

# COMEDY BASICS

Improvisation & Authenticity  
'Truth' in Comedy and The Game  
Play Theory and Socialization

# Some Truisms:

- **Comedy exists on a continuum.** What is and is not funny is primarily subjective. Funniness is found in situations that are often treated with seriousness.
- **Comedy exists within society,** and our laughter comes from identifying with characters' experiences. These experiences remind us of our relationships with others.
- **Social norms change** in unexpected and sometimes artificial and absurd ways, and we can use laughter to talk about these changes and what they mean.

# Progression and Play

- Comedy is often used to highlight weaknesses in contemporary society.
- We can play with social norms to task these weaknesses.
- In so doing, we become aware of how artificial some of our social conventions are (e.g. common touch: shaking hands, hugging, back patting)

# A HISTORY

- Del Close (d. 1999), was born and raised in the midwest, and spent most of his life in Chicago, where he directed and performed at Second City and Improv Olympic.
- He was a prolific teacher of improvisational comedy; **his students are and have been among the most prolific comedic figures in the last 40 years.**

# “Truth In Comedy”

- Audiences are resistant to being told when something is funny, so **Laughter needs to be a spontaneous response to an authentic or truthful situation or suggestion.**
- By being ‘truthful’ or ‘authentic’ performers allow the audience to discover unintended and unexpected connections between characters and ideas. **These ideas resonate emotionally rather than intellectually** (Truth in comedy 25).

# Truth In Comedy (cont'd)

- By refraining from 'being funny', **performers emphasize the social basis for comedy**, and the absurdities that are always present in everyday interactions. Most people are very sincere, but find themselves in absurd situations anyway.

# Absurdity

- We might define absurd moments in different ways, but they are always social:
- A moment when an **ideal outcome** (such as understanding, collaboration, connection, achievement) **is impossible** for various reasons.
- A moment when the emotion produced is neither negative or positive.
- A moment when the surface events of a situation do not reflect the authentic reality of the situation.

# IMPROVISATION

- Is a way for writers and performers to find unexpected connections between characters and situations.
- Usually governed by certain rules that sometimes change or misappropriate those in society.
- Usually has a very definite structure and goal.

# Yes, and...

- A concept to define interactions between performers in improvisational settings, where performers don't deny another performer's suggestion, but rather accept it and build upon it.
- A method of absorbing and building energy within a scene.
- Can also be deployed in day-to-day life as a method of absorbing and gaining momentum for ideas.

# Retroscribing

- One of the main ways that improvisational comedy is deployed in films and television shows is through Retroscribing.
- Retroscribing is the practice of developing a loosely-outlined program that has no written dialogue. Performers create the dialogue between each other with a sense of where each scene is supposed to go.
- Christopher Guest (Spinal Tap, Waiting For Guffman, Best In Show, et al.) is a prime figure.

## Example: *Home Movies*

- Season One of this show is heavily retroscripted, and has a loose, dialogue-heavy aesthetic as a result.
- Characters often make discursive points and take unexpected lines of thought to explain their opinions.

# The Game

- **Is a rule that is discovered while performers do improvisation that dictates what type of actions will govern the rest of the scene.**
- The game can be based on interpersonal dynamics, or group behavior.
- Mutual destruction, tit-for-tat, mirrored behavior, etc. Can be simple examples of games.

# Example: Mr. Show

- A show that deploys skewed rules of contemporary society as the basis for their sketch/improv games.
- By using skewed rules of society, Mr. Show's games resonate with our everyday experiences, and highlight their potential absurdity.

# Socialization

- A term that refers to our reception, deployment, and transmission of social norms.
- **We develop an understanding of what is and is not considered normal behavior based on the people we are surrounded by, and is therefore situational and somewhat arbitrary. Some people don't fit easily into a system.**

# Life as an Improv

- Improv comedy is a microcosm of everyday life. We perform a function and our interactions with other people are governed by rules that may be arbitrary, but are very important in helping us understand who we are.
- We usually react to situation in the same way as “Yes and...” in order to continue having productive and worthwhile relationships

# Step Brothers

- What are the games that characters play with each other?
- How do characters oppose or play with socialization? What is considered normal, and what happens when characters don't meet that standard?