design tactic of playwrights to create "laughing points" for offsetting the tension of the play (Grawe 63)—is a derivative of Freud's theory. The patterning of laughs by way of comic relief is crucial to the strategy of the playwright when constructing the comedic piece; it paces the play and highlights the major points in action, allowing for more intense discovery when arriving at the culminating denouement (Grawe 218).

Brockett, in outlining comedy's origin, discusses its predecessor, the satyr play, and its fundamental use as comic relief to the more "serious" aspects of Greek tragedy:

> Essentially a burlesque treatment of mythology (often ridiculing gods or heroes and their adventures), the boisterous action [of the satyr] occurred in a rural setting and included various dancing, as well as indecent language and gestures....Satyr plays served as afterpieces to

> the tragedies, providing comic relief from the serious plays that had gone before. (15)

Grawe believes that "Shakespeare, of course, was the great pioneer of 'comic relief scenes' as a means of leaving particular emotional responses in order to build them later to a higher pitch" (63). The relief factor in the design of comedy is used for orchestrating emotional highs and lows—in other words, manipulating the dynamics of the piece. This was a concept developed early in the genre, but, according to Grawe, was infinitely mastered by Shakespeare. Comic relief, however, did not end with Shakespeare; it permeates the genre as much today as it ever did and makes the dramatic events of tragedy more conducive to audience thresholds.

The Intellectual Function

The final function Ziv attributes to humor is the "intellectual function." It is the "ah-ha" moment, when the listener realizes that he "got it!" The intellectual function is attributed to the wit, which applies not only to that of the audience, but to the comic, as well. For the comic, he must construct the joke to be understood at a designated moment, and "this demands some planning" (Ziv 70). He is only successful when the audience achieves a

revelation by resolving the disparity between the incongruous components. These points must be calibrated judiciously in order to be effective, and it is, therefore, the prolific application of the comic's wit that determines the efficacy of the comedic piece.

> The intellectual activity that accompanies the production and enjoyment of humor represents the intellectual function of humor. Intellectual activity that leads to understanding causes enjoyment and satisfaction. The source of satisfaction is the conscious proof of our ability. (Ziv 70)

Therefore, it is the communion-of-wit between audience and playwright that allows for the formulation of humor and its subsequent discernment, respectively.

Comedy writers, regardless of time or place in history, have consistently used at least one (or more) of these humor functions to achieve their comedic purposes. In whatever form comedy assumes, it is apparent that man has an insatiable lust for its transitory and emancipative powers. Could this be because of man's instinctive physiological need to laugh, as suggested by Berger? Or perhaps the appeal of comedy is explained by the old

psychological debate surrounding Plato's proffered Superiority Theory: that man must elevate himself above others and finds pleasure in those who fail or fall short of his own superiority? This debate, which began during the time of Plato, continues today. Therefore, with each of the humor functions comprehensively examined, let us explore some of the more scholarly definitions of the genre.

## Defining the Genre

Defining the genre of comedy has become the eternal question, and all who have attempted to answer it agree on one thing: there is no agreement. Some scholars attempt to define comedy on a socially responsive level: "A comedy is a form of the dramatic art in which a moral flaw in character awakens our laughter by its lack of harmony with the exigencies of society" (Smith 149). Another attempt at defining the genre hints at a more Aristophanic explanation: "Comedy refers to a literary structure, be it drama or novel or film, that moves toward a happy ending and implies a positive understanding of human experience" (McDonald 81). And, finally, others have put forth theories which are more philosophical in nature:

> ...comedy as seen from a formal perspective is the representation of life patterned to demonstrate or to assert a faith in human survival, often including or emphasizing how that survival is possible or under what conditions that survival takes place. (Grawe 17)

In Grawe's opinion, comedy—as opposed to tragedy—revolves around the knowledge of what *is* and the hope of what *could be*. It is the faith of man in his own conservation—the dramatic epitome of "the happily ever after." Sleeping Beauty notwithstanding, this definition does not guarantee that the boy will always get the girl; rather, as comedy is the representation of life, and since, true to life, the boy does not always get the girl, the "message" of comedy insists that the boy will, however, maintain the will, as well as the means, to go on without her.

According to Grawe's definition, all comedy throughout history has preached the same underlying message of human survival. Regardless of the comedic "styles" employed to deliver that message, for centuries, it has remained a constant, unifying the genre into a neat package that is clearly defined by a common purpose. But can this theory

be substantiated? Of course, by this definition, plays which include the proverbial Aristophanic "happy ending" need no apology. But what about those plays which are classified as comedies, but which do not end "stereotypically" happy?

One pertinent example is a show in which the guarantee of comedy is explicitly ensured within its title: Funny Girl (Styne-Merrill, 1964). This play is riddled throughout with satiric wit and farcical devices, each serving as comic relief to some of the more serious moments in the play. It centers on the life of a young, but talented, woman named Fanny Brice, who, despite her more endearing internal qualities, battles to overcome a lack of confidence in those external qualities which are less-than-endearing. Nick Arnstein, a dashing young gambler, who lives according to his whims and passions, develops an unexpected attraction to Fanny. With some convincing, he gives her the confidence to believe in more than just her exceptional singing ability and clever persona, but in her beauty and sexuality, as well.

Fanny presents Nick with an overwhelming aesthetic appeal, launching the man into a romantic pursuit of the girl that surprises everyone, including Fanny.

Nevertheless, in the end, Nick's pride will not allow him to play "Mr. Brice" to Fanny's stardom, and, consequently, Fanny loses the love of her life. But in a gripping finale, she sings a song of hope and faith, vowing that she will, in fact, survive without him!

Of course, merely demonstrating a faith in human survival does not a comedy make. There is also the consideration of the "laughing points," created by the incongruity of what is unconsciously expected by the audience and their ensuing reaction to the opposite transaction.

To illustrate this type of comedic incongruity, consider the movie, Naked Gun (Paramount, 1988). In this piece, the Queen, in full regalia, is accidentally "topped" by Lt. Frank Drebin as he attempts to prevent an apparent assassination attempt. The two careen helplessly across the dining room table, legs sprawled and eyes jutting from their sockets. Since there is an assumption with regard to royalty and the relative protocol associated with that status, a comedic effect is created by the incongruous circumstances. With the aggressive function fast work, the audience is compelled to laugh. However, the laughter response of the audience is not a simple matter of

prediction-by-design; it is—as will be discussed later on—a response that is only released when the unconscious is allowed to dominate over reasoning.

Considering Grawe's definition of comedy, which is to demonstrate a faith in human survival, how, then, does each of the various comedic styles correspond to this standard? As nearly every style of comedy is based in the "aggressive function" of humor, human survival would appear to be an antithetical notion. Consider, again, the scene from Naked Gun: Where is the faith in human survival as the Queen is figuratively dethroned by the denigrating circumstances? The answer lies in the distinction between the "means" and the "result" of the comedic piece. The style—in this case, parody—constitutes the means toward achieving that result which is indicative of all comedy. As a parody, this style is notoriously rooted in satire, and, therefore, the aggressive function is essential to its appeal. Nevertheless, the result is a message of human survival. By the end of the piece, good has won over evil: the "bad guy" is vanquished, and Lt. Drebin is promoted to a higher rank and status. The audience leaves the theatre with the assurance that their hero not only survives, but flourishes.

The satirical circumstances within the comedic piece are merely a means to an end, which, in keeping with Grawe's definition, conventionally promotes a faith in human survival. In other words, in a comedy, the audience is *pre*-assured that the hero will always be victorious over his enemy and will live another day to fight another battle, thus resulting in a happy ending. This analysis, therefore, supports the theory that comedy has not evolved since the days of Aristophanes, but has, in fact, merely adapted to suit the period in which the particular comedy appears; in other words, a faith in human survival equates to a "happy ending."

The benefits of comedy to society, when imparting a message of human survival, are, therefore, great; its cause is noble. We are inspired to trudge on, even through adversity, using our wits to see us through. And it is the wit that is uniquely associated with comedy, providing for its genius and lending to its most universal and profound appeal.

## Wit's Relation to Comedy

"Wit is laughter with the accent on intellectualism. It is, as people believe, the final layer—and the least

primitive layer—in the composite structure known as 'the sense of humor'" (Bergler 67). As previously discussed in Ziv's five functions of humor, the last (the intellectual function) relies on the wit of the playwright to orchestrate an incongruity. It is the obligation of the audience to use its intellect to achieve a revelation—that is, to "get the joke." The measure of the wit is generally determined by the disparity between the incongruous components; in other words, the farther the distance the audience must intellectually travel to connect the images and conclude the message, the wittier the playwright is perceived to be and, thus, the greater the audience appreciation. There is also the additional Freudian factor of audience ego and their perception of their own wit once they have made a "connection" (Halpern 29).

Bergler affiliates wit with irony, pointing out the contradiction that exists when reality is juxtaposed with meaning and intention:

> Wit always employs paradox and irony. It paradoxically conjoins aspects of reality that are understood to be separate in the serious attitude. It ironically hides its meanings, saying one thing but meaning another. (136)

Irony—another word for incongruity—was considered by Freud to be the comic's exploitation of contradiction; in other words, the audience is prepared to hear (or see) the exact opposite of what will ultimately transpire at the discretion of the comic's wit (Freud 277). As a result, the audience will respond positively, negatively, or neutrally.

The neutral response is, according to Freud, the result of the irony being lost on the listener, usually because the comic failed to indicate "through the inflections, concomitant gestures, and through slight changes in style" that a contradiction was being implied (276-77). This analysis is debatable, of course, since many a "dry" comic has excelled in the art of contradiction and irony without emphasizing such theatrics.

As the neutral response is to the comic's wit the equivalent of rejection, certainly more dismissing to the comic is the negative response, which often occurs when comedy "hits too close to home." However, for audiences who can set aside their pain and suppress conscious reasoning, comedy can serve as a kind of panacea for the ailments which afflict the psyche.

> Humor is thus a means to gain pleasure despite the painful affects which disturb it; it acts as a substitute for this affective development, and takes its place. If we are in a situation which tempts us to liberate painful affects according to our habits, and motives then urge us to suppress these affects *statu nascendi*, we have the conditions for humor. (Freud 371)

Here, Freud reiterates the recurring theme of laughter-as-a-medicine. We, the audience, naturally protect the most painful aspects of our psyches by building walls between the unconscious and the conscious. Nevertheless, we achieve liberation when we forfeit to the will of our unconscious desires and surrender to the psychological abandon of "playing" (Berger 56).

Freud believed that the wit releases repressed instincts from the unconscious, which usually concern the sexual drive and, occasionally, aggression (Smith 68). According to Berger, Freud also considered the wit an unconscious vehicle for rebelling against authority and, more precisely, against reason: "Wit creates a separate reality, luminous with magical power, with its own distinct rules" (56). This is the rationale that supports the

theory of "infantilization," or the state in which the unconscious mischievously entertains incongruity. According to Freud, infantilization occurs when the unconscious effectively drops its guard and allows itself to play with words, meanings, images, and connotations (196). The individual regresses to childlike psychological behavior by separating from reality and indulging in the *un*reality of his unconscious proclivities, thus inspiring the term, infantilization.

Wit is the translator of double-meanings and opposites and provides for a sense of the absurd (Smith 68). It accommodates the crafty manipulation of words and their subtexts. Wit is also responsible for the audience's ability to decipher the "codes" of incongruity—which instincts, according to Freud, are intuitively manifested out of the unconscious through the process of "wit-formation" (Freud 281). Therefore, the unconscious wit becomes an asset to the playwright and the audience for the creation and enjoyment of comedy, respectively. This begs the question: If wit is directly related to the unconscious, and the unconscious carries such efficacy to liberate the psyche and create and assimilate the

components of incongruity, what makes this area of the mind so powerful?

Willard Smith summarizes Freud's interpretation of the all-consuming authority of the unconscious:

> ...the unconscious assumes a portion of the mind which we are generally unaware, save in dreams; an unconscious mind, in which are packed all the repressed and thwarted desires and motives by which the primitive race-spirit expresses itself in infancy, childhood and adolescence. (Smith 68)

The unconscious, therefore, harbors all of our darkest desires! When we delight in comedy—whether in the role of the comic or the audience—we are unleashing the unconscious where our "thwarted desires" are hold up and are regressing to childlike play with the thoughts and images of our involuntary—no less antipathetic—inclinations.

Through the knowledge (or assumption) of man's unconscious tendencies and the mutual identifiers employed to facilitate the proverbial comedic message, playwrights and their audiences have come to speak the same language—one that is based in aggression and incongruity.
Therefore, having dissected the unconscious wit at length, let us now delve further into another unconscious aspect of

comedy and one of the most pervasive influences to ever affect the fundamental comedic structure: the archetype.

# CHAPTER THREE

# ARCHETYPES IN COMEDY

## Carl Jung

We cannot begin a conversation of archetypes without first discussing Carl Jung. Although the concept of archetypes was contemplated long before Jung explored its virtues, it was he who first made the connection between archetypes and the unconscious: "The archetype is essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear" (Jung 5).

Jung believed that the psyche contains a surplus of paradigmatic "identities" which are concealed within the unconscious and released at various times throughout the "individuation" process (Porterfield 14). This process is the means by which the individual achieves psychological maturity. Humans not only project archetypes onto others by seeking them out in society, but, in doing so, we effectively look for ways to lure these archetypes out of the unconscious and usher them into consciousness. Jung writes: "I use the term 'individuation' to denote the

process by which the person becomes a psychological 'in-dividual,' that is, a separate indivisible unity or 'whole'" (275).

Jung identified some, but not all, of the archetypes which he believed to be holed up in the unconscious. Admittedly, the list is incomplete because such archetypes live in the region of the psyche that cannot be investigated or probed outright (Jung 40-41). For now, the following have been identified and entered into the Jungian archetypal registry: the shadow, the anima, animus, the father, the mother, the maiden, the trickster, the hero, the spirit, the persona, the holy child, the self, the wise old man, death, and rebirth.

Jung referred to individuation as "the transformation process that loosens the attachment to the unconscious" (293). It is a complex psychological phenomenon—too complicated to be fully scrutinized here, but simple enough in its logic to be applied within this context without exhaustive interpretation. Sufficed to say, each of us is drawn by the psyche toward certain social archetypal personas which reflect those harbored within the unconscious. These archetypes are eventually released into the consciousness by way of sensory and psychic suggestion;

in other words, as they are seen and perceived by the individual, they become available to the individual in various persona forms. Once an individual has "consciously" explored each of the unconscious archetypes, a state of psychological wholeness (or "individuation") is achieved. Sally F. Porterfield writes:

> Like a troupe of brilliantly innovative actors, our archetypes fit themselves into whatever parts are available to them in each individuation drama, but they always maintain, under the mask of the actor, the archetypal characteristics that are common to all mankind. (21)

With regard to dramatic depiction, man is thought to have a psychological craving to live vicariously through those archetypes which are typically portrayed on the theatrical stage—specifically, the "hero" archetype. Joseph Campbell, who indoctrinated this archetype in his book, The Hero with a Thousand Faces, believed that man esteems the character of the hero as it is represented in "the fairy tale, the myth, and the divine comedy of the soul" (28). It is the ideal prototype, indicative of the one that inhabits the psyche of man. Therefore, the journey of the dramatic hero symbolizes the "transcendence

of the universal tragedy of man" (Campbell 28). Campbell maintains that the hero archetype, as well as others, have been theatrically depicted throughout history as a means to satisfy man's need to "discover and assimilate" (18) his own unconscious archetypes. Campbell's interpretation of individuation is defined as the individual becoming a "valid, normally human form" (19-20).

As the hero represented in dramatic literature is understandably deified by the human psyche, so, too, are the other, less-dignified, archetypes. These are the ones which appeal to the "shadow" (Jung 123) element of the psyche. For example, in melodrama, when we observe the hero besting the villain, the hero within us is victorious; however, as the villain antagonistically plays out his maniacal fantasies, our shadow, or "evil" (Jung 322), archetype is also thereby indulged.

Man is an actor by nature, according to Jung; he hides from the world his "wicked blood-spirit, swift anger and sensual weakness" by camouflaging it with "the persona, the mask of the actor" (20). Although Jung deals specifically with the unconscious, or the "involuntary manifestations" (153) of the archetypes, other scholars have directed their

philosophies toward the more conscious aspects of the psyche.

Carol Pearson, in her book, The Hero Within, expounds on Joseph Campbell's theory of the hero archetype. Like Campbell, she describes individuation as the journey of the hero within us (1). He navigates through the various stages of "awareness" and explores each of the correlative archetypes before subsequently graduating to the next stage (Pearson 6). The hero, in the Pearson interpretation, resides in the consciousness of man and is influenced by popular culture, as well as his own personal experiences. This differs from the Jungian conception, since it relies on the individual's conscious perceptions and is not obliged by unconscious dictates.

As the hero journeys through the stages of awareness, he embodies each associative archetype and consciously chooses whether to move forward or regress backward to a lower level of awareness (Pearson 16-17). In other words, unlike that of the unconscious, man is capable of controlling his progression through the conscious archetypal stages. This is manifested in the form of the individual's "persona," or, as Jung defines it, the "mask" (20). As the psyche matures and develops, the archetypal

personas confer to higher forms. Each of these stages is subjectively identified in society by its characteristic idiosyncrasies, with such recognition contingent upon the observer's cultural and historical biases. Nevertheless, there is a universal consensus with regard to the specific identifiers which typify the various social archetypes; for this reason, they are universally recognizable in their replicated forms—in other words, through their theatrical depictions. Therefore, it will be the conscious archetypes which will be explored herein as they pertain to the genre of comedy.

## The Six Archetypes

Allan G. Hunter, in his book, Stories We Need to Know, outlines his interpretation of the six conscious archetypes of human development as they are manifested in the form of the persona. The first of these stages indicates the most basic (or "infantile") phase, and the last culminates in the full maturation of the psyche. Jung referred to this, of course, as the individuation process. Campbell and Pearson, as noted above, consider this the journey of the hero within us. Hunter, however, simply refers to this as

the process of human development, specifically of the human mind (10).

The six archetypes identified by Hunter are: the Innocent, the Orphan, the Pilgrim, the Warrior-Lover, the Monarch, and the Magician. Hunter suggests that humans recognize these archetypes in all aspects of life, and, as art is considered to represent life, we see them illustrated in comedy, as well. This is evidenced in the earliest Greek plays and continues to be substantiated by contemporary comedic works today. Before looking at some examples, let us first analyze the six Hunter archetypes in greater detail, so we can better recognize their personification in the genre of comedy.

Hunter describes the Innocent archetype as one that is "defenseless and undefending" (12). This is the individual who is "trusting, wholly loving," and very "accepting" of those around him (17). During this stage of development, the individual is quite vulnerable; however, he is learning the most important lessons he will need in life. The Innocent is not afraid to look ignorant or to ask questions; he is a shameless learner. Most of all, he wants to trust others. Due to his trusting nature, he tends to be quite "gullible" and is easily "ordered around"

by the more dominant figures in his life (17). We associate this archetype with children and simple-minded adults; however, all human beings are capable of reverting back to this stage when necessity forces them into a more passive, learning phase.

The Orphan archetype seeks someone with whom he can identify—someone to take care of him. He eagerly seeks to be "adopted" (22) and feels "alone, threatened, misunderstood, and desperate to be understood by someone" (12). For this reason, the "passive" Orphan will attach himself as the "dependent sidekick" (22) to anyone who will adopt him. The rejection by this individual of what was previously "expected" (13) of him plays a huge part in this phase of psychic development. Orphans are generally petrified of losing their security, and, for this reason, they may become tyrannical in their efforts to sustain that security. This describes the more "active" Orphan, as seen in the "office bully," the "yes-man," and the "crooked cop" (22). These individuals are driven by their egos and, therefore, are not above stooping to "backstabbing" (22) and manipulation, if necessary.

The Orphan stage is a very difficult one to graduate out of; however, once the Orphan is ready to look for

"meaning" (32) in his life, he will progress into the Pilgrim stage. The Pilgrim archetype is seeking identity—a real purpose. This stage is a spiritual journey, in which the Pilgrim becomes an "explorer" (35) who "wanders the globe" (32) in search of his "highest calling" (39). Because of this, the Pilgrim is one who cannot seem to "settle down" (32). He believes that the "grass is always greener" (32) somewhere else; therefore, he compulsively moves from place to place until he finds what he is looking for. For the Pilgrim archetype, "movement equates to progress" (33). However, once he has established his identity and determined his life's calling, the Pilgrim is ready to "attach" (14) himself to it. This begins the stage of the Warrior-Lover.

The Warrior-Lover is full of "passionate commitment" (14). This sentiment is applied to the people, causes, family, or other convictions to which the individual might martyr himself. Unless the individual has completely progressed out of the Pilgrim stage—identifying who he is and what he stands for—the stage of the Warrior-Lover will never be fully realized. There cannot be a firm commitment to any cause if the individual has not yet sanctified his identity. A true Warrior-Lover is revered by others as the

most "responsible" (58) in the group. He is not motivated by ego, but by the greater good. It is the "individual" (69) that matters most. Therefore, the Warrior-Lover is not concerned with the "smaller battles," but focuses on the "larger campaign" (50). Warrior-Lovers who champion others' rights can fall into a trap of self-importance. In this case, pride will prevent the individual from moving on to the next stage. It is imperative that the Warrior-Lover finds a sense of humility, in order that he may be ready to move on to the Monarch Pair stage.

The Monarch Pair is a twinned figure, representing the King-masculine and Queen-feminine (14). He is the most responsible of the archetypes. However, as opposed to the Warrior-Lover, who fights for a cause but is overly-independent and prefers to be a lone intercessor, the Monarch delegates, employing wisdom and self-control. He is at the center of the cause, but "doesn't fight the battle" (73) himself. He "takes action to cause action to be set into motion" (82), overseeing like a ruler. The Monarch is the one to whom others turn, and he is occasionally forced to use "tough love" (74) in order to accomplish his goals. He "listens" with "patience and empathy," like a judge from whom others seek advice and

counsel (78). He has "mercy" and "concern" for all (74). He is the quintessential "parent," but can become a "tyrant" if allowed to be ruled by his "shadow" (73).

The Magician archetype is the last in the maturation process of the human psyche; however, it is the most difficult one to achieve (14). This is the ultimate level of wisdom. The Magician is the individual who says little, but means much. He "makes things happen with little effort" (83), standing on the outskirts of the cause while using patient circumspection, discernment, and deliberate restraint. The Magician has "special persuasive power" (87) and is a "miracle-worker" (83) to those who seek him out. Magicians exist in society as the "grandparent" (87), the minister, the psychologist, and the shaman—in other words, those who are not ruled by their egos, but by their desire to escort others into "awareness."

For the purposes of identifying these archetypes in comedy, let us endow them with certain classifying traits: the Innocent is the "trusting-lover"; the Orphan is the "sarcastic-sidekick"; the Pilgrim is the "seeker-wanderer"; the Warrior-Lover is the "passionate-martyr"; the Monarch is the "protector-ruler"; and the Magician is the "shaman-adviser." These archetypes have been represented in comedy

since the beginning of the genre and continue to be represented today in television, film, and contemporary theatre.

In the late twentieth-century, the Hunter archetypes were depicted in televised sitcoms by the following: the Innocent was seen in the characters of Lowell (*Wings*, NBC 1990-97), Coach (*Cheers*, NBC 1982-93), and Rose (*Golden Girls*, NBC 1985-92); the Orphan was embodied by Chandler (*Friends*, NBC 1994-2004) and Carla (*Cheers*, NBC 1982-93); the Pilgrim characters were represented by Phoebe (*Friends*, NBC 1994-2004) and Kramer (*Seinfeld*, NBC 1990-98); the Warrior-Lovers were seen as Richie (*Happy Days*, ABC 1974-84) and Angela (*Who's the Boss*, ABC 1984-92); the Monarchs included Fay (*Wings*, NBC 1990-97), Mr. Cunningham (*Happy Days*, ABC 1974-84), and Claire (*The Cosby Show*, NBC 1984-92); and the Magicians were seen in Wilson (*Home Improvement*, ABC 1991-99), Aunt Bee (*The Andy Griffith Show*, CBS 1960-68), and, depending on episode, Frasier (*Frasier*, NBC 1993-2004).

These archetypes, of course, represent the six stages of human development; however, such "awareness" stages are not exclusive to one age-group or gender (Hunter 12). Individuals graduate to higher archetypal levels as they

journey toward complete psychological maturation. They may also regress to past archetypes when necessary, with such progression-regression vacillation having no determinant timeframe. An individual may move from Pilgrim to Warrior-Lover in a day, while others may take years to move through the same two stages. Some individuals, however, may never move further than the Orphan or Pilgrim stages over the entire course of their lives (Hunter 91).

In addition to the six archetypal stages, there are the sub-stages of each archetype. These consist of a combination of two archetypes. For instance, an individual who is classified as a Pilgrim may momentarily exhibit the characteristics of a Warrior-Lover in order to solve a particular "problem" (Hunter 194). This theory was epitomized in the Seinfeld show when Kramer (a Pilgrim) refused to allow Jerry to compromise Miss Rhode Island's integrity by dating her without a chaperone during the week of the Miss America pageant. Thus, Kramer temporarily became a Warrior-Lover, defending the chastity and honor of the naïve, yet hopeful, contestant for the sake of the greater good. Nevertheless, Kramer only exhibited Warrior-Lover tendencies to solve that one isolated problem. He remained a Pilgrim archetype and would only progress to the

next stage of psychological maturation as his awareness level increased. Of course, this is just one example; there are countless other combinations of personas which formulate the various sub-stages of human development and contribute to the personality of the individual.

Finally, Hunter applies the Jungian concept of the "shadow" when defending the darker facets of the archetypes. There is a positive and a negative side to each of the personas, and the negative leadings are driven by the shadow—that is, the "evil" (Hunter 156) nature of the archetype. The shadow is the most destructive aspect of all the archetypes, often responsible for the impolitic choices an individual may make which ultimately prevent him from graduating to higher levels of awareness.

## The Stock Characters and Their Masks

Throughout history—whether deliberately or involuntarily—writers and artists have creatively invested archetypes into their works by way of "stock" characters (also referred to as "group-types" and "sub-types"). Regardless of their titles, these are customarily considered derivatives of the base archetypes. To illustrate the use of stocks in ancient comedy, Willard

Smith identifies the seven Aristophanic group-types of Old Comedy, with each character representing an archetype existing in Greek society. The following is a delineation of the Greek archetypes, including their Hunter-archetype associations: the buffoon (Orphan/Pilgrim), the soldier (Warrior-Lover), the cook (Monarch), the parasite (Orphan), the learned doctor (Magician), the wife (Innocent/Warrior-Lover), and the farmer (Monarch) (91). Menander, representing "New Comedy," also enlisted seven stock types which looked slightly different from those of his predecessor: the prodigal son (Pilgrim), the harsh father (Monarch), the learned cook (Monarch), the boasting soldier (Warrior-Lover), the lenient uncle (Monarch/Magician), the mercenary courtesan (Innocent/Warrior-Lover), and the faithful slave (Orphan)(Smith 96-97).

The stock types of ancient comedy were auspiciously climaxed in the works of Plautus. Smith defines these as: two old men (the one harsh, the other lenient); two young men (the one a rebel, the other upright); a courtesan; a parasite; a faithful slave; an intriguing slave; a maid-servant; a mother; and a long-lost daughter, who is at the beginning of the play supposed to be a courtesan (103). Although the Roman, Plautus, borrowed his play structure

from the Greeks—particularly Menander—he took the liberty of adding four new stock types to the previous battery of characters, bringing the count to eleven.

Most of the stock types with which we have become familiar in ancient—and even current—comedy are, in fact, authentic elucidations of the six Hunter archetypes. Hunter qualifies the archetype as "a large category, in which there can be many variations" (11). These variations are also referred to as "stereotypes," which Hunter classifies as the "over-arching" (11) categories. Although stereotypes are considered loose contractions of the more proper archetypes, they are still recognized by the human unconscious as those personas which Jung suggested our psyches seek to project onto society.

The Greeks knew the importance of representing "universal types and abstracts of human character" (Smith 91). This, according to Smith, was Aristotle's explanation for the reason actors of ancient comedy wore masks instead of showing their own faces. The masks represented the all-inclusive ubiquity of the type, or the "standard." This costuming technique was later adopted by the Romans, who also subscribed to the universal nature of the character type—which trend would eventually be assimilated by the

illustrious Commedia dell' Arte over a thousand years later.

Although the mask was eventually removed from the stash of the actor's regalia, the relevance of the archetype has remained steadfast. It has become the obligation of the actors to replicate the characteristics and recognizable tendencies of the archetypes to which they have been assigned. As the playwrights of succeeding generations have continued in the tradition of their ancient predecessors, the pre-established network of archetypal personas has been repeatedly recycled. Shakespeare and Molière, borrowing plotlines from Plautus and Terrence, also borrowed their archetypes, merely altering them to suit the "histrionic strategy" of their culture:

> ...we may see that characters, plots, and techniques passed on from one age to another ought not to be regarded as carrying fixed quanta of meaning. Rather the meaning of stock characters and events varies as theatre audiences interpret those materials for different ends and according to different needs. (Gruber 70)

Although the archetypes remain resolute, their meanings change according to the social climate in which they appear. For this reason, archetypes have become a constant staple of the comedic play structure—a veritable necessity to achieving the purpose of comedy and an assumed expectation.

Some of the most enthusiastic diplomats of archetypal comedy were represented by a humble group of jugglers, acrobats, and mimes, who became prestigiously known as The Commedia dell' Arte. Their archetypal and improvisational mastery would culminate into an unprecedented movement that would ultimately lead, most providentially, to the twentieth-century improvisation revolution.

# CHAPTER FOUR

# THE COMMEDIA DELL' ARTE

## The Atellan Farces

The Commedia dell' Arte, translated as the "comedy of the professionals" (Fava 35), like all comedic extractions, was influenced by the works of early Roman authors—specifically, those of Plautus and the Atellan farces. The "fabula Atellana" (Brockett 47) was introduced by the Etruscans around 100 B.C. and was the first to specialize in improvised "scenarios" (Duchartre 18). Although the art of improvisation was previously seen in the phallic celebrations of the City Dionysia, it was the Atellan invention of the scenario that would become the most resounding of the Commedia's influences.

> The Atellanæ were comedies and popular farces, parodies and political satires. Whatever the plot or argument of the piece, the roles kept the same character, further emphasized by the famous mask, without which the more important Italian comedians rarely made their appearance until the end of the eighteenth century. (Duchartre 18)

The Atellan scenario merely served as an outline for the intended improvised sketch. It was not a script, per se, but an overview of what was expected to occur in the scene. John Rudlin explains: "The canovaccio [scenario] is a simple synopsis, a technical indication of scenic content, a list of characters and the action to be accomplished by them, perhaps together with some hints about argument and dialogue" (53). In other words, the actors were given *some* direction as to where the scene was destined to go, but were free to improvise the dialogue, as well as the action, in pursuit of a predetermined denouement.

Although the improvised scenario was the invention of the Atellans, the use of stock characters was, of course, adapted centuries earlier. The Greek pioneers of comedy were the first to idealize a convention of stock characters and their respective "masks," which denoted the marked characteristics of the indicative prototypes. However, it was the Atellans, perhaps inspired by Plautus, who would inculcate the four obligatory stock characters—a schematic that would be theatrically recapitulated for more than two millennia. The Atellan types were as follows: the braggart (Warrior-Lover), the old man (Monarch/Magician), the

glutton (Orphan), and the outcast (Innocent/Pilgrim) (Brockett 47). It is these four characters which have become immutable figures in the proliferation of comedy—both ancient and contemporary—and which are epically identifiable in nearly all comedic works, regardless of style.

The farces were so pervasive in Rome that they completely "eclipsed the regular classic theatre" (Duchartre 25) of the time. Nevertheless, around 22 B.C., as audiences began to tire of the regurgitated Greek comedies, including the farces, a new art form developed in its wake: the pantomime. The art of the pantomime was the "art of the gesture" (Duchartre 25) and often included musical accompaniment and sung plotlines. It was a close derivative of the more vulgar and satirical Roman art form known as "mime," contrived centuries earlier. The pantomime would fundamentally innervate the impending dance style of "ballet" (Brockett 47-48), and its musical applications would later be reinvented and illuminated in the works of the Commedia dell' Arte.

## The Byzantine Era

When Constantine legalized Christianity in 313 A.D., he banned all professions of the "liberal arts"—specifically, those works performed with spoken dialogue. However, the pantomime and its antecedent, the mime, were exempt from this abolition because they existed independent of dialogue and included only musical accompaniment and, occasionally, song. These two forms have, therefore, lingered around the theatrical periphery, relatively untouched, since ancient times (Duchartre 25). The acrobatic feats and overall theatrical versatility of the mime would become the foremost influence of the Commedia, as idealized in their trademark lazzi (or comedic "bits"). Today, mime continues to be a thriving art form throughout the world in various forms of circus entertainment, and it maintains a constant presence in the primordial tradition of "street-performing" even into the twenty-first century.

As the liturgical theatre of the Byzantine era dominated the early Middle Ages, theatre—as it was known during the rule of the Roman Empire—became virtually extinct. For nearly a thousand years, plays were restricted to religious content and were performed primarily within the church forum. These were known as the

mystery, miracle, and morality plays. There was, of course, a compulsory moral consequence interjected into all of the liturgical scenarios, and the clergy infamously presided over all content and casting (Brockett 69-79).

## Comedy Resurrected

In 1453, with the fall of Constantinople and the onset of the Renaissance period, a new interest was peaked for all things theatrical, and, again, dramatists turned to their Greek and Roman forerunners for artistic stimulus. Brockett catalogs the timeline of events that led to the rebirth of the ancient comedies during the Renaissance era:

> In 1429, twelve of Plautus' lost plays were rediscovered; in 1453, the fall of Constantinople brought many scholars, along with manuscripts of Greek plays, to Italy; in 1465, the introduction of the printing press into Italy made the wide dissemination of classical texts possible, and between 1472 and 1518 all of the then-known Greek and Roman plays were published. (155)

These discoveries and concurrent technical innovations resuscitated the long-lost art of comedy, and the Greek and

Roman ancestral works were reinterpreted once again—this time, in a most unconventional fashion.

The first appearance of the Commedia dell' Arte occurred during the middle of the sixteenth century "in the market place where a crowd has to be attracted, interested and then held if a living is to be made" (Rudlin 23). Commedia actors succeeded at galvanizing the attention of their audiences through their extraordinary abilities to improvise and perform fantastic acrobatic feats. The nomadic pantomimes of the Middle Ages, no doubt, influenced the proliferation of the aspiring performers of the early Renaissance era due to their widespread European presence. This contribution is attributed to the versatility of the Commedia, whose avant-garde repertory included music, dance, dramatic reenactments, and a wide range of corporeal spectacle:

> And since the technique of improvising required the most rare and varied gifts, an actor of Italian comedy was obliged to be, among other things, an acrobat, dancer, psychologist, orator, and a man of imagination, possessing a thorough knowledge of human nature, so that he could

> adequately bring alive the character he interpreted. (Duchartre 70)

The Commedia Types

The Commedia dell' Arte maintained a consolidated hybrid of the Atellan "fixed types" (Fava 32) as part of their stock arsenal. Such characters included the Old Man, the Male-Female Lover, the Servant, and the Capitano. These archetypes were repeated in every scenario and were rarely arbitrarily altered. This format was preserved to ensure audience recognition and to dictate audience expectations. The characters' gestures, clothes, masks, and inclusive stylizations were consistent and always distinct, regardless of the actors who played them.

Antonio Fava dissects the Commedia stocks as follows: the Old Man represented the definitive condition of old age; the Lover—whether male or female—represented the struggle of one who deserves and wants love; the Servant (or Zanni) represented "the eternal struggle for survival," as well as the condition of subjugation; and the Capitano represented the "internal conflict between being and seeming"—the epic identity crisis (34). All other characters were considered sub-types of the four base

archetypes and were only vital as the premise or locale dictated.

Following this delineation, the Commedia types would correspond with the Hunter archetypes as follows: The Old Man represents the Monarch/Magician, while the Lovers conform to the Warrior-Lover archetypes. The Capitano is quintessentially a Pilgrim, who perpetually seeks an "identity," and the Servant typifies the Orphan archetype. The Innocent would be represented by one of the many supernumerary characters or would, occasionally, be a sub-stage of one of the four main stock characters.

Each of the fixed types is referred to as a "mask," and it is the mask that is "the identification of the character" (Fava 131). Fava refers to the process of the Commedia actor getting into character as "enmasking," which is the "transformation" of the actor (34). The mask *is* the character, and it is the actor who lives through the mask.

The fixed types of the Commedia were believed to represent the elemental characteristics of all four personality types existing in Renaissance society and, as many scholars contend, of those which still exist today. In defending this point, Fava writes:

> For example, if we want to invent the mask of a politician, all we have to do is take the known Commedia types and put them in a new situation, so as to obtain types of politicians who are combinations of the mask and the political behavior we wish to feature. (126-127)

In other words, any one of the four Commedia types can potentially portray the character of a politician; it is the occupation of politics that personalizes the "absolute type" (Fava 128), or archetype, with certain "political" conditions unique to the occupation. However, the identifiers which render the type recognizable remain at the core of the character in the form of the persona. All other factors are merely symptomatic of the character's circumstances. The Capitano archetype, when portraying a politician, is still the Capitano archetype. The fact that he is a politician alters his condition, not his persona. Such is the nature of the archetypal construct: it is a veritable constant—perpetually identifiable, regardless of individual circumstance.

## Molière

The Commedia dell' Arte, as motivated by its Roman predecessors, would eventually spur the geniuses which were imminent of comedy to come—most remarkably, a French farceur, who would transform the new fad into what would become known as the "Comedy of Manners." Molière was, no doubt, a fan of the Commedia, as his many works do attest. He would have personally witnessed their notoriously-reputed farces and masked archetypes on their many excursions across his homeland of France during the early eighteenth century.

After the passing of Louis XIV, the Commedia became increasingly popular in France as the country sought levity to relieve their grief and mourning (Duchartre 114). Molière was a young man during the height of the Commedia's reign in France, and his "farcical" repertory is testament to its influence.

In preservation of what was now becoming tradition, Molière effectively borrowed the Commedia techniques, transmuting the regulatory masks to create a new company of characters, including the Aspiring Gentleman, the Hypochondriac, Don Juan, and the Miser (Perry 116). Each character had an expressed motivation associated with its

type, which, again, corresponded with audience expectations. The relative impetuses for the Molière archetypes were status, fear of disease, sex, and money, respectively (Perry 116).

Molière sought to make comedy more "respectable, and to give it acknowledged, worthwhile themes" (Perry 115); however, his flair for biting satire would often—and immortally—wound various members of the clergy and aristocracy. For this reason, his career fluctuated between "high favor and disgrace at court" (Perry 115). Nevertheless, the works of Molière, as they typically represent domesticated archetypes and physically-exaggerated farces, are a tribute to the grandeur of the Commedia's inimitable influence on modern comedy.

## The Commedia on Tour

By the end of the eighteenth century, parliamentary opinion regarding the Commedia began to wane, and foregone supporters quickly turned on them, protesting that the "Italian comedy was good for nothing but to teach lewdness and adultery" (Duchartre 74). Their work became subjectively appreciated, depending on one's religious convictions and whether that person was fortuitously the

object of the Commedia's ridicule at any given time. This contrariety kept the troupes forever side-stepping reproach and constantly on the move. Thus, the motley companies would migrate throughout Europe in roving bands of ten to twelve (Brockett 175), satirizing and blaspheming with pro tempore impunity, only to scurry off to the next town before the inevitable repercussions could be enforced.

In 1733, the troupes found their way into the Russian heartland, and, as Russian nobility felt a keen regard for Parisian artistry, the French-favorites were welcomed with open arms. Their impact on the Russian theatre would be demonstrated most significantly when dramatic theorist Constantin Stanislavski essentially drew from the Commedia and introduced improvisation into his newly-anointed acting "System." It would be the first time improvisation would be used in a pedagogical way.

Improvisation, as well as the four "stock" characters, are, therefore, the Commedia dell' Arte's greatest legacy, and it is these two predominant performance techniques which are at the core of most comedic acting techniques today.

## The End of an Industry

In 1801, the "Cisalpine republic prohibited masked performances," culminating in the disbanding of the Commedia dell' Arte as an "industry" (Fava xvi). Nevertheless, its remnants were entrenched in the street-mimes, puppets, and marionette plays of the era, which bolstered and immortalized the framework of the Commedia's unique art form and ensured that its legacy would be preserved.

Archetypes—which components are intrinsic of the comedic genre—have never ceased to dominate the base structure of comedy. The modern era, as it began with the neo-classical works of Shakespeare and continued into the nineteenth-century with the move toward "romanticism" (Brockett 279), preserved the model of the archetypal character—perhaps unwittingly—as a means for acquiescing to the unconscious need of the audience to see their "ideal prototypes" epitomized on the stage. The Commedia masks of Pantalone, Harlequin, and Columbine continue to be dramatized by present-day circus performers in the personification of the "clown," and the iconic two-person comedy team of "Punch and Judy" is a perpetual homage to the Commedia dell' Arte's profound influence, having

dominated "seaside" attractions for the past two centuries (White 35).

The Commedia's reinvention of the Atellan style of improvisational comedy would be resurrected in the early twentieth century by Jacque Copeau and Vsevolod Meyerhold. Before that, however, a new intrigue with improvisation would originate in the fertile soil of twentieth-century "realism," with the concomitant move toward character-based verisimilitude. Stanislavski and his contemporaries would ultimately authenticate this ancient craft for a new era and open the doors to many of the impending innovations to come within the art.

# CHAPTER FIVE

# THE IMPROVISATION REVOLUTION

## Constantin Stanislavski

At the turn of the twentieth century, improvisation took a respite from comedy and became more closely associated with the pedagogy of "realistic" acting. The System that revolutionized the art was that of Russian master Constanin Stanislavski, who indoctrinated a young syndicate of aspiring actors, destined to propel his tenet into the vast theatrical domain. These disciples included Chekhov, Vakhtangov, Meyerhold, and a host of American offshoots.

Richard Brestoff, in his book, The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods, explains that the move toward theatrical realism evolved out of the "age of the machine":

> Human beings were regarded quite simply as wondrous machines, who could feign real emotions and fool any observer. It became an obsession to reproduce real feelings and effects (blushing, sweating, suddenly turning pale) through imitations. (8)

Thus, actors became imitators, studying the techniques of other actors who had mastered the craft of recreating life before them: "If you were to play the young lover, you watched and copied the actor currently playing the young lover" (Brestoff 8). Over the course of the century, imitation became replication, which soon became transformation. No longer was beauty defined as truth; rather, truth was now "beautiful" (Brestoff 28) because it was the "objective observation of life, no matter how squalid or elevated" (Brockett 370).

Constantin Stanislavski was at the helm of this trend. As a young student of acting, he was encouraged to "copy" (Brestoff 21) his teachers, but could not understand how imitation would lead to "inner truth" (Brestoff 26). He began to contemplate a groundbreaking discipline that would facilitate the verisimilitude required of the new, realistic trend.

Upon opening the Moscow Art Theatre (MAT) in 1897, Stanislavski focused his efforts more intensely on solidifying a System that he could impart on his actors-in-training. He realized that the answer to eliciting inspired and realistic performances was found in two necessary conditions of the actor: relaxation and

concentration (Brestoff 27). According to Stanislavski, the actor cannot commit to truth under "extraneous" (Brestoff 27) fits of anxiety. Stanislavski also stressed the importance of the actor's concentration, referring to this as the product of "doing" (Brestoff 34). Thus, he accentuated the need for the actor to concentrate on the "action"—which precept Stanislavski deemed the most crucial consideration of the actor for achieving ultimate verisimilitude.

Stanislavski taught his principles primarily using the dramatic component of "circumstance" (Brestoff 39). Through circumstance, his student-actors could explore character intentions, obstacles, sense memory, justification, imagination, feelings, and, of course, relaxation and concentration. To aid the actors in making personal discoveries with regard to the various principles surrounding "circumstance," Stanislavski drew from the vault of the Commedia and began to incorporate the ancient use of improvisation. He would construct scenarios in which the student-actors could experiment with his new System and its varied components. With this effort, the rudimentary use of improvisation was permanently injected into the modern technique of "realistic" acting. It would

eventually be embraced by some of Stanislavski's more perceptive students and passed on to future generations, however, with several glaring omissions, a few improvements, and, regrettably, some irking adaptations.

Between the years of 1922 and 1924, the MAT performed in the United States for the first time (Brestoff 77). At the persuasion of their transatlantic admirers, the Russian syndicate began to teach the eager Americans their coveted acting System. They succeeded in training up a new breed of devotees in the topical form of realism and set into motion a wave of "truth-in-acting" that would transfix American acting pedagogy for the next one hundred years.

The insurgence of the Russian doctrine into the wellspring of the American theatre was convoyed by a distinguished group of mentors, including Lee Strasberg, Stella Adler, and Sanford Meisner—all subscribing to the Stanislavski System, but interpreting (and sometimes distorting) various principles to satisfy their own inclinations. Regardless of the subjective variations, it was through the efforts of these pseudo masters—particularly Lee Strasberg—that the Stanislavski System became known as the "Method" and quickly shot into the convention of American dramaturgy. As a result, the

Method—or at least some adaptation of it—has subsequently become a fundamental standard in American acting training (Brestoff 94).

## Viola Spolin

In conjunction with the principles of the System, the Americans adopted Stanislavski's unprecedented use of improvisation as it occurred in the form of "acting exercises." However, as the System—by now, the Method—became more popular in mainstream America, various members of the pedagogical community began to recognize some of its apparent drawbacks. One of those faultfinders was former Stanislavski-disciple Viola Spolin, who, between the years 1924 and 1927, studied under creative drama pioneer Neva L. Boyd. Spolin credits Boyd for her inspiration in developing what she christened as the first improvisational "theatre games" (Spolin xlvii). As a result of this distinction, Viola Spolin is considered by most scholars to be the Mother of modern improvisation (Brestoff 140).

Spolin argued that the Stanislavski System and its doctrinal requirement for tapping into the actors' emotions were stifling the actors' creativity by bogging them down "cerebrally" (Spolin 22):

> Techniques are not mechanical devices—a neat little bag of tricks, each neatly labeled, to be pulled out by the actor when necessary. When the form of an art becomes static, these isolated techniques presumed to make the form are taught and adhered to strictly. Growth of both individual and form suffer thereby, for unless the student is unusually intuitive, such rigidity in teaching, because it neglects inner development, is invariably reflected in performance. (Spolin 14-15)

Although Spolin condoned Stanislavski's use of "circumstance," Method actors were losing touch with the physical aspects of performance and devoting too much attention to the mental burden associated with the new form, specifically as it concerned "emotion memory." She believed that "spontaneity" was lacking in the actor's current regimen and that the "intuitive" (Spolin 15) was the key to unleashing the actor's creative instincts:

> The objective upon which the player [actor] must constantly focus and towards which every action must be directed provokes spontaneity. In this spontaneity, personal freedom is released, and

the total person, physically, intellectually, and intuitively, is awakened. (Spolin 6)

Spolin's use of theatre games for invoking the intuition and freeing the actor's "sensory equipment" (Spolin 15) would become the touchstone for all future improvisational acting, ensuring an "organic rather than a cerebral experience" (Spolin 22). The late Avery Schreiber, prominent television and commercial actor, considered the Spolin philosophy to be "The Method of improvisational theatre, as replete with multiple truths, insightful experiences, and discoveries of the soul and mind as any method of acting" (Libera 4). It was through the inspiration of the Spolin method that a group of University of Chicago students brilliantly translated improvisation into a new comedic art form that would revolutionize contemporary comedy. This phenomenon would take place in a small, but charismatic, comedy club in the Hyde Park district of downtown Chicago.

## The Compass Players

In the 1950s, a flurry of improvisational groups arose out of the frenzy ignited by the Spolin "games"—the most immortal of these emerging from the genius of Spolin's own

heir, Paul Sills. In 1955, artistic extremist David Shepherd teamed up with Sills to "create an alternative, popular theatre that would reflect the lived experiences of the mass of people" (Adler). Inspired by the Commedia dell' Arte, Shepherd's intention was to mimic the Commedia's scenarios while emphasizing "contemporary society" (Adler). Sills, however, had other things in mind; particularly, he wanted to draw from his mother's legendary theatre games and invent "topical skits" (Adler), gearing them primarily to the college and professional sects.

The Sills and Shepherd coalition gave birth to The Compass Players—a first of its kind, but certainly not the last. For a time, Shepherd put aside his Commedia-driven ambitions and seceded to Sills' improvisational "skits"—a format that dominated the company's repertory during its most seminal years. Together, these enthusiasts and their followers translated the Spolin techniques into a nonpareil comedic art form, the likes of which had not been seen in contemporary times.

Much like the Commedia, The Compass Players specialized in satire and farce, developing their structured scenarios from the Spolin improvisational games;

however, unlike the Commedia, they did not restrict their cast of characters to a recurring few. Rather, though still based on the recognizable archetypes, their objects of ridicule centered on the current headliners of the day, whose "conditions" (occupation, reputation, etc.) distinctly defined them. The result was a contemporary blend of Spolin and Commedia ideals—a metamorphosed comedic sensation based principally in improvisation.

From the Compass prototype, countless "copycat" theatre groups quickly arose, validating the legitimacy of the new art form. Nevertheless, Shepherd's dream of a modern-day, Commedia-style format still remained unfulfilled. In 1959, out of the tension created by their disparate viewpoints, Sills left Shepherd and, along with Howard Alk and Bernie Sahlins, began an endeavor that resulted in the most legendary group ever to implement the use of "short-form" improvisation: Second City (Libera 18).

## Second City

Chicago-based Second City continued the legacy begun by The Compass Players. Under Sills' direction, Second City would purvey a myriad of avant-garde comedic masters, including John Candy, John Belushi, Mike Meyers, Gilda

Radner, Catherine O'Hara, and, of course, Fred Willard, among many others (Libera ix). As such, Second City is considered the premiere model of its kind, not only for its longevity, but for its unprecedented achievements in the field of comedy. This landmark has generated many contemporary comedic icons, corroborating its status as the quintessence of the contemporary improvisational comedy group. In fact, many of the Second City alumni have brilliantly staffed such celebrated sketch-comedy television programs as Saturday Night Live (NBC, 1975-2009), SCTV (Canada, 1976-81), and Mad TV (Fox, 1995-2009), giving credence to its unrivaled acclaim and establishing its technique as the standard for contemporary comedic acting training.

Over the past fifty years, Second City has hatched dozens of supplanted offspring—both in America and throughout the world. These replicas have attempted—many successfully—to emulate the achievements of Second City, promulgating its unique comedic style even further into the continuum of popular entertainment. Second City's subsequent immortality validates its enormous influence on the genre of comedy and casts it as a worthy benchmark, to

which all other comedy groups and training methods must indubitably be measured.

## ImprovOlympic

In 1981, Compass co-founder David Shepherd and fellow-alumna Charna Halpern teamed up to create the ImprovOlympic, aggrandized by Halpern as the first "theatrical sport" (Halpern 3). This endeavor was engineered to counter the "short-form" improvisational sketch-comedy of Second City—which designation had inextricably become the group's trademark. Halpern and Shepherd were looking to remove the "structure" of sketch-based comedy and sought to reinstitute the more "pure" (Halpern 7) form of improvisation.

In 1983, Halpern, looking for inspiration, turned to Compass and Second City progeny Del Close, who had become known as the Father of "long-form" improvisation. By now, Shepherd had moved on, but the team of Close and Halpern quickly turned the ImprovOlympic into an art form all its own, relying solely upon the creative spontaneity of "unstructured" improvisation: "True improvisation is getting on-stage and performing without any preparation or planning" (Halpern 13). In other words, unlike the

Atellans, the Commedia, and Second City, organizers of the ImprovOlympic opted to refrain from working with scenarios and chose, instead, to create scenes based on *pure* spontaneity.

To begin an ImprovOlympic game, a situational problem (or "theme") is established, usually inspired by audience suggestions (Halpern 133). Players are obligated to solve the problem strictly through spontaneous instinct—in other words, without any planning or predetermined denouement. Warm-ups and transitional games are used to motivate the direction of the overall piece. These may involve "word games," monologues, or other forms of theme-based activities (Halpern 136-37). The improvisational game is usually divided by shorter games which build on the information provided in the earlier scenes. Such is the configuration of "long-form" improvisation, for which the ImprovOlympic is most renowned. The long-form was eventually perfected by the team of Close and Halpern in a game they curiously called "The Harold," which continues to be performed by various ImprovOlympic franchises and touring companies throughout the world today.

The main difference between long- and short-form improvisation is simple: long-form is long in duration—more

than ten minutes, but usually not longer than thirty minutes—and is divided into several "acts"; and short-form is short—never more than ten minutes in length—and usually consisting of one scene, or "game" (Libera 121-122). Second City, of course, uses short-form improvisations to develop outlines for future sketches (Halpern 13). The pre-improvised pieces are, then, refined and recreated in later performances. Structured improvisation, therefore, remains the basis of Second City's short-form comedy, much like it did for that of their predecessors, The Commedia dell' Arte.

To begin a short-form improvisational game, the actors are given a situation (or circumstance) involving the three Spolin components of "who" (character/archetype), "what" (objective/action), and "where" (situation/environment) (Spolin 33). Similar to the long-form, actors are required to solve the problem through spontaneous action; however, occasionally, the scenes will have some sort of pre-determined structure and/or resolution, to which all of the actors cooperatively aspire. Nevertheless, spontaneity remains the key component of the short-form, with the requisite incongruity occurring by way of the conflict derived from the circumstances.

To illustrate this format, consider the following problem: a blind man (who) must build a house of cards (what) in a snow storm (where). To solve the problem, the actor must transform himself into the designated archetype, not only adopting the qualities of blindness, but adapting to the conflicting conditions which work in opposition to the action required to solve the problem. However awkward and naturally humorous the circumstances may be, the actor must treat the situation with a sense of truth as he attempts to solve the problem. In other words, the purpose of the game is not to create comedy, but, in this case, to build a house of cards. Comedy instinctively arises out of the actor's sense of truth and his unrelenting commitment to the "action," despite the obstacles created by the incongruous circumstances.

## The Components of Improvisation

Spolin defines improvisation as "acting upon environment and allowing others to act upon present reality, as in playing a game" (25). Libera, writing on behalf of Second City, insists that "environment is action" (15), not verbalization:

> Ad-libbing and wordiness during the solving of problems constitutes withdrawal from the problem, the environment, and each other. Verbalization becomes an abstraction from total organic response and is used in place of contact to obscure the self, and when cleverly done, this is difficult to catch. (Spolin 42)

The mantra of all improvisers, regardless of lineage, is "show—don't tell" (Libera 44). This was, of course, the standard instilled through the teachings of Viola Spolin, who taught that action is created by way of the characters' relationships. Sherry Hollett of Second City fame notes, "...the relationship is the foundation for everything that happens between the characters onstage" (Libera 33), and "honesty" is the key to sustaining the action. According to Andrew Currie, "You don't have to find the funny; the funny will find you. All you have to do is play the scene" (Libera 63).

It is never the goal of the improviser to be funny; it is, however, his goal to be honest when actively responding to his environment and the relationships he has created with the other players in the scene: "Deliberately trying to be funny or witty is a considerable drawback and often

leads to disaster. Honest responses are simpler and more effective" (Halpern 9).

Audience laughter, which is the visceral goal of all comedy, is achieved through the actor's commitment to archetype and truth: "The actors must be totally committed to their characters and play them with complete integrity to achieve maximum laughs" (Halpern 25). This commitment represents the actor's "serious" treatment of the circumstances, and it is out of this commitment that the requisite incongruity, which is necessary to all comedy, may instinctively arise. Charna Halpern writes, "The only way to play comedy is seriously" (26). This is because "Audience members laugh at things they can relate to, but they cannot empathize if the performers are insincere" (Halpern 23). The Greeks, of course, knew the importance of presenting a truthful representation of life. They also knew that satirizing the things their audiences would recognize was the key to garnering the most fervent response. Jung described this as the need of the individual to usher the unconscious archetypes into consciousness, and such can only be achieved when truth is at the core of the dramatic representation. This knowledge has been passed down for twenty-five hundred years, and the

folks at Second City, as well as their imitators, have continued to maintain the tradition.

## Archetyping and Truth in Improvisation

Although improvisation does not, by definition, emphasize the study of archetypes, it does, however, involve the spontaneous transformation of the actors to solve a problem. As transformation necessitates a preconception of those sub-types existing in society, the improvisational actor is, thus, compelled to make "society" his study. For this reason, teachers of improvisation often encourage their students to participate in the active "observation" (Libera 35) of people, politics, current events, and other relevant places and things in which such fertile and duplicative sub-types might prevail: "We want our improvised scenes to mirror reality, to create recognizable human behavior on our stage" (Libera 10). This does not mean, however, that "caricatures" (Libera 101) are acceptable in improvisation.

By mirroring a "stereotyped" version of reality, one does not mirror *actual* reality; it is only through the study of "true" life that "truth" can, therefore, be created onstage. Nick Johne, Second City alumnus, laments

those instances in which characterization has, unfortunately, become stereotyping:

> We start the scene and what we usually get is a scene where the construction worker is your garden variety stereotypical Italian, complete with hairy chest, bad accent, and bad attitude. You know, a stereotype! A cartoon version of the construction worker, not a character. (Libera 69)

Characterization is best achieved by going into the "real" world and observing "life"—in other words, going to the construction site and studying *real* construction workers, not the ones already characterized by other actors. Done the former way, the realistic depreciation is exponential, and truth is thereby compromised. Sheldon Pantinkin of Second City remarks: "A lot of people build characters off characters they've seen in movies or TV. Don't. That's already a character, and therefore already a distillation of a real human being, and you'll probably end up with a caricature" (Libera 101).

Improvisation requires the actor's commitment to truth, specifically as it regards relationships, environment, and circumstance. But, equally important to the audience, improvisation demands a recognizable

representation of life, and this has been traditionally achieved through the technique of archetyping. Therefore, archetyping and truth have become the core precepts of not only improvisation, but all comedic acting, and it is these two precepts which, if carefully scrutinized and honed, can aid the comedic actor in achieving greater comedic success.

## Contemporary Comedic Acting Pedagogy

Improvisation is at the core of most comedic acting training in twenty-first-century America. Professor Bill Parsons, Director of Undergraduate Acting at the University of Southern California, states, "Improvisation is essential regarding spontaneity, impulse release, and listening." Additionally, he concludes that the most crucial consideration for teaching comedic acting lies in the concept of "playing the truth of character and situation."

The theme of "truth and archetyping" as a means to audience recognition is reiterated by many of the most reputed comedic acting teachers of our time, including John Wright, who states: "Typicality [as opposed to originality] is much more useful, which is why the vast majority of our comedy is based on recognition....Recognition is at the heart of the way we represent our humanity on stage" (9).

To instill the precepts of truth and archetypes in his comedic actors, Wright turns to improvisation, or, as he prefers to call it, "play":

> Play occupies a luminal world between the actual and the imaginary where anything can become something else and metaphors breed like rabbits. Comedy thrives in this atmosphere, and if you're riding a piano stool as if it were a racehorse, laughter is a reassurance because it tells you that we're seeing what you're seeing so it must be OK. (30)

Therefore, improvisation opens up unconscious resources in the actor (also known as the "imagination"), and truth becomes a byproduct of that creative process. As Wright's actors commit to the circumstances, the element of truth is unconsciously nurtured within them. Through "play," the actors are encouraged to "find the game" (Wright 33), as opposed to consciously creating the comical situation:

> Comedy thrives in an atmosphere of irreverence and pleasure: we need to think that we're in a space where we can do anything. Good acting needs exactly the same conditions. Play doesn't mean that the work is frivolous. Far from it.

> All it means is that we take play very seriously. Play warms the heart and cools the head. It's fun, it's liberating, it's empowering and it gives us that compelling combination of engagement and objectivity that enables all of us to generate meaning, take risks and find things. (Wright 80-81)

This was Viola Spolin's original intent for the use of improvisation: to discourage the cerebral tendencies of the actor and engage the intuitive. As it specifically applies to comedic acting training, improvisation forces the actors to resist playing comedy for the sake of comedy and reminds them to concentrate simply on the element of truth: "...you don't have to be inventive. You've just got to be reactive" (Wright 39). In other words, incongruity must not be invented; it must be cultivated out of the truthful reactions of the characters to their circumstances.

Paul Ryan, comedic acting coach to many of Hollywood's brightest comedians and author of The Art of Comedy, writes:

> I have people come to my workshops and create very odd and strange sketch characters that are simply not funny. What's missing usually is that

> their character is not truthful and the audience can detect something is missing. The actors are trying too hard to make us laugh, but the real humor arises from letting us see the reality of that person. Rather than pushing comedy, I believe that you have to allow it to happen. (xix)

Ryan passes on to his students the belief that the audience is always seeking a truthful representation of the character (or archetype). Where truth and character are not accurately represented, comedy cannot thrive. For this reason, he believes that "improv is one of the fundamental skills of comedic acting," as it provides a venue for the actor to "become uninhabited and free" and able to explore on an intuitive level (xxiii).

As put forth by Spolin, the intuitive inspires transformation; and, as exemplified in the teachings of Stanislavski, improvisation inspires concentration which, in turn, manifests truth. For this reason, Ryan emphasizes the use of improvisation in his comedic acting training regimen. In fact, in his book, he outlines his "Ten Commandments of Comedy Improv"—which criteria he believes to be necessary for achieving the most successful comedy.

These tips include maintaining energy, listening, believability, trust, and focus (50-52).

Like Stanislavski, most of Ryan's improvisational exercises concentrate on one primary component: circumstance. He constantly reminds his readers of the old adage, "comedy comes out of the situation." As such, his suggested exercises always require the actors to fully investigate the circumstances and environments of their characters (134). Ryan, like his contemporaries, has, therefore, found improvisation to be the most efficient means for teaching comedic acting.

## The Unique Call of Improvisation

The research shows that comedy, as opposed to tragedy, involves the element of comedic incongruity. As the aggressive function of comedy is contingent upon the unexpected, the actor's commitment to truth and character, therefore, directly affects the requisite incongruity (or the disparity between the expected and the unexpected). Fred Willard, who has had many opportunities to contemplate this concept, is well aware of the comic's "dilemma." He shares an example of a fellow comedic actor discovering this reality for the first time:

> I have a friend named, Mike Haggerty, who's a Second City guy. He's been on a lot of TV, and he's done a few dramatic roles....And he did some cop show or something, and he said, "Fred, it's so easy to do drama." He says, "You just do the lines—you don't have to worry about being funny—just do the lines, do a character, learn your lines, and do it."

Haggerty realized that playing truth and character in the face of comedic incongruity adds an element of difficulty to the actor's obligation. He concludes that performing tragedy is easier!

Comedic acting training, therefore, must satisfy the unique burden of the comedic actor and instill within him the skill of maintaining truth and character in the face of the "ironic" circumstances (or incongruity). The training required for this purpose must, therefore, encourage a more enhanced sense of focus (or concentration) and the ability to call upon instinct, thus forcing the actor into a greater sense of truth. For this purpose, improvisation has proven to be a worthy instrument in the arsenal of comedic pedagogical applications. Through improvisation, truth and archetyping may be equally explored, and, as the

most successful comedic actors have demonstrated throughout history, when these two precepts are adequately honed, comedy not only exists, but thrives!

# CHAPTER SIX

# CONCLUSIONS

## Summary, Conclusion, and Recommendations

Structured improvisation, as originally developed by the Roman Atellans, has existed as a comedic style for over two millennia. Although the genre of comedy initially emerged out of the phallic improvisations of the City Dionysia, structured improvisation as a comedic style was not imposed until four hundred years after the genre was first introduced. The style of improvisation would eventually be adopted by the Commedia dell Arte' in the early sixteenth century and, then, re-adopted during the wave of twentieth-century realism. But it was Viola Spolin who took improvisation to a whole new level with her invention of "theatre games," for which she is now considered the Mother of modern improvisation. With the induction of the Stanislavski System, improvisation became a pedagogical tool for the first time. However, it was Viola Spolin's son, Paul Sills, who would most prodigiously propel improvisation into the contemporary theatrical mainstream with his "topical skits" and the formation of The Compass Players and Second City.

Comedy, as opposed to tragedy, preaches a message of human survival, but the genre is also defined by its element of comedic incongruity. The aggressive function of humor, as supported by Plato's Superiority Theory, is the most stimulating catalyst for constructing the incongruous moments of the comedic piece. This is because, by nature, humans possess a psychological compulsion to look for a disparity in the dramatic situation—in other words, a conflict between character and circumstance. This aggression-based incongruity feeds the human ego by suggesting to the audience that others are intellectually inferior to them. The biological reaction to this discovery manifests itself in the form of laughter. For this reason, satire, which literally means "the ridiculing of human behavior," is at the core of most comedy.

The Atellan farces were founded on the premise of satirizing the contemporary archetypes of the day—which trend has continued well into the twenty-first century, most prevalently through the form of improvisational comedy. In fact, comedy itself began with the improvisations of the Greek satyrs, and, in keeping with tradition, satire has proven to be the most effective form of comedy.

So, what really constitutes improvisation? As we know it today, it is the only "spontaneous" style of comedy. It has become a fad—the style that has dominated the comedic genre for nearly a century. This is because it is a means for opening up unconscious resources which lend themselves to transformation, and, as the spontaneity of improvisation can hardly be duplicated in any other format, improvisation is only gaining momentum for its unique "intuitive" aspects and apparent correlation to the wit.

Regardless of style or technique, two conditions are always incumbent upon the comedic actor: a commitment to truth and a believable representation of life, typically achieved through "archetyping." According to Lou Wagner, former star of the television drama CHiPs (NBC, 1977-1983), the two essentials of comedy are the two essentials of *all* acting: "For the actor, comedy and tragedy should not be treated differently. Each relies on an understanding of the character you are playing and a sense of honesty in the way you treat the circumstances." In other words, comedy is not performed for the sake of comedy; it is found in the situation and the incongruity that derives instinctively through the conflict between character and circumstance. However, these criteria cannot exist outside the realm of

truth. Therefore, comedic actors do not treat their craft any differently than do tragic actors: both require the "serious" treatment of the characters and their circumstances.

Nevertheless, in comedy, the element of comedic incongruity adds a measure of difficulty to the sense of truth that must be preserved. For this reason, improvisation is often used in comedic acting training to condition the actor for the rigors of maintaining character integrity in the face of the "distracting" incongruity.

As art is said to represent life, so, too, is the mandate of comedy. To satisfy this obligation, archetyping has become a means toward characterization. Jung suggested that all individuals harbor a host of unconscious archetypes which represents those existing in society. We instinctively "project" our unconscious archetypes onto society in order to draw particular archetypes into consciousness. This constitutes the journey toward individuation. In a theatrical depiction—as in a comedy—the various unconscious "personas" are effectively projected, and the audience psychologically responds. In this way, comedy represents life and serves a purpose for

the audience in their journey toward psychological maturity (or "individuation").

The Greek and Roman architects of comedy knew the importance of representing life through the dramatic arts. This was seen in their use of the "mask" and the designation of a standard set of archetypal (or "stock") characters which were meant to embody those personas existing in society. This technique was eventually adopted by the Commedia during the sixteenth century and subsequently passed on to the writers of both modern and contemporary comedy. As supported by Jung, the psychological need for humans to proceed toward eventual individuation justifies—even necessitates—the use of archetypes in all genres of art, including comedy.

Truth and archetyping have, therefore, shown themselves to be the primary precepts of comedic acting, and improvisation has proven to be the most useful tool for instilling such precepts in the comedic actor. This is because improvisation is fundamentally rooted in spontaneity, and spontaneity frequently results in incongruity—a core component of the comedic situation. Student-actors who participate in improvisational exercises are, therefore, compelled to perfect their skills of

characterization, concentration, and instinct in order to maintain truth in the presence of incongruity.

As improvisation is a proven pedagogical tool for effectively imparting the principles of comedic acting, how, then, might the current method of comedic acting training through improvisation be improved? By applying the Hunter archetypes to improvisational exercises—such as the ones represented here—it is possible to expedite the characterization process, thereby eliciting a greater sense of truth from the actor.

As has been established, each of society's archetypes conveniently fit into one of the six Hunter-archetype categories: Innocent, Orphan, Pilgrim, Warrior-Loved, Monarch, and Magician. Using the descriptions outlined in Chapter Three, it is possible to associate one of these archetypes with any designated character. For instance, in the case of the Second City example, in which the construction worker was "stereotyped" rather than realistically defined, the problem could have been alleviated through the application of one of the Hunter archetypes. If the actor decided that the construction worker was to be a Warrior-Lover, then the qualities associated with this archetype would be studied, not the

"conditions" that are most often stereotyped of a "typical" construction worker—for example, dialect, movement, gate, body language, mannerisms, etc. The conditions which are justified by the circumstances would only be applied secondarily to the archetypal qualities, once the character had been fully studied, experimented with through improvisational exercises, and thoroughly "developed."

Thus, stereotypes may be avoided through the application of the Hunter archetypes and truth more accurately portrayed. In this way, the use of improvisation, as it is utilized for the purposes of comedic acting training, may be improved and the precepts of truth and archetyping ameliorated, as well.

# APPENDIX A

# IMPROVISATION GROUPS

# Improvisation Groups

## Second City

1616 North Wells Street
Chicago, IL 60614
312-664-4032

6560 Hollywood Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90028-6217
323-464-8542
www.SecondCity.com

Since 1959, The Second City has established itself as a Chicago landmark and a national treasure. The theatre that launched the careers of such comic greats as John Belushi, Mike Myers, Bill Murray, Gilda Radner, and more offers nightly comedy shows, as well as a variety of other programs and services. Each theatre has a resident troupe that writes and performs an original comedy revue. The shows are smart, funny, and highly original. The Second City also has touring troupes that take shows on the road, a Training Center that teaches improvisation, acting, writing, and other skills, and a corporate communications division that services the business world.

## ImprovOlympic (IO) Theatre

3541 North Clark Street
Chicago, IL 60657
773-880-0199

6366 Hollywood Boulevard
Los Angeles, CA 90028
323-962-7560
www.ImprovOlympic.com

Founded in 1981, iO (formerly ImprovOlympic) is the world famous flashpoint of comic creativity that spawned an entire generation of America's best and brightest entertainers. Over 5000 people have trained and performed at iO's Chicago and Los Angeles theaters, including some of the most recognizable names in show business: Mike Myers, Chris Farley, David Koechner, Adam McKay, Tina Fey, and many, many more.

## The Groundlings

7307 Melrose Avenue
Los Angeles, CA 90046
323-934-4747
www.Groundlings.com

The Groundlings began as The Gary Austin (formerly of San Francisco's The Committee) Workshop in 1972. As the improvisation classes became increasingly popular, a core group of performers began to showcase their material at various spaces for invited audiences, including The White House and The Improv. The first performance by the newly-incorporated non-profit organization known as The Groundlings was in 1974 at its most "permanent" temporary home, downstairs at Ralph Waite's Oxford Theatre in Hollywood (now The Met Theatre).

## The Upright Citizens Brigade

5919 Franklin Avenue
Hollywood, CA 90028
323-908-8702
www.LosAngeles.UCBTheatre.com

307 West 26th Street
New York, NY 10001
212-366-9176
www.NewYork.UCBTheatre.com

Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre is the home for all things comedy in Los Angeles and New York City. They have affordable, high-quality shows seven nights a week. They also run one of the largest and most respected improv schools in the country. Check out the full schedule or get more info on improv and sketch classes on their website. The Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre is dedicated to fostering both an appreciation and education of the arts through affordable and high-quality comedic performances and classes.

## The MoHos

Sherman Oaks, California
www.FredWillard.com/MoHos

The MoHo Group was formed in 1994 by Fred and Mary Willard. The MoHo Group is a weekly comedy workshop that specializes in sketch writing, but all comedy writing is encouraged. Fred and Mary's sole purpose for starting the workshop was for people to have fun and do sketch comedy.

# APPENDIX B

# DEFINITIONS

# DEFINITIONS

**Archetype** – the original pattern or model of which all things of the same type are representations or copies; prototype; a perfect example.

**Cerebral** – of or relating to the brain or intellect.

**Characterization** – the act of characterizing, especially the artistic representation (as in fiction or drama) of human characters or motives.

**Comedy** – a drama of light and amusing characters and typically with a happy ending.

**Denouement** – the final outcome of the main dramatic complication in a literary work; the outcome of a complex sequence of events.

**Farce** – a light dramatic composition marked by broadly satirical comedy and improbable plot.

**Genre** – a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content.

**Humor** – that quality which appeals to a sense of the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous; the mental faculty of discovering, expressing, or appreciating the ludicrous or absurdly incongruous; something that is or is designed to be comical or amusing.

**Improvisation** – to compose, recite, play, or sing extemporaneously; to make, invent, or arrange offhand; to make or fabricate out of what is conveniently on hand.

**Incongruous** – not harmonious; not conforming.

**Intellect** – the power of knowing as distinguished from the power to feel and to will; the capacity for knowledge.

**Intuitive** – directly apprehended; intuition: quick and ready insight; immediate apprehension or cognition.

**Irony** – incongruity between the actual result of a sequence of events and the normal or expected result.

**Lazzo/Lazzi** – improvised comedic dialogue or action in the Commedia del' Arte.

**Parody** – a literary or musical work in which the style of an author or work is closely imitated for comic effect or in ridicule; a feeble or ridiculous imitation.

**Pedagogy** – the art, science, or profession of teaching.

**Precept** – a command or principle intended especially as a general rule of action.

**Prototype** – an original model on which something is patterned; archetype; an individual that exhibits the essential features of a later type; a standard or typical example.

**Satire** – a literary work holding up human vices and follies to ridicule or scorn; trenchant wit, irony, or sarcasm used to expose and discredit vice or folly.

**Scenario** – an outline or synopsis of a play; a plot outline used by actors of the Commedia dell' Arte; an account or synopsis of a possible course of action or events.

**Spoof** – to make good-natured fun of.

**Stereotype (also "sub-type")** – something conforming to a fixed or general pattern; a standardized mental picture that is held in common by members of a group and that represents an oversimplified opinion, prejudiced attitude, or uncritical judgment.

**Technique** – a method of accomplishing a desired aim.

**Transformation** – an act, process, or instance of transforming or being transformed; to change in composition or structure; to change the outward form or appearance of; to change in character or condition; convert.

**Truth** – sincerity in action, character, and utterance.

**Unconscious** – the part of mental life that does not ordinarily enter the individual's awareness yet may influence behavior and perception or be revealed (as in slips of the tongue or in dreams).

**Verisimilitude** – like the truth.

**Wit** – mind, memory; reasoning power; intelligence; mental capability and resourcefulness; astuteness of perception or judgment; the ability to relate seemingly disparate things so as to illuminate or amuse; a talent for banter or persiflage; a person of superior intellect; an imaginatively perceptive and articulate individual especially skilled in banter or persiflage.

# APPENDIX C

# FRED WILLARD INTERVIEW (ABRIDGED)

## Fred Willard Interview (*abridged*)

The following interview was conducted by Anne Johnston-Brown on February 23, 2009 at 7:05 p.m.:

Q: Who are your favorite comedic actors or comedians today?

A: Today...there's so many that are good. I think there's a whole circle at the top that I consider geniuses: John Cleese, Michael McKean, and David Lander, and Harry Shearer, all of them. I first met them when all three were in a group called, The Credibility Gap.

Q: Credibility Gap?

A: Credibility Gap. At the time, I was in a group, called The Ace Trucking Company. We played a lot of colleges and coffeehouses and some nightclubs, so our comedy had to be very quick—go for a quick joke, get out—which is completely opposite from what I learned at Second City in Chicago, which is don't go for a joke—the scene can go on for 10 minutes as long as you get from point A to point B and just evolve characters. But when you're playing in front of a coffeehouse, or a club, or college kids, they don't have time for that.

Q: Right.

A: So, anyway, I saw this group, The Credibility Gap, at what is now The Improv on Melrose, and I thought they were so smart. And we actually combined our forces for about 10 or 11 days when two of our members couldn't make a trip. And I used Michael McKean, David Lander, and Harry Shearer, and we combined our sketches together. And, strangely enough, as bright as they were, the people who came to see us didn't laugh as much at their stuff as they did at ours. But they had the most brilliant scene, which is a take-off on Abbott and Costello's "Who's On First?"

Q: Do any of the young ones [comedians] today really strike you?

A: Well, Dave Attell can be very "blue," but I think he's very, very funny... I laugh at him. Louis Black, if you get through all the "fucks, fucks, fucks," he has just really brilliant stuff.

Q; Did you formally study the art of comedy, or is it something you just do naturally? Did you major in it?

A: No, no, no, no. I started out in New York. I went to an acting school because I suddenly decided, "What should I be: a disc jockey or an actor? I think I'll be an actor. That won't be hard." (laughter)

Q: When was your big break?

A: I think the big break is we played in Chicago at a place called the Gate of Horn and also Mr. Kelley's. The producer and the director from Second City had come to see us. So, eventually my partner and I kind of broke up, and I got a call from my agent. He said, "They're casting for Second City. Would you go in?" This was in New York, and they were having auditions at William Morris. I had seen Second City; it was so bright. Everything was about philosophers and politics and Kierkegaard, and everyone seemed to have a beard. I had never improvised; I was scared to death. And I went in, and there were about 20 of us. And the first thing he said was, "We have a sketch of a coffeehouse; there's a folk singer." And we'd been through that for a couple of years. So, I held up my hand, and I said, "Let me try that." So, I had some ideas and it went well, and I did about three or four very good ones. And by the end of the hour or so, he said, "Okay, we have time for one more." I just put my hand up, and I said, "Let me! Let me!" And another guy I had auditioned with at that time was Robert Kline. I had never seen him before. I had never met him. He influenced me so much. And he's also—to me—one of the funniest stand-ups.

Q: What year did Second City come see you at the Gate of Horn?

A: Well, it must have been...Second City debuted in '61, and we were at the Gate of Horn, I would say, in the late '60s, maybe middle '60s. Well, probably...about '64 or '65. Second City was great, working with the people. And the great thing about it is every night you could have an idea during the day, come in at night, and we would be in the dressing room, and I'd say, "Hey, I've got an idea." And I would look at Bob Kline, and I'd say, "Bob, you be a policeman, and so-and-so, you be a..."—David Steinburg was in the company too—"David, you be a transvestite, and Judy, you be..." And to this day, every time Bob Kline sees me, he says, "Willard, you casting today?" You could have something on the stage that you thought of that day.

Q: How long were you with Second City?

A: Just one year. And it was wonderful. We broke in wonderfully because we came, and they had us learn Second City sketches that had already been up on their feet, so we didn't have to start from scratch and improvise.

Q: What role do you feel was the funniest you have ever [played]?

A: (long pause)

Q: I know you've got to look back.

A: I would probably say, A Mighty Wind. I was the freest and the funniest.

Q: (laughing) I agree.

A: And I was pretty funny in Waiting for Guffman. But I think in Mighty Wind, it all came together. I had my blonde hair, and there were no stops.

Q: Do you think that a background in theatre and/or improvisation is helpful to young comedic actors?

A: Oh, definitely! Yes. Anything you can do on the stage in front of an audience, which is why I love this little acting school I went to called, Showcase Theatre. You were in front of an audience, and it was probably no bigger than this theatre. It probably seated 30 people, but you could hear if they were with you, or you could tell if they were bored. You did your lines; you reacted. I hated the teacher. I hated the instructor 'cause he'd give you a scene to do; you'd get up and get two words out, and he'd stop you: "Now, wait a minute. What's your motivation? Do this. Do that." And I wanted to say, "Jesus! Let me get through it once." So, I hated the teachers. They were both frustrated actors. In fact, I modeled my characters in Waiting for Guffman on them. But once you were on the stage, you were on your own. Now, I have a very strong opinion about improvisation and sketches. Sketches, you can sit down and write. And I guess there's no rule—from a 30 second blackout to a 12-minute sketch. Improv, a lot of people are scared of it, and it's something that if you can do, it's wonderful, and if you can't do, you don't have to feel bad.

Q: Well, then, I have to ask you this question, since we're on this subject: Do you think that playing comedy—not just improvisation—but comedy itself requires a higher level of intelligence?

A: (bursts into laughter; pauses to think) Usually. I have a friend named, Mike Haggerty, who's a Second City guy. He's been on a lot of TV, and he's done a few dramatic roles. He's a great big Irishman: big, round face and ruddy... beer drinker. You can just tell he's a beer drinker—big stomach. And he did some cop show or something, and he said, "Fred, it's so easy to do drama." He says, "You just do the lines—you don't have to worry about being funny—just do the lines, do a character, learn your lines, and do it." Sean Penn, who won the Academy Award, I imagine if you put him in [comedy] sketches, he'd be quite good. Uh, I saw James Franco do [comedy], and my wife said, "I was surprised because James Franco always plays these very intense characters." He was very funny! He was playing a stoned guy. So, a good actor can be very good in comedy and vice versa. John Cleese, who I think is probably the most brilliant comedy mind, I saw him on TV do The Taming of the Shrew, and for the first time in my life, I could understand Shakespeare. It wasn't like, (becomes dramatic) "To be or not to be..." He was just speaking, and so I understood.

Q: Do you think that wittiness can be taught?

A: No. A lot of it comes...and I hate to say this...a lot of comedy comes from pain. You talk to most comedic actors—most comedians—they had very unhappy childhoods. They're not happy. Beautiful people with beautiful lives don't have to be funny. They just go through life, and they get things. It comes from being an outsider, and you observe other people. Now, I'm very quiet. I'll sit at a party and just observe people. I just love it. And I'll see someone do something, and I'll say I've got to remember to do that in a sketch. I worked in an office in New York when I first got there, and I got a lot of my inspiration from the bosses who were there—you know, fuddy-duddies.

Q: Very clichéd?

A: Yeah. Yeah. There were the bosses and...what are they called..."bean-counters." So, my favorite comedy is the kind of straight-ahead comedy, where you let the comedy come out.

Q: Do you think that comedy is a more exaggerated reality?

A: There should be a reality to your comedy, and let the comedy come out, instead of just doing funny things. What I like to do with all of my characters, and what Christopher Guest's people do...everyone creates their own characters. So, they're very serious about their character. Even my characters that are kind of exaggerated, I still feel that it's coming from a real person.

Q: So, you *believe*.

A: Yeah, I *believe* the character, and I *believe* what he's doing.

Q: It just happens to be funny stuff.

A: Yes. Yes. Rather than just being... you know...wearing funny clothes and being the clown.

Q: What advice would you give to teachers of comedy? Do you have any tips you could give them for bringing out the comedic instincts of young actors?

A: I'd have them watch or listen to as much comedy as possible. Go out and see....I learned as much from going to see a show—even if it's bad—as I do from seeing something good. 'Cause I'll see something bad, and I'll say, "Ooh, don't ever do that," or, "It's so bad, I can make a spoof of it." A lot of comedy is doing people...you know, doing *ironic* things. And also improv...go into a sketch. And a good way to get into it easily is don't try to be funny; just enter a sketch. Maybe a man and a woman are having a fight. They're at a marriage counselors. You walk in delivering pizzas. Don't go in with a huge funny idea if you don't have it. Just walk in. You've got the pizza. If you give them the pizza, take the money and leave without a laugh. That's okay. You've got

your feet wet. One of the most interesting things I saw was a Second City sketch show that Joe Flaherty from SCTV put on, and there was an actress who came out. She was not funny at all. She was quite attractive, which helped, but she didn't try to be funny. She just got in the scene. She did it. I said, "It's so refreshing just to see that." And eventually you'll come up with something funny. So, don't be afraid of getting into an improv.

Q: How would you summarize your technique for playing comedy? In other words, if someone wanted to use your technique for comedic acting...if they had a script in their hand and they were getting ready to play a big piece of comedy, what steps would they follow?

A: One thing, it really helps to know your lines. Get on top of the script then you can play with it. That's the most fun. The hard part is memorizing. And then...I don't know... you just put on a switch and see the fun part in your head of what you're doing. Don't try to be funny. Don't mug. And, if it doesn't come to you, just carry right through. I think as long as you have an awareness of what you are doing...

Q: You make a choice?

A: Yeah, what your character is...something in his background. Maybe if you're playing a boss, you'd think in your mind, "This boss doesn't know what he's doing, but he still has his message to deliver..."

Q: Okay.

A: "... and he's got to pick on someone who's the scapegoat." You know, "Phillips, you were in late yesterday...," just some little funny thing in the background. Maybe a tough army sergeant who's deathly afraid of...or wants to be an interior decorator, or wants to redesign...just a little thought in your mind, just a little offbeat thing. Or a sergeant who is really tough on his troops, but has never faced a minute of actual combat, but he's very tough. Just know that in the back of your mind, and go for that.

Q: And if you go up on your lines, how do you get out of that?

A: It's like a tightrope walker: What do you do if the wind catches you and you fall? I think that's where improv comes around. But just remember what you're doing and start making up lines. Just a funny story that has nothing...well, it does have something to do with this: Severn Darden and Del Close—everyone knows Del Close—there was a play, and I think Del Close went up on his lines onstage. And Severn Darden slowly inched his way over to Del Close, like he was going to help him out, and he got right up to his ear, and he went, "Blah, blah, blah, blah..." Now, that breaks the tension!

# APPENDIX D

# PERFORMING ARTS SCHOOLS

# Performing Arts Schools

**American Academy of Dramatic Arts**
1336 North LaBrea Avenue
Hollywood, CA 90028
323-464-2777
www.AADA.org

**American Conservatory Theatre**
30 Grant Avenue
San Francisco, CA 94108
415-834-3350
www.ACT-SF.org

**Baylor University**
Post Office Box 97262
Waco, TX 76798
254-710-6481
www.baylor.edu

**California State University, Chico**
400 West First Street
Chico, CA 95929
714-989-INFO
www.csuchico.edu/thea

**California State University, Fullerton**
Post Office Box 34080
Fullerton, CA 92834
714-278-2300
www.fullerton.edu/arts/theatredance

**California State University, San Bernardino**
5500 University Parkway
San Bernardino CA 92407-2318
909-537-5000.
http://theatre.csusb.edu

**Cast Academy of Acting & Showcase Theatre**
5213 Saint Moritz Drive NE
Minneapolis, MN 55421
763-789-2353
www.actortrainingcast.com

**Columbia University**
305 Dodge Hall, Mail Code 1808, 2960 Broadway
New York, NY 10027
212-854-2134
www.Columbia.edu

**Cornell University**
225 Center for Theatre Arts
Ithaca, NY 14850
607-254-2757
www.arts.cornell.edu

**National Theatre Conservatory**
The Denver Center for the Performing Arts
1050 13th Street
Denver, CO 80204
303-446-4855
www.dcpa.org

**New York University**
721 Broadway, 7th Floor
New York, NY 10003
212-998-1918
www.tisch.NYU.edu

**Northwestern University**
1949 Campus Drive
Evanston, IL 60208
847-491-3170
www.northwestern.edu

**Purdue University**
1376 Stewart Center
West Lafayette, IN 47907
765-494-3083
www.cla.purdue.edu/theatre

## San Diego State University

College of Professional Studies and Fine Arts Theatre
Dramatic Arts 204
San Diego, CA 92182
619-594-6363
http://theatre.sdsu.edu

## Southern Methodist University

Post Office Box 750356
Dallas, TX 75275
214-768-3765
http://smu.edu/meadows/theatre

## Syracuse University

200 Crouse College
Syracuse, NY 13244
315-443-3089
http://vpa.syr.edu/drama

## The New School for Drama

151 Bank Street
New York, NY 10014
212-229-5859
www.NewSchool.edu/drama

## University of California, Los Angeles

103E East Melnitz, Box 951622
Los Angeles, CA 90095
310-206-8441
www.tft.ucla.edu

## University of Florida

Post Office Box 115900
Gainesville, FL 32611
352-392-2038
www.arts.ufl.edu/theatreanddance

## University of Minnesota

580 Rarig Center, 330 21st Avenue South
Minneapolis, MN 55455
507-389-2321
www.mnsu.edu/theatre

**University of Nebraska**
215 Temple Building
Lincoln, NE 68588
402-472-2072
www.unl.edu

**University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill**
Department of Dramatic Art, CB#3230, Center for Dramatic Art
Chapel Hills, NC 27599
919-962-1132
http://drama.unc.edu

**University of Southern California**
Drama Center 116, 1029-33 Childs Way
Los Angeles, CA 90089
213-740-1286
http://theatre.usc.edu

**University of Washington**
Box 353950
Seattle, WA 98195
206-543-5140
http://depts.washington.edu/uwdrama

**Wayne State University**
95 West Hancock
Detroit, MI 48202
313-577-3508
http://theatre.wayne.edu

**Yale University**
Post Office Box 208325
New Haven, CT 06511
203-432-9300
http://drama.yale.edu

## WORKS CITED

Adler, Tony. "Improvisational Theatre." Encyclopedia of Chicago. 2005. Chicago Historical Society. 25 Apr 2009 <http://encyclopedia.chicagohistory.org/pages.631.html>.

Aristotle. Poetics. Trans. Kenneth McLeish. New York: Theatre Communications Group, 1999.

Berger, Peter L. Redeeming Laughter: The Comic Dimension of Human Experience. New York: Walter de Gruyter, 1997.

Bergler, Edmund. Laughter and the Sense of Humor. New York: Intercontinental, 1956.

Brestoff, Richard. The Great Acting Teachers and Their Methods. Lyme, NH: Smith & Kraus, 1995.

Brockett, Oscar G., and Franklin J. Hildy. History of the Theatre. 10th ed. Boston: Allyn and Bacon, 2008.

Campbell, Joseph. The Hero with a Thousand Faces. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1972.

Cundall, Michael K. "Humor and the Limits of Incongruity." Creativity Research Journal 19 (2007): 203-211.

Duchartre, Pierre-Louis. The Italian Comedy. New York: Dover, 1966.

Fava, Antonio. The Comic Mask in the Commedia dell' Arte. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2007.

Freud, Sigmund. Wit and Its Relation to the Unconscious. 1916. Trans. A.A. Brill. New York: Dover, 1993.

Grawe, Paul H. Comedy in Space, Time, and the Imagination. Chicago: Nelson-Hall, 1983.

Grotjahn, Martin. Beyond Laughter. New York: Blackiston Division, 1957.

Gruber, William E. Comic Theatres: Studies in Performance and Audience Response. Athens: The U of Georgia P, 1986.

Halpern, Charna. Truth in Comedy: The Manual for Improvisation. Colorado Springs: Meriwether, 1993.

Hunter, Allan G. Stories We Need to Know. Forres, Scotland: Findhorn Press, 2008.

Jung, Carl. The Archetypes and the Collective Unconscious. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1969.

Kerr, Cherie. Build to Laugh: How to Construct Sketch Comedy with the Fast and Funny Formula. Santa Ana: ExecuProv, 1996.

Libera, Anne. The Second City Almanac of Improvisation. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 2004.

McDonald, Russ. The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare. 2nd Ed. New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001.

Merriam-Webster Online. 2009. Merriam-Webster. 28 Mar 2009 <http://www.merriam-webster.com/search/>.

Parsons, Bill. Email to the author. 14 Sept 2009.

Perry, John. Encyclopedia of Acting Techniques. Cincinnati: Beltway, 1997.

Porterfield, Sally F. Jung's Advice to the Players. Westport, Conn.: Greenwood, 1994.

Rudlin, John. Commedia dell' Arte: An Actor's Handbook. New York: Routledge, 1994.

Ryan, Paul. The Art of Comedy: Getting Serious about Being Funny. New York: Back Stage, 2007.

Shelley, Cameron. "Plato on the Psychology of Humor." Humor: International Journal of Humor Research 16 (2003): 351-367.

Smith, Willard. The Nature of Comedy. Boston: Badger, 1930.

Spolin, Viola. Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques. Ed. Paul Sills. 3rd ed. Evanston: Northwestern UP, 1999.

Stanislavski, Constantin. An Actor's Handbook. 18th ed. Trans. Elizabeth Reynolds Hapgood. New York: Theatre Arts Books, 1996.

The Bible Online. 2005. Bible.com Ministries. 7 Apr 2009 <http://www.bibleresources.bible.com/search>.

Wagner, Lou. Personal Interview. 20 May 2009.

White, Diz. The Comedy Group Book. Hanover: Smith & Kraus, 2007.

Willard, Fred. Personal Interview. 23 Feb 2009.

Wright, John. Why Is That So Funny? A Practical Exploration of Physical Comedy. New York: Limelight, 2007.

Ziv, Avner. Personality and Sense of Humor. New York: Springer, 1984.