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## Immediacy In Comedy: How Gertrude Stein, Long Form Improv, And 5 Second Films Can Revolutionize The Comedic Form

Alexander Hluch  
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**IMMEDIACY IN COMEDY: HOW GERTRUDE STEIN, LONG FORM IMPROV, AND 5 SECOND  
FILMS CAN REVOLUTIONIZE THE COMEDIC FORM**

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for  
the degree of Master of Fine Arts in Acting  
in the department of Theatre  
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at the University of Central Florida  
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## ABSTRACT

Comedy has typically been derided as second-tier to drama in all aspects of narrative. Throughout history, comedy has seen short shrift in both critical reception and academic investigation. Merit is simply placed on drama far before that of comedy. This is not for comedy's own lack of skill or craft, but simply for comedy's misappropriation as a narrative form. Throughout the years, by way of either competition or economic superiority, comedy has been pigeonholed into the typified dramatic structure that drama so thoroughly encapsulates. Being forced into a form that exemplifies complex, climactic structure and explicit character development, comedy in its purest form has suffered through the ages.

Gertrude Stein's theory of Landscape Drama, and, more specifically, immediacy, is best attuned to comedy in its truest form. Comedy does not require sweeping character development, obtuse narrative design, or fantastic spectacle to produce superior works of art. Comedy, when compared to drama, exists best in a much more punctuated format. Stein's theories, while never intended for comedy, align absolutely perfectly with the comedic genre's design. And epitomized through long form improv on the stage, and the newly-fashioned digital short made profitable by the proliferation of the internet and digital culture, comedy's purest form has become more readily available as narrative has progressed throughout history.

With this thesis, I intend to display the disparity between comedy and drama due to comedy's misallotment into a format that does not properly encapsulate it to its most fulfilling embodiment. Through this display, I seek to uncover the debt done to the comedic form from centuries of neglect in academic query and merit in order to best prove comedy's need for

critical scrutiny. Further, in doing so I hope to better construe a community of comedic research and criticism in order to create better art and more diverse comedic offerings.

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Allons-y!

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## CHAPTER ONE: WHY AM I NOT LAUGHING?

Comedy has long been derided for its unyielding nature and inability to amount to the dramatic standards that typical narrative productions engage in and constitute. When looking at chronological breakdowns of performative awards, box-office returns, and critical reception, it is easy to ascertain the emphasis Western society has put on drama as the more “legitimate” genre of storytelling. The error in this manner of thinking, however, is that comedy looks to produce the same result as the rest of drama. Quite the contrary, comedy’s truest endeavor has always been the elicitation of joy from its audience. Thereby, the moment of catharsis in comedy comes from the immediate release of laughter. It is a measured, quantifiable result (either laughter or lack of laughter) of the author’s ability to exhibit mastery through wit and surprise. It is the sole purpose of comedy. While tragedy and the other dramatic forms can typically be measured in terms of character development, plot, language, and a multitude of other facets, comedy is recognized for being superior in its own genre merely by its propensity to evoke the maximum amount of mirth. While the sole pursuit of laughter would appear to be an obvious element in the search for comedy’s most genuine form, it merits noting that many forms of drama are labeled as “comedies” when their cathartic end product is far from that of pure, unbridled laughter.

When discussing comedy in this paper, the definition looks to be any form of narrative in which the purpose is to induce laughter, rather than a narrative which is simply enhanced by comedic elements, anecdotes, or asides. While it is understood that this is a bold, sweeping umbrella under which many narratives and forms can fall, it still stands to reason that any form looking to produce laughter is capable of utilizing a unified set of parameters. Much like drama

has multiple forms and yet is continually evaluated in an Aristotelian manner with an emphasis on plot, character, and structure, comedy can look to be assessed in a unique, specific manner, as well.

Based on the above description, I have prescribed the comedic form into two subgenres of comedy that can be used to classify all comedic material, that of “pure” comedy, or comedy that only looks to incite laughter, and that of “dramatic” comedy, or comedy that seeks retribution and vindication through its deft accomplishments in narrative. These two subgenres of comedy have gone back and forth in trying to claim supreme legitimacy as comedy’s truest bent. Pure comedy, that of Satyr Play, sketch, and improv, looks to only incite laughter regardless of timespan or narrative while dramatic comedy looks to intersperse laughter within a traditional, feature-length dramatic thread, accommodating for plot structure, character development, and expansive backstory.

Complications set in when the comedic form comes to be viewed analytically, however. Through the annals of history, comedy has been forced to adhere to dramatic standards that simply do not pertain to the success of its genre. The dramatic form has been ghosted onto comedy in a way that has made laughter, comedy’s very goal, secondary to the pursuit of principle dramatic tenets and constructs. Throughout the years, the allocation of the typical 90-120 minute, three-act structure that drama adheres to has become the measure by which all narrative has come to be assessed. And in doing so, dramatic comedy has typically been viewed as the definitive format for comedy, both disregarding and displacing pure comedy as a viable construct and subgenre.

This conformation of the comedic form into something that it is not has led to a definitive schism in merit and worth as far as comedy and drama are concerned. Again, when looking at gross revenue, critical reception, and the distribution of EGOT awards (Emmy, Grammy, Oscar, and Tony), drama is almost unanimously lauded over comedy. Accordingly, this has led to an unnecessary ranking of comedy as secondary and superfluous to drama. This contrived inferiority, however, is merely the pigeonholing of comedy into the dramatic format, which I argue is not the most sustainable genre for comedy, or laughter, to excel. With an emphasis on plot, character development, and a restrictive structural adherence to a masculine, Western, climactic narrative, the dramatic format designates story elements and constructs that restrict and limit comedy rather than uplifting and encouraging it. While the subgenre of pure comedy exists only to engender laughter, dramatic comedy seeks to both produce laughter as well as engage an audience in a structured, masterful narrative. While seemingly a more difficult, artistically noble task, the very act of trying to create dramatic comedy puts the singular goal of hilarity aside to attempt to accommodate that of narrative ingenuity.

This thesis looks to examine comedy's truest form and how to best exploit the genre's pre-eminent devices in order to develop the highest echelons of creativity in the comedic vein. In order to best represent the genre's perfect form, I look to utilize Gertrude Stein's theories of immediacy and Landscape Drama with examples of what is known as sketch and improv comedy in order to ascertain the principle direction in which comedians can properly expand and explore their art. Stein's methodology of immediacy, the sentiment being that theatre is only poignant in the immediate present, without pretense of future or past chronological

influence, has never been more relevant than in comedy. And, ironically, a theatrical form known as improv comedy almost perfectly adopts Stein's theoretical designs.

Improv comedy, as it is best known, is immediately created live, onstage. Perfectly encapsulating Stein's concept of immediacy, improv exists around a structure designed to maximize the amount of humor in any given scenario. The structure of long form improv comedy, which will be explored later, lends itself perfectly to comedy's idealized form in the sense that it exists purely in order to obtain a laugh. While living moment to moment onstage, improvisers seek to build a comedic game around suggestions from the audience all in search of the cathartic result of laughter.

Sketch comedy, in the realm of the newly-developed digital short, also exists with no intention other than that of humor. Complex plot twists involving multiple, interwoven marriages and cross-dressing royalty are all entirely superfluous when the main goal of the work is to induce laughter. By looking specifically at sketch/digital comedy I argue that comedy is best suited to fit into a miniaturized form free of dramatic constraints in comparison to the standard three-act structure that all feature-length productions entail, with special emphasis given to Stein's theory of narrative immediacy and the Upright Citizens Brigade's theories on long form improv comedy. This form allows the genre to expunge all the unnecessary components that serve no purpose other than to equip comedy with dramatic principles, such as expansive, poetic dialogue, immersive character development, and complexity in plot, that merely weigh it down and muddle the end product.

Why entertain the notion of comedy's perfect medium, to begin with? What value does the genre's medium have upon the exploration of the form? Why not just continue to shovel

out the same, gratuitous drivel year after year? The goal of achieving a perfected mode for the comedic narrative is in the hopes that comedy can be better validated, researched, and understood. In the academic realm, we have established entire degrees and areas of study to drama and its form in an effort to better understand our culture and its artistic product as told through the stage or screen. We grant PhDs in areas of Dramatic Theory, Literature, and Criticism. While it certainly is a fantastic time to be an avowed researcher of narrative, preference typically has been given to those who enjoy studying Chekhov or 19<sup>th</sup> century realism rather than Chaplin or Vaudeville. The fact of the matter is that there is not a single degree in all of North America awarded for comedic endeavors at an accredited university. In the United Kingdom, the second university to offer a comically-inspired degree has literally instated its program to begin in 2013 (Trueman, 2012). Without a semblance of reverence for comedy (admittedly, a task to be taken lightly), the form is not allotted professional or academic bolstering or importance, and therefore remains unavailable to be analyzed, studied, and discussed in the effort to produce stronger artists and artwork.

In essence, the evolution of comedy has been an entirely self-reflexive process. Rather than any sort of mentor, tutor, or apprenticeship construct existing in the art form, comedians have always had to learn and perfect their craft entirely independently. There are no formally-accredited institutions dedicated to the study of the form, mainly because the form itself has been trivialized as trite and inconsequential next to its dramatic counterparts (obviously, it does not help that comedy is also inherently cynical in its parodist nature and seeks to dismiss any sort of serious inquiry). The genre's ability to grow and be nurtured as a substantial artistic

medium lies in the hands of subsequent generations, who continually come at the form merely from a self-informed place.

The reason for this sweeping dismissal lies in the very mode which comedy occupies. The default format for comedy is one that has been appointed by historical way of competition. Whether in order to compete in festivals such as the City Dionysia, or to merit Hollywood taking a chance on a screenplay, writers and producers have continuously forced comedy to occupy the vehicle of drama, or what is better known as “tragedy,” which intrinsically constricts and limits comedy to less than what it could be. The very reason we utilize any sort of academic inquiry into drama at all is to attempt to become better artists and to better understand our own culture through art. The relevance of the question of comedy’s form pertains to our ability, as artists and comedians, to be able to produce the best possible comedic content.

The fact that the subgenre of dramatic comedy attempts to utilize the same structures of merit as drama itself, however, acts as a detriment to the entire genre of comedy, as a whole. It is no secret that comedy gets short shrift in the discussion of acclaimed narrative. Dramas are universally accepted as the superior form of entertainment, as referenced by the majority of winners in either the Tony’s Best Play category or the Academy Awards’ Best Picture category (Tonyawards.com, 2012). Additionally, critical reception and box office receipts always skew towards drama, referenced by worldwide domestic film grosses (Boxofficemojo.com, 2012). In addition to this generalized stamp of superiority, the fact that we have lost the founder of modern criticism, Aristotle’s, treatise on comedy, has helped to put the form slightly behind the Dramatic narrative in academic discussions. In fact, the very notion of discussing comedy in an intellectual sphere has been derided and relatively neglected for

years, both for its inability to live up to its dramatic sibling's standards as well as the comedy community's own insular insistence that comedy cannot be quantified or researched for fear of "over-analyzing" the art form.

While dramatic comedies from Chekhov, Beckett, and even Shakespeare have seen a strong dose of analytical inquiry over the years, the inquiry is typically due to an extemporaneous artistic bent that is interwoven with the comedy. With Shakespeare, the language itself generally becomes the impetus for study, with Chekhov, the cultivation of 20<sup>th</sup> century Realism becomes the topic at hand, and with Beckett, the acceptance and structuring of the narrative in response to the Avant-Garde becomes the imperative. Rarely, if ever, is pure comedy, or comedy that has no social or narrative crux, studied in and of itself. It has not been until only recently, with the advent of blogging and web-journalism, that there has been any sort of fervent, structured discussion as to the inner workings of pure comedy. And this dearth of dialogue is to the very detriment of the form. How can we correctly assess and improve upon any artistic endeavor without first analyzing and critiquing it? In spite of most comedians' insistence that the genre simply cannot be broached in a serious fashion, we must seek to discuss and dissect the individual nuances and notions of pure comedy for what it is worth.

In the following chapter, I will attempt to elaborate on the history of the comedic form in an abbreviated manner in the hopes of establishing a base timeline of comedic evolution. In order to best understand how comedy has arrived at its current, most well-known iteration, we must examine the journey that has led us to the genre's current molding. Following this historical reflection, I will demonstrate how Gertrude Stein's theories of Landscape Drama and immediacy directly pertain to the comedic form and how imperative they are to the

understanding of comedy's construction as well as its future. In the fourth chapter, I will discuss the first of two formats that I think are most conducive to the pure comedic form, that of improvisational comedy. After elaborating on improv's superiority as pure comedy's authoritative staged form, I will look to illuminate the screen's closest approximation, as stage and screen each have separate qualities that afford them equal dominion in the genre. With my final chapter I will look to surmise the work in total and bolster my argument for pure comedy's validity as a form separate from that of the traditional Western narrative, contending that the proliferation of multiple narrative formats to best facilitate individual genres is absolutely crucial to its success.

## CHAPTER TWO: ALL OF COMEDY FOREVER

From as far back as we have record, comedy and drama have occupied the same stage, but not necessarily in the same construct. Dating back to the City Dionysia in Ancient Greece, comedy in the form of the Satyr play initially utilized a vehicle of short, abbreviated sketches. Moving from the phallic, perverse processions of the earliest Dionysian festivals, as well as that of the traveling comic mimes, comedy in its earliest recorded form was in much the same vein that we consider stand-up comics and sketch comedy troupes today: touring specialty acts whose sole intent involved humoring an audience. Problematically, however, comedy was not lauded at anywhere near the same level of importance as drama. When it was eventually granted entrance to the City Dionysia, 33 years after tragedy, comedy's mode was manipulated to best fit a competition already centered around tragedy's narrative construct, rather than its own mirthful pursuits (Goldfarb 29). In accordance with this brand new respect, comedy was converted from the early Satyr Plays to a more exhaustive form in line with its dramatic counterpart. This became the genesis for comedy's transmutation, as Greek Tragedy had already established the standard by which dramatic competition was perceived by the time comedy made its entrance into the foray, which is best referenced by Aristotle's emphasis on Plot, Character, and Thought, above all else (Wilson & Goldfarb 35).

This movement to Dionysian competition drove comedy into a direct correlation with tragedy. In order to vie for legitimacy against its revered and respected counterpart, comedic-minded playwrights adhered to the dramatic guidelines that they were never meant to fully emulate, in turn creating the form that I have coined "dramatic" comedy which evolved out of traditional Greek Old Comedy. This marked shift was propagated even further with Greek New

Comedy, in which a more “refined” semblance of dramatic comedy arose. The comedic form became standardized by the feature-length nature of Old Comedy before being quickly replaced by an even “more subtle comedy of manners and well-wrought intrigue, which focused on domestic—that is, family—situations and bourgeois life in the cities. In short, New Comedy was more realistic, more down-to-earth, and its comedy arose not from satire and extreme exaggeration” (Wilson & Goldfarb 53).

A decisive shift in comedy, this move from the more boundless, anarchic style to a more realistic duplicate of the dramatic form would pave the way for the genre throughout the rest of history. Dramatic comedy was born out of comedy’s necessary expansion in order to compete with drama in the City Dionysia. Through each historical shift, a decisive regimentation of the comedic form can be documented, which in turn has, at times, produced a backlash in the pure comedic vein. Rather than expanding and experimenting within itself and within its own narrative, however, comedy only further collapsed in upon itself to create the standardized, homogenous format that has come to be generally accepted through the centuries as “traditional Western narrative.”

### Comedy Cut in its Purest Form

This first pigeonholing of the genre marked the point in which comedy as a form in and of itself would splinter and become two, distinct modes: again, that which we have referred to as pure comedy, or comedy with the sole intent of eliciting laughter, and that of dramatic comedy, or comedy looking to engender a skilled narrative with a comedic bent. In naming the two subgenres, I describe pure comedy as such not merely to say that it is inherently “better”

than dramatic comedy, but simply that it has no pretense or desire to do anything other than induce a humorous catharsis, whereas dramatic comedy looks to encapsulate Aristotelian merit within the comedic format. Further, pure comedy comes without definitive form, or time constraints. In fact, pure comedy can consist of a mere five seconds of content if that is what the comedic concept calls for, while dramatic comedy typically adheres to a feature-length structure. Despite the nomenclature that I have imbued it with, however, pure comedy has never seen the same amount of appropriation and validity as that of dramatic comedy.

Throughout history, favor has typically been given to dramatic comedy through commerce, critical reception, and governmental regulation, which continually furthered the sequestering of comedy into the dramatic form as evidenced by most of the major theatrical movements past the Middle Ages. In filing comedy into the dramatic form rather than the pure form, I argue that comedy is apportioned inadequately and that through its allotment into the dramatic form has become second-rate to drama and of lesser quality as an art form on its own. I argue that the tenets of pure comedy are far closer to that of comedy's main goal, that of pure laughter, than that of dramatic comedy. Further, by researching pure comedy as comedy's main narrative form, I attest that more attention can be paid to the genre as a viable, unique narrative with its own set of skills, techniques, and merits rather than simply being seen as an inadequate aspirant of drama.

### **New Old Comedy (New New)**

In satirizing the social scenes of the day, New Comedy became more subdued and nuanced at its core. These earliest comedies were usually lampoons of either political or social

norms. Acting as the bridge between Satyr Plays and the present, New and Old Comedy alike synthesized these elements of societal, Satyr-esque farce into a traditional dramatic structure, forgoing pure comedy entirely. When later adapted by the Romans, dramatic comedies were generally improvements made upon Greek structures in the tragic form that comedy became forced to fulfill. Roman comedy lauded Greek New Comedy above Old, and assisted in the propagation of the form throughout “[s]ubsequent periods, such as the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, [which] held the plays of Terence in great esteem” (Wilson & Goldfarb 64). The Romans’ enjoyment of the more domesticated New Comedy further manipulated the form in which dramatic comedy came to occupy. The chorus was done away with, which further sequestered comedy into a facet of mimesis that looked to bring about a comedy of nuance and subtlety rather than a more presentational form (Lauter 34). Further, the only two documented Roman comic playwrights, Plautus and Terence, excelled in New Comedy; “Since later critics turned to them as the foremost examples of comic drama, the plays of Plautus and Terence exerted enormous influence on Renaissance comedy. All of the extant Roman comedies are adaptations of Greek plays” (Brockett 45). The traditional comedies that we can only assume Romans valued most, due to their survival in written form, all perpetuated the Greek construct of New Comedy and further maneuvered comedy into this new dramatic format. While minor changes did occur, such as the addition of music underscoring dialogue, New Comedy’s situational, domestic brand of humor flourished throughout.

## Bawdy, Farcical Farce

Despite this marked proliferation of the Greek form, however, pure comedy still managed to retain relevance and maintain semblances of its original bawdy, farcical form through both Atellan farce and mime. During the stark downfall of Rome's appreciation for drama in the first century B.C.E., pure comedy in these two facets actually survived New Comedy and acted as the premiere form until the Middle Ages. Atellan farce served as the chronological link in the historical chain of pure comedy between Greek Satyr Plays and the Italian construct of *Commedia dell'Arte* (Brockett 47-48). Its incredibly abridged structure and use of stock characters created a wholly independent form in Atellan farce that differed from that of New Comedy. Eventually, mime entirely usurped Atellan farce and dominated the popular entertainments of the day in Roman society, contributing to a sort of carnival-esque construct that subversively pervaded into the Byzantine era and the Middle Ages. Without any definitive dramatic work to compete with or mimic, comedy was free to reallocate itself to its original unrestrained nature. Comedy in this new post-Roman paradigm more resembled interspersed routines reminiscent of the variety show era of the 1970's rather than any specific sort of pure or dramatic comedy. However, mime and the variety shows of the late twentieth century both have more in line with pure comedy than dramatic comedy due to its irregular narrative construction (or total lack thereof, for that matter). They involve typically meaningless plots and character arcs in minute formats all for the same result of obtaining nothing more than laughter, harkening back to the wandering companies of comedians that performed in the earliest processions and Satyr Plays of Greek theatrical endeavor.

The term “mime” in Roman society constituted a wide breadth of performers, from acrobats to comics, whose sole intent was to keep spectators entertained and in their seats. This comedic construct would eventually act as the dual vehicle in which pure comedy was kept alive through the Middle Ages by simultaneously maintaining the pure comedic tradition through roving troupes of mimes from the fall of Rome through the European Renaissance, as well as by incensing the Christian Church enough to persecute theatre, as a whole. The Western decline of drama can be readily traced back to the staunch Christian response to the lewd and antagonistic acts of mime entertainments: “Church leaders were offended by the sexual content of Roman entertainments and by their frequent satirical attacks on Christianity. As a result, the church issued various edicts condemning theatre and its participants” (Wilson & Goldfarb 74). This now-infamous theatrical exile of the Middle Ages actually bolstered pure comedy more than many of the form’s most popular outlets. By denouncing drama as a whole and making theatre illegal, dramatic comedies became much more difficult to stage, whereas pure comedy, typically the work of wandering troupes that could pack up in an instant, were able to continue with their tours.

In this way, mime acted as a harbinger for pure comedy and managed to propagate the form by constantly dodging the prevailing church’s newly inflicted wrath on all of theatre, in effect temporarily stamping the traditional dramatic form out of existence in a war of attrition. Dramatic comedy, by nature, needs more physical provisions to survive. Typically, it is a longer structure and involves a thorough examination of a story in the form of a script, with actors playing definitive roles. Pure comedy, however, especially that of mime, could encapsulate any band of traveling minstrels with the ability to make a crowd laugh through a series of gags or

bits. Being that pure comedy is intrinsically more mobile, it was able to survive the very religious onslaught that it helped to create, while dramatic comedy, much like all structured drama, suffered. Subversive by nature, mime managed to survive the Christian persecution of theatrical productions, and continued its traditions throughout the expansion of the Christian era. With dramatic comedy, and drama as a whole, legally condemned, mime acted as the sole agent of sustainable comedic theatrical endeavor for centuries, possibly extending its influence all the way to the earliest *commedia* troupes.

### The Middle Ages, or, Why Catholics Hated Laughter

This tradition of mime continued throughout the Middle Ages as the Roman Catholic Church ironically revitalized drama in order to help spread their message. Liturgical dramas became the premiere theatrical construct, and dominated the landscape to such an intense degree that the only occasion for sanctioned irreverence was during festivals of celebration. The Feast of Fools, for example, in which miniature sketches could be performed in an effort to temporarily usurp the power structure of the church between Deacons and Choir Boys, could be viewed as taking part in the preservation of pure comedy in one of its most sanctioned periods. With all of drama basically reduced to Biblical story-telling, there was very little room for dramatic comedy during this period. The religious rebuke to drama, as a whole, helped to suppress the rise of dramatic comedy and lent itself quite cohesively to the gradual oncoming expansion of *Commedia dell'Arte* through mime. While Elizabethan and Spanish theatre of the Renaissance did, in fact, re-establish the link to the full-length dramatic comedy of New Comedy, pure comedy thrived in the form of mime and *Commedia*.

## Rigid Silliness in the Renaissance

When examining the Elizabethan era, the direct correlation between the Roman paradigm and the Shakespearean concept of comedy is readily apparent and integral to the understanding of dramatic comedy's evolution. Through the intense study of playwrights like Seneca, Elizabethan writers worked under the auspices of strict Roman influence. Dramatic comedies became valued as meaningful fare for court entertainments, and looked to rival tragedy for supremacy of form. This newfound delight in dramatic comedy saw its almost immediate resurgence and, with the assistance of some of the greatest poetic playwrights in all of history, saw its permanence established.

Ancillary to dramatic comedy's flourishing, however, the European Renaissance, beginning with the Italian Renaissance, reinvigorated pure comedy as well, in the form of the already-discussed *Commedia dell' Arte*, roughly around 1568. Running adjacent to the full-length comedic productions performed at court, *Commedia* inspired a long lineage of pure comedy that derived from the "Atellan farce of Rome as preserved by wandering mimes during the Middle Ages or by Byzantine mimes who came west when Constantinople fell in 1453. The Principal evidence [being] the similarity of stock characters" (Brockett 172). While routines were certainly memorized by actors that would fulfill a role for years on end, the propensity for improvisation in *commedia* slackened the importance on narrative and heightened the emphasis on evoking a laugh, something that would soon become increasingly pushed aside during the more and more structured period of Neoclassicism.

After the French Renaissance, comedy looked to become even further regimented into a dramatic framework. The neoclassical period looked to assimilate art, especially drama, into one, definable commodity. In doing so, the comedies of the day followed the five-act structure and rules of verisimilitude that dominated the theatrical landscape, even in works by playwrights that were considered adversarial to the establishment, such as Molière. Molière's works were not considered controversial for their deviation of form, even though he has been credited as being "much influenced" by *Commedia dell'arte* (Brockett 194). Instead, Molière's reputation for scandal came from his intense diagnosis on French society reflected through his comedic characters. Rather than assisting any sort of comedic evolution into pure comedy, Molière helped to define the form even more fully in the vein of the neoclassicists' structural ideal; "[Molière's] comedies...shocked audiences, not because of their subject matter but because he insisted on depicting vices and follies truthfully" (Wilson & Goldfarb 216). This truthful representation of events in the comedic arena only furthered the growth of dramatic comedy into a form that enforced dramatic principles over comic fare. Molière's shedding of light on societal woes through comedy, while incendiary and historical, only further sequestered dramatic comedy away from pure comedy with its increasingly rigid, sanctioned plots that looked to instill awe in the audience with their narrative complexity. By acting subversively towards the establishment in terms of theme and depictions of class, Molière further closed the door on any discussion of a differentiated narrative in drama by occupying the traditional construct of dramatic comedy. His adherence to the typical rules of narrative while he actively railed against the upper class cemented Neoclassical structuralist ideals of form and narrative which further forced comedy into the dramatic mode.

Ironically, however, even in the height of the neoclassical period, an age in which deviation from the traditional form seemed destined to be damned, pure comedy still managed to hang on. Of the five acting companies that were granted royal patronage during Molière's time, one of the five was a *Commedia* troupe straight out of Italy that had recently adopted the French language. After Molière's death, the *commedia* troupe continued to be granted an endowment until it was penalized for performing "a supposed satire of the second wife of Louis XVI," in which it lost its funding entirely (Brockett 195). Again, not for its ingenuity of form, but for its own too-close-for-comfort content, pure comedy was punished and took a strong blow in the form of financial assistance. This decline in comedic ingenuity was echoed further by a decline in theatrical ingenuity as a whole, when a stark monopoly was granted to the *Comedie Francaise*, or the new French national theatre. The unfortunate "lack of outlets for plays had a stifling effect on French drama; this problem was worsened by the...preference for plays that were imitative rather than innovative" (Wilson & Goldfarb 223). With one governing body presiding over all of comedy, and drama as a whole, favor was given to dramatic comedy in the semblance of what the French populace, especially those at court, had come to expect from Molière's character-driven comedy of virtue.

### Why the Restoration Made Everyone's Lives Worse

The restoration only saw the dramatic mode of comedy further purported as the era of the comedy of manners became normative. While the Neoclassical period saw comedy fit to resemble what tragedy had asserted as the "correct" narrative, the Restoration further expounded, rather than expanding in another direction, on that notion and built their dramatic

ideals on the back of neoclassical sensibilities. This brand of comedy was most readily influenced by Molière himself, and adopted many of the practices that neoclassical comedies exploited, such as “the fashions and foibles of the upper class—gossip, adultery, sexual escapades...Language—witty exchanges, repartee, and sexually suggestive references—is at a premium” (Wilson & Goldfarb 236). Especially during the English Restoration period, when comedy sought to take on an even more dramatic bent, concentrating the comedic narrative even further than Shakespeare had by focusing on non-fantastical elements and bringing the comedy into a traditional portrait of characters’ true-to-life endeavors. The style was borderline didactic, as playwrights waxed poetical about morality by portraying a plethora of adulterous characters intertwined in mishaps and conflagrations. In the plays of Wycherly and Congreve especially, themes of morality and virtue as identified through infidelity were the norm. These thematic devices were used to parody the upper class and make a mockery of the debauched lifestyles they led. In doing so, however, these plays became relatively bawdy, at least in terms of subject matter and plot device. This, once again, attracted the negative attention of the church which looked to reinstate its hold over society.

Once again, in an attempt to use comedy to subvert the power structures, comedy was further sanctioned to adhere to rules of “good” dramatic invention. The comedy of manners exemplified in this period was quickly usurped by sentimental comedy in the 18<sup>th</sup> century as the oversight of the church prompted playwrights to do more than merely lampoon the upper classes, but to actually reward the virtuous in their works while simultaneously punishing the evil. Character and plot were central to both forms, and sentimental comedy was exemplified for its proclivities in crafting a happy ending for its protagonists, sometimes painstakingly so.

This specific emphasis on dramatic constructs, such as character and climactic story structure, further contributed to comedy's metamorphosis into its current, most dramatic structure.

While comedy was looking to circumvent the power structures of upper-class society, it still managed to pigeon-hole itself, much like during the Neoclassical period, into an even further sanctioned form. Now bound not only by strict concepts of character development and plot, comedies had an actual narrative end result in mind, a goal to achieve, if you will.

### The Government is Not Funny

While the main comedic forms of the day were dominated by dramatic comedy in the form of sentimental comedy and the comedy of manners, pure comedy did manage to live on through *commedia dell'arte*, pantomime, and burlesque (Brockett 209). Of course, these theatrical entertainments were more veiled, kept under the radar from governmental supervision, unlike their longer-narrative comedic counterparts. Restoration England, for example, saw the passage of the Licensing Act of 1737, which dictated that all "legitimate" theatrical endeavors had to be submitted to the Lord Chamberlain's office for review before being produced (Brockett 210). While this law began by only pertaining to specific theatres in Westminster, it eventually was broadened to include all "entertainment within a twenty-mile radius of London" (Brockett 211). This reinvigorated governmental control of the dramatic form further filtered comedic content, as the law was passed more out of a desire to manage political parody than to censure mature thematic elements. That being said, the term "blue" comedy, which came to indicate any sort of crass, obscene form of humor, came about as any revisions or edits to a play were made by the Lord Chamberlain's blue pen (Idle, 2012). These

new English regulatory measures debilitated theatre across the board, especially in its minute, more underground forms. Meanwhile, Opera dominated the landscape of the Italian theatrical scene, and *Commedia*, ironically, had become antiquated to modern Italian audiences who now looked to English sentimentalism to provide their comedic escapes. The domination of dramatic comedy was spreading across the European continent, as regulations and popular opinion unanimously favored dramatic comedy's form over pure comedy.

As the nineteenth century approached, *commedia*, comic opera, pantomime, and burlesque looked to be the last bastions of the pure comedic form, as most productions sought legitimacy through adherence to either Neoclassical constructs of narrative perfection or governmental approval. The 1800's saw a marked dramatic stricture even further as the concept of the "well-made play" became a newfound addition to the already mounting list of benchmarks that playwrights sought to achieve in order to maintain a status of public approval. Towards the end of the century, the newly developed style of Realism only tightened the stranglehold that dramatic comedy had on the form, as plays looked to emulate life onstage to the best of their ability. The concept of slapstick parody and satire became secondary to realistic portrayals of life, much akin to the immediate favor granted to playwrights such as Chekhov in works such as *Uncle Vanya*, *Three Sisters*, and *The Cherry Orchard*. These four-act dramas have been viewed as absolutely revolutionary to the time period, emblematic of The Moscow Art Theatre's influence on the entirety of twentieth-century drama. However, it is rarely mentioned that the playwright himself very much considered them comedies of the day. This striking admission, as well as the utter dearth of definitively comedic theatre from the first half of the twentieth century, points to realism's, and its evolutionary predecessor,

naturalism's, dramatic bent. Playwrights and practitioners alike looked to examine the human condition as closely as possible, which left little room for the absurdity of pure comedy. Of course, with such strong artistic opposition to a form comes creative kickback, and two distinct shifts brought about a strong retaliatory blow to dramatic comedy in both the Avant-Garde and a wholly new form of media, the cinema.

### How Swiss Weirdoes Paved the Way for Pure Comedy

With realism and naturalism pervading all forms of narrative in the early twentieth century, Europe saw the burgeoning of another new movement less than fifty years after realism's intrusion: that of the Avant-Garde. In an effort to most accurately portray "life" onstage, the earliest surrealists argued that Realism could never accomplish said goal because they were constantly trying to construct an onstage façade of reality. Instead, the first practitioners of the Avant-Garde movement argued for drama in which "the nature of reality itself becomes the prime subject of plays because of a loss of confidence in the assumed model for dramatizing human behavior and thinking about human existence" (Cardullo and Knopf 6). *Ubu Roi*, arguably the entry point of the surrealist movement, actually functioned as closely to pure comedy as any play of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. With its non-linear, almost non-existent plot, base set of stock characters, and misuse of language that delved into the vulgar during multiple sequences, *Ubu Roi* looked to elicit laughter through shock. Its mode actually sought to challenge the confines of traditional narrative through its comedy. It was, by its very nature, subversive in form, and yet it was the closest approximation the century would see to pure comedy, actually paving the way for the absurdist humor of the early 21<sup>st</sup> century.

While this retaliatory evolution was burgeoning in the theatres of Switzerland, France, and Italy, in the United States a separate medium of narrative was being cultivated that would benefit both pure and dramatic comedy in huge ways. The moving picture became a viable force for entertainment in the latest part of the nineteenth century, though it was hardly a marketable force until the twentieth. Cinema, in its infancy, was basically a parlor trick in which Nickelodeons would show clips under a minute long that would shock or awe an audience. Some of the earliest clips involved a train headed straight for an audience, two foremen working in their shop, and other short clips that were without narrative entirely. Eventually, cinema expanded and became profitable enough to illicit actual narratives on celluloid.

The rise of the medium was always entirely in line with the capitalistic construct of supply-and-demand. If the Hollywood moguls saw a way to capitalize on a newly discovered technology in the arena of the cinema, they would instantly pounce, whether that be sound, color, surround sound, 3-D picture, etc. Cinema has always been directly tied to commerce and the demands of the populace. Once the public became tired of the 30 second clips that had no dramatic merit, studios began to provide longer, more complex fare for the movie-going multitudes: “The development of movies from just images of things happening without editing moved pretty quickly, within a decade. I mean, you had the studio system and the whole thing was working” (Peter Bogdanovich, *Moguls and Movie Stars*, 2011). This eventually led to the rise of the silent film stars of the 1910’s and 1920’s. Comedic greats such as Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd, and Max Linder championed the comedic short through grandiose physicality and slapstick. Being that any and all dialogue had to be conveyed through title cards

that would interrupt the action onscreen, less attention was paid to overblown exposition and plot while the crux of the narrative simply focused on making the audience laugh. Most of these silent film-era comedians had a rote, specific character that they would revisit in each short. While these characters typically were not complex to begin with, their continual reintroduction to audiences assured that time would not be spent doting on the establishment of character. Instead, maximum time could be allotted to mining a comedic bit, or “game,” in order to produce the greatest amount of laughter.

By the end of the 1920’s, however, sound had become a viable, readily-engineered component to motion Pictures, and with the successful integration of sound, came the solidification of the studio system (Wilkman, 2011). The days of plurality in the motion picture marketplace were coming to an end, as monolithic studios began to rise up out of the consolidation of smaller, more struggling production houses. Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer was the prime example of the industry’s condensation as a whole. Here, three very separate production houses (Goldwyn and Mayer absolutely abhorred one another) were joined together in a mutual partnership borne out of the inability to compete with some of the newly engendered, massive studios. The result was a complete success directly in the face of the harsh times of the Great Depression (Wilkman, 2011). With this adaptation of a pseudo-monopolization of the empires, the old business model for producing two-reelers, or what we now refer to as “short films,” was almost immediately replaced by a model demanding feature-length stock. While cinema had provided an excellent outlet for the pure comedy of vaudeville and burlesque to gain entrance into the mainstream populace’s hearts, it now looked to bolster dramatic comedy and squelch pure comedy almost entirely.

As the development of cinema looked to further perpetrate dramatic comedy's superiority due to its more readily-marketable packaging, and the avant-garde began to wind down in America and Europe especially, all coupled with the death of American burlesque and vaudeville, pure comedy looked as though it was at risk of finally being entirely discarded. Ironically, however, the advent of a smaller screen managed to save pure comedy from its abandonment by the larger screen. Television gave comedians and radio personalities alike a fresh outlet to entertain audiences that looked to rival the movies. With unlimited hours of airtime up for grab and an affordable business model in place, television was willing to take risks on the two-reelers and vaudevillian acts that the moving pictures had recently forsaken. Out of this development came the late-night pioneers in the form of *The Tonight Show* and, subsequently, the variety show craze. Programs such as *Your Show of Shows*, *The Carole Burnett Show*, *The Ed Sullivan Show*, *The Gong Show*, *The Sonny and Cher Hour*, and *The Benny Hill Show* in the United Kingdom led to the growth and vitalization of sketch comedy in both the U.S. and the U.K. *Saturday Night Live* debuted on NBC in 1975 to glowing reviews, and still remains on the air today, while Monty Python's Flying Circus dominated not only the European airwaves, but eventually, the U.S. as well, doing more in subsequent years after its initial telecast than during its premiere.

## Scripts Make Things Less Funny, or, How Procrastination Became an Art Form

Around the same time that television had taken variety and sketch directly into the homes of millions of viewers, asserting pure comedy's relevance on a culture that was almost bereft of the form, improvisational comedy began to propagate in the city of Chicago. First under the banner of The Compass Players and later under the guise of the still-extant-and-thriving Second City, improv comedy sprung up from Viola Spolin's simplistic acting exercises intended to excite skills of listening and being present to actors. Improv comedy, from its birth pangs in the 1950's to the present day, continued to gain momentum and continually grew to be an incredibly formidable force (some could argue the preeminent force) for comedians. Much like the repertory and regional theatre companies of the U.K. and the U.S., improv clubs in New York, Chicago, and L.A. have become bedrock institutions in the training and blossoming of comedians across all spectrums of screen and stage. Harkening back to principles from the days of *commedia*, modern day long form improv has become one of the closest approximations to pure comedy in history. As the closest performative form to the definition of pure comedy, improv helped to spawn a wealth of new movements in a relatively short amount of time, including the institution that has become *Saturday Night Live*, *SCTV* in Canada, the *Upright Citizens Brigade*, the alternative comedy movement, and multitudes of others.

An arena which used to be dominated by Chicago's Second City and Improv Olympic, improv comedy in its modern form is a definitively American conception. The history of improv is one that is fairly ambiguous, despite its youth as an art form. Viola Spolin's exercises that were intended for actors looking to hone their craft through work in spontaneity, were taken and theoretically bastardized by her son, Paul Sills, into what became known as live improv

comedy. Sills helped to found The Compass Players, the first professional improv company in the United States, in 1955 with David Shepherd. Sills would go on to instruct huge names in comedy such as Mike Nichols, Elaine May, and Shelley Berman before finally opening The Second City theatre in 1959. This theatre, which blended sketch comedy that audiences were guaranteed to enjoy, and improv comedy, which was more of a risk at first and was regarded more as a parlor trick at the end of the night rather than the main show, would go on to spawn the proliferation of improvisational institutions that Chicago became so noted for. Second City was also the link to modern day, long-form improv that Del Close became known for pioneering. A strangely mystical figure in the improv community, Del first came to Second City in the 1960's after departing for San Francisco. He returned in the 1970's, however, to direct and soon became a vital fixture and pseudo-guru in the improv community.

Long form improv became not only a training ground for sketch comedians to hone ideas, but it also became a verified skill that actors and directors instantly saw immense value in. While acting technique had stressed the role of listening in the work of the actor, it was the spontaneity, the ability to live in the moment, and the emphasis on creating at every moment while onstage, that brought instant merit to long-form in the acting world.

Unfortunately, however, it was merely regarded just as that, a skill capable of progressing actor's training. The very art form that Viola Spolin had accidentally originated remains to this day a mere launching pad for comedians to make the move to television or film rather than the individual art form that it actually is. Regrettably, improv in and of itself is still a cheap commodity, typically regarded as light entertainment rather than an artistic medium to be cherished in its own capacity. Improvised performances are scarcely, if ever, recorded,

which means that every single night, all across the country, brilliant performances are being lost, forever, as the very definition of the form is that of being unscripted. Rather than recording and distributing improv, studying it to better enhance our capabilities, the form is often thought of as a simple tool for performers to become quicker on their feet. Of course, this is to the detriment of pure comedy, as improv is the closest staged approximation we currently have to the concept of pure comedy.

Having only existed for a little over half a century, long form improv catalyzed a proliferation of movements that, in the late 1990's and early 2000's, were described as the "alternative scene." Beginning with stand-up comedy, but slowly working its way into sketch and narrative, the alternative scene consisted of educated comedians pandering to audiences that were more open and accepting of references to "nerd" culture and absurdist humor. Or, as it is better voiced by Jason Mantzoukas in the miniature documentary *The Subculture of Improv*, "It attracts a type of hyper-intellectual...wise-asses, smart nerds." The Comedians of Comedy tour in late 2004, and its subsequent documentary released in 2005 gave voice to an underground movement that was previously relegated to Los Angeles comedy clubs and surrealist shows on Cartoon Network's late-night programming block, Adult Swim. This mere decades-old movement has given birth to the closest semblance of pure comedy on both stage and screen.

### Laughing for 11 Minutes is Far More Feasible

Debuting in 2001, Adult Swim helped to encapsulate pure comedy in a way that synthesized all the elements of pure comedy throughout the ages: the parody of Satyr Plays,

the diversity of the variety show format, and the adaptability of the episodic television show, all while somehow maintaining a sense of improv's throwaway mentality regarding content. Adult Swim was unique from anything that came before it in that it utilized programs in 15-minute time slots, rather than the conventional 30. Once commercials were inserted these programs typically became 11 minutes in length, half as long as their 22-minute (or "half hour") counterparts, and infinitesimally shorter than dramatic comedy's feature-length. The shortened time slots, coupled with a style complete with recycled footage and hyper surrealist programming, gave pure comedy a definitive, nightly voice with programs like *Space Ghost Coast-to-Coast*, *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*, *Harvey Birdman*, *Attorney at Law*, *The Brak Show*, and *Sealab 2021*. Every one of the aforementioned programs except *Aqua Teen* were reproductions of classic cartoons overdubbed with new dialogue and a minimal amount of new cuts to the footage. These hyper-simplistic constructions created a comedy of pastiche that operated with a micro-budget, therein allowing Cartoon Network's already lax late-night department an even further wealth of control. In turn, the writers at Adult Swim were able to mine a vein of pure comedy which had rarely, if ever, been seen before. The freedom to explore narrative constructs without any need to adhere to specific dramatic characteristics became a staple of Adult Swim's comedic crop. Many of these cartoons' episodes end with their lead character dying or losing their dignity in some reprehensible act in a total reversal of the typical Western archetype of a protagonist. In shows such as *Sealab 2021*, for example, character almost ceases to exist, as characters tend to betray any semblance of expositional truth or character development of any kind. Certain episodes have ended with no resolution or climax, but simply characters screaming inanities at one another. This absurdist humor has evolved through

programs such as *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!*, *12 oz. Mouse*, *Robot Chicken*, and *Superjail* to create a bastion of pure comedy that has helped spark the next generation of comedians, that of the digital generation.

Adult Swim acted as both a harbinger and a catalyst for pure comedy in the new millennium in that they managed to both house the form while helping to further its reach. The combination of Adult Swim's influence over alternative comedy, mixed with the digital revolution of the 2000's, created the closest approximation for pure comedy that audiences have yet to see. While currently in its infancy, the realm of digital media, which, for the purposes of this thesis consists of the shorts that contribute to the mountainous media-producing engine that is internet humor, has done wonders to advance the format of pure comedy.

### [Teh Internets or, Yes, Virginia, the Internet Actually Did Perfect Comedy](#)

In 2005 an internet start-up service calling itself Youtube began to host videos created by users for free. While other services had existed before this point, Youtube was the first site to directly attribute its conception specifically to the hosting of user-created content. Additionally, Youtube exploded in popularity in a way that rivaled most other websites, across the entirety of the spectrum. Search engine giant Google eventually took notice, and purchased Youtube, solidifying the site's legitimacy as the premiere host of user-created content. Coupled with the "prosumer" business model of many camcorder companies (namely Panasonic, with their hyper-affordable DVX-200) which was in full swing at the time, the digital era opened the floodgates to the masses in the sense that anyone with a camcorder and access

to the internet could create art to be viewed by the masses. And viewed it was. Initially, the crop was amateurish and sparse, producing videos made either as class projects or spur-of-the-moment endeavors with little less going for them than a cheap laugh in the vein of *America's Funniest Home Videos*. Within only a few short years, however, entire websites, FunnyorDie.com, CollegeHumor.com, LiquidGeneration.com, etc., were actually dedicated to the production of independent content. Comedy instantly saw a more notable effect than any other genre due to its sustainability in a punctuated, condensed form.

With no immediate, discernible way to monetize this new form, complete creative control was given to the user who could simply generate the most hits. Companies experimented with sponsoring certain comedic groups and artists, but in the end the process was incredibly democratic in that viewers could ultimately “vote” for who they wanted to see produce more due to each video’s individual views being tabulated by these aggregate sites. This complete creative control led to a model in which videos were hardly ever over five minutes, in fact, most were under three. This was due, in part, to the general age and skill level of most performers being that of youth and inexperience, respectively. The up-and-coming comedians that existed in this realm were typically students and aspiring comics who were looking to get noticed, not professionals who still saw little merit in the budding format. Additionally, Youtube itself went for many of the years of its infancy with a strict 10-minute time limit, partially in order to combat piracy (Kincaid, 2010). Finally, though, this shortened format was also attributed to the demand of the public. Most videos over five minutes were not being viewed by online audiences, who had notoriously been labeled as having shorter attention spans.

Whether internet audiences truly did have a shorter attention span, or whether this newly-democratized form of narrative had simply imbued the viewer with the power to delineate how much they were willing to invest in something they were unsure of, is a topic for later discussion. The revolutionary component to the process, however, was that content was being shortened to accommodate viewer interests. There was no need to produce 90-minute, feature-length fare, as there were no costs to the studio in terms of producing film reels or distributing the work. No losses were being accumulated, meaning that artists felt free to create material at the length that seemed appropriate for their subject matter. The vein of comedic fare that constituted pure comedy finally had a poster child in the form of the digital short. All of these amalgamous components became most perfectly encapsulated by a website entitled *5 Second Films* wherein the creators produced comedic shorts no longer or shorter than five seconds. This seemingly-abbreviated time span allowed just enough space to create a dramatic set up and punch line all within the span of five seconds. The concept was simple enough in its conception, but the implications of the format are magnificent for comedy. Obviously, the time allowance is negligible, but the principle behind the allowance is genius; comedy does not need any sort of extraneous set up in any fashion to function expertly. It merely needs the game of the scene, which will be discussed further in the chapter on improv.

These individual clips, shareable over the internet to any number of fans, are the purest condensation of comedy. They allot just enough time for the creators to deliver a laugh to the audience in a narrative format. Without any pretense involving over-bearing character or plot development to weigh down the humor, this young group of filmmakers currently looks to have stumbled across the purest form of comedy as we have come to define it.

## We're Movin' on Up

What is certain, from following comedy through its chronology, is that the form as a whole has fluctuated in a pseudo-sin/cosin wave throughout its entirety, bouncing back and forth between its punctuated, most-cohesive form of satire, sketch, and Satyr Play and its less-adaptable, feature-length, three-act structure of dramatic comedy.

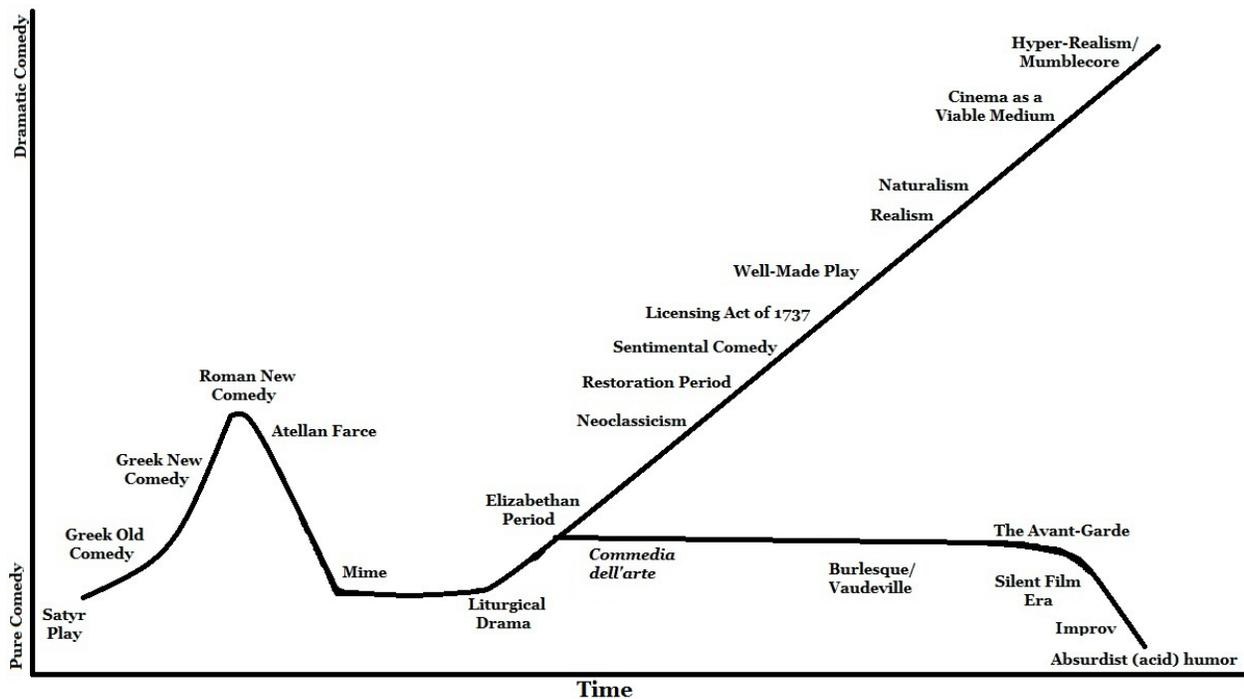


Figure 1: The Historical Progression and Divergence of Dramatic and Pure Comedy

Western civilization's origin story of the comedic form, however, does not allow for a fully-formed hypothesis as to why the marked shift occurred between the Satyr Play and comedy that was formatted to fit the dramatic form. Because we only have extant copies of Aritophanes' works to describe all of Greek Old Comedy, and Menander is the only playwright in which we can try to track the Greek influence into Roman narrative, it is difficult to

accurately postulate, with a full sample, the exact root of the transition between what we consider “sketch” comedy and comedy’s feature-length form.

We can at least surmise, however, the gradation of the metamorphosis between the bawdy Satyr Plays reminiscent of our current form of sketch comedy, and the longer, dramatic format. At the very least, one can chart comedy as I have basely attempted in this thesis, to discover the ways in which dramatic narrative was controlled, condensed, and correlated to incorporate one, definable narrative form, rather than multiple. Comedy and drama have been streamlined, throughout history, to conveniently accommodate commerce and critics alike. Old Comedy, for example, acted as a perfect transition between the buffoonery and mockery of the Satyr Plays, to the more “refined” works of New Comedy: “Most Old Comedies [did] not follow the pattern of climactic drama: they [did] not take place in a short span of time, [were] not restricted to one locale, and [had] a large cast of characters. Old Comedy always [made] fun of society, politics, or culture” (Wilson & Goldfarb 42). Interestingly enough, pure comedy and dramatic comedy seemed to take shifts as the dominant, existing comedic forms until the regeneration of comedy, and drama as a whole, after the Middle Ages. Noted in the graph above, pure comedy and dramatic comedy managed to splinter apart with the European Renaissance and exist co-habitually, though not necessarily equally, to one another. This deviation in the form has brought about two superlatively-charged mediums for comedy that have come to exist on hyper-polarized ends of the spectrum. While seemingly innocuous, this spectrum represents the chasm into which comedy has come to inhabit. Never truly merited due to its regimentation with all other forms of dramatic narrative, comedy looked to become that which it was continually held up next to: drama.

By attempting to parallel the dramatic form throughout all of history, comedy managed to transcend itself and splinter into the aforementioned forms of the dramatic and the pure. In doing so, the dramatic form rose more steadily in popularity, as it was more marketable, more apt for production, and more understandable amongst audiences, while the pure form was relegated to venues in which audiences desired nothing more than laughter. This marked break, however, has left comedy relegated to a secondary position behind that of drama, due to its being both misunderstood and misrepresented.

Comedy has a chance to authenticate itself simply by delineating its ideal narrative form. In these next chapters, I look to illuminate that form. Utilizing Gertrude Stein's theory on Immediacy, I seek to explore pure comedy's value as an art form with the goal of the argument being the need to view comedy as a completely independent form in and of itself, rather than a type of dramatic narrative in the same vein as that of the prototypical dramatic narrative. Unless we manage to do so, comedy will continue on in the vein that it has, attempting to occupy the shadow cast by drama.

## CHAPTER THREE: LANDSCAPE COMEDY, OR, GERTRUDE STEIN SHOULD NOT HAVE DIED

As most comedians will happily divulge, analyzing comedy is one of the trickiest and most enigmatic academic endeavors one can attempt in the arts. The conundrum first lies in the simple questions of what anecdotes and images make an audience laugh and, more importantly, why? While comedy is certainly subjective, the same could be said for every other art form. And that question of subjectivity has never invaded the world of drama or tragedy as it so fervently has with comedy. Dating as far back as Aristotle, we have attempted to understand, score, and analyze dramatic fiction down to an attempted science, while comedy has traditionally been neglected.

Ever since the loss of Aristotle's treatise on the comedic, there has yet to be a fitting academic endeavor to replace it. Part of the problem with allotting analytical constructs to the comedic form is that pure comedy's merit, as I have come to define it, hardly lies in the structure of the story or the adept interweaving of dramatic devices and conceits. The very principles with which we understand and judge dramatic works are extraneous to truly adept comedies. Merit lies, instead, with the sheer, visceral moment of pleasure that an audience derives from the "special moment" in comedy that brings surprise in with the fantastical to create a purgation of momentary elation. While there are multitudes of other quantifiable components to comedy, laughter itself has become the sole unit of measurement by which the genre is defined. The overarching goal of the comedic form has always been to incite outbursts of laughter, which are momentary and fleeting. This shows that comedy is episodic, rather than climactic. It involves punctuated beats within a narrative looking to evoke a discernible,

succinct reaction from the audience. With this common goal in mind, I believe that comedy has been misunderstood throughout the years by being held up to the exact same lens as its sibling institution, drama. Unlike drama, comedy does not need narrative structure of any kind to achieve its goal. While a base narrative structure can sometimes facilitate the comedy of a scene, it is not necessary. It has merely been forced into the climactic, Western style of narrative that we so casually associate with every form of story.

### Landscape Drama Was Right for the Wrong Form

At its core, comedy actually becomes more akin to Gertrude Stein's methodologies of Landscape Drama and her position on immediacy in the theatre. The elements of surprise, incongruity, and presence from moment to moment, all of which constitute Gertrude Stein's theories, also construe the basic tenets of comedy. Further, these basic components are also central to long form improv comedy and the burgeoning digital short. With the advent of the digital age, comedy has begun to move closer and closer to its most genuine form: that of individualized, episodic skits and sketches that lack any discernible plot or structure. In essence, this marked shift in narrative form in which the immediate gratification of humor will be best served is encapsulated by Stein's theories of immediacy and Landscape Drama more so than any other narrative form that Stein herself attempted to apply her theoretical template to.

To best discuss my methodology for this bold, new format, I will first discuss what my theory on comedy consists of, intrinsically. Comedy is nothing more than the moment in which an audience is fully engaged with what is occurring onstage and then jostled with the surprise of a special moment which instigates a movement of either involuntary laughter (the purgation

of joyful emotion) or admiration for a wittily-crafted moment. Comedy does not need story or sequence to exist, it only needs to evoke surprise and delight. In a move that comedians would eternally chide me for, I would argue that comedy could most readily be defined by an equation. Simply enough, that comedy equals surprise multiplied by timing multiplied by extrapolation, or  $C = S \times T \times Ext$  where surprise is created by immediacy times exaggeration, or  $S = I \times Exag$ . There is no need for massive narrative, no need for grandiose character development, no need for climactic structure in which an audience follows a distinct plot for ninety minutes before an epic end battle brings all the elements of the story together. Comedy has merely been ascribed this format because of its sibling institution, drama's, popularity and relative ease of definition.

The problem is almost one of semantics. Ever since Aristotle's six core tenets became the measuring stick for Western civilization's understanding of the performative arts, all forms of performed narrative have been measured by this system where we lump all genres of expression under the blanket term "drama" (Pritner, 5-6). The root of comedy, however, does not lie in massive, sweeping plots in which characters come into a better understanding of their own existential nature. The immediate crux of comedy lies in Wile E. Coyote sustaining an anvil drop to the head and then springing back upward like an organic accordion. Individual moments or bits like these are what people remember from all comedies, they leave the most lasting impression as they are the source of the laughter or catharsis. Whereas critics and fans alike discuss elements of drama in terms of character development, acting style, narrative complexity, etc. This disparity in drama and comedy's memorability gives insight into what key components constitute the purest form of either genre.

## Comedians are Lazy

The lack of scholarship in the comedic realm, coupled by the relative acceptance of Aristotelian analysis, has driven comedy into a paradigm which it has never explicitly needed to fit or thrive in. The fault lies in the lethargy of the academic community, best described by the idea that comedy is “not conducive to a discussion. It’s a visceral reaction in which one’s own laughter is the barometer of success. Everything starts and ends there. There’s no need for analysis since the purpose of the show is met at the point in which laughter escapes. Talking about it doesn’t help. In fact, it may hurt” (McGee, 2011). This fearful, tacit ideology is detrimental to the creative process, as it has let an entire beloved genre go relatively undocumented in academic research for years. Unfortunately, this concept of detrimental academic inquiry is generally met with incredible support throughout the community.

The greatest, most memorable comedies of the twentieth century typically consist of sketches and shorts that harkened back to the days of vaudeville and the English music hall. From Abbott and Costello, to Laurel and Hardy, to The Marx Brothers, to The Three Stooges, the genre best defined as “slapstick” comedy began its cultivation in the early part of the past century. However, when discussing these pioneers of narrative, academics do not typically consider them on the same plane as other masters of performance, such as Shaw, Ibsen, Checkhov, or Pinter. Robert Thompson perfectly describes the common misconception of physical comedy; “A lot of people now talk about physical comedy saying it’s childish or it’s infantile, or it’s primitive” (Kantor, 2009). The aforementioned titans of comedy are generally discarded for what critics see as a lack of merit in their structure. Academics and critics alike

appear to automatically discount comedians as artisans based on their principle goal of inanity and laughter.

All one has to do to see this bias at work is look towards the Academy Awards in film (Dirks, 2011). The closest film to slapstick comedy to ever win an Oscar is *Annie Hall*, which is hardly a departure from drama. The fact of the matter, however, is that the general public gauges comedy through a dramatic lens. The outcome of which produces, not pure comedies, but rather, genre-crossing hybrids, whether they be “dramadies,” or “tragic-comedies.”

### Immediacy, or Presence, or When is it Now, Now?

In Gertrude Stein’s series of lectures that she paraded across the United States in 1934 and 35, Stein spoke to the concept of immediacy onstage and the attempt to earnestly hold an audience through the evocation of emotion that did not take the viewer out of the present:

When the curtain opens, the spectator is introduced to any number of characters and situations, usually through expository dialogue, and then placed in a position of remembering past information or events while anticipating future events, climaxes, or resolutions. This position made Stein nervous because she was given little control- the play’s structure was forcing her to “read” the performance in a certain way, manipulating her emotions unnaturally. While Stein did not expect the theatre experience to be the same as life experience, she felt the performance was attempting to imitate and evoke emotional experiences in familiar in life, failing by the very nature of the

spectator/performance situation and thereby creating internal confusion via the existence of more than one time-sense. (Davy 115)

It is important to note that Stein was most concerned with the form through which narrative was delivered to its audience, and the attempt of a theatre troupe to emulate life onstage. To Stein, the simple act of recreating life realistically was a frivolous task if ever there was one, as the simple intellectual contract that one permits when entering a theatre is that of separation. The audience knows, when going to see a play or movie, that the events onstage are hardly real. Even when going to see an autobiographical play, or a movie “based on true events,” audiences are skeptical as to the reality of what they see. This is merely an after-product of a narrative-conscious society, and nothing to be derided. However, it does help to illuminate the methodology of immediacy, in that it admits that typical Western narrative loses something in translation to its audience simply by existing as an “other” onstage. The theatrical presentation of life is a direct falsification, as one cannot embody life by attempting to replicate it. There have been thousands of Hamlet’s through the years, and yet, there has never once been an actual Hamlet. This falsification has brought about both an intellectual disconnect with the audience, as well as an emotional one. And Stein’s entire goal was to reconstruct that emotional connection with the audience, through her methodology.

Stein was speaking in bold swashes at the time about all performative genres which would eventually lead to her Landscape theory on drama. The genre which her theory most clearly benefits, however, is comedy, for everything not related to the set up and immediate gratification of comedy is extemporaneous and only detracts from the production. Attempts to engage the audience in empathy for a character or a situation will overturn the initial intent of

merely looking for that joyful purgation. Stein was attempting to create a genre that would captivate an audience at every single second of the performance, never allowing them to break their metaphorical gaze. What she failed to realize, however, is that comedy (and more specifically, pure comedy) accomplishes this task, in the very moments in which it successfully delivers on the element of surprise.

### Digital Shorts and the Condensation of Commerce

What we have seen throughout the twentieth century is a contraction of comedic narrative into its most raw, immediate form. Pure comedy has almost evolved on its own over the last 100 years to a place of immediacy as Stein came to describe it. It has progressed from the quick shorts and specials of The Marx Bros., the Three Stooges, and other duos of the early twentieth century, to the era of the variety show in which an episodic structure was exploited on a weekly basis to create a sense of surprise and immediacy in the audience based upon sketches that the audience had no relation to, to the explosive, nuclear comedy of the new media generation. Without the regulations of network television or monolithic studio systems attempting to create a demographically-pleasing, 90-minute endeavor, the internet has opened the floodgates for what many have dubbed “alternative comedy.” This genre, also categorized as “acid humor,” combines the most absurd, fantastical, surreal, and often violent imagery in an effort to surprise a generation that has become entirely jaded by an overstimulation of story and narrative. 5secondfilms.com is the leading example of this synthesis. Founded by graduates of the University of Southern California’s film school, the members of 5 Second Films produce five shorts per week at an exact length of five seconds apiece. There is absolutely no

time for character development, exposition, or even extensive dramatic composition. In a short entitled "Drama Queen," two characters, male and female, are doing dishes. The man casually asks, almost to know one at all, "What if you crossed a zebra with a tiger?" The woman immediately drops her plate, which breaks. The camera zooms in on her eyes, which start bleeding, and she screams, in a demonically low pitch, "NOOOOOO!" (5secondfilms.com, 2011). As the audience, we have no idea what these characters' relationship consists of. We have no idea what they were just doing or discussing or what they are about to discuss. And more importantly, we do not care. It is entirely irrelevant and may actually take away from the humor or the scene by convoluting the minds of the spectators with unnecessary information. If the goal is mirthful catharsis, then exposition and dramatic structure simply are not imperative.

The point is that humor can exist in an infinitesimally small scene with the basest components available to the audience. As long as you have the surprise formed from the unusual and the immediacy that was mentioned in the earlier equation, the comedy of the situation comes about naturally from the act of being flung into a narrative setting where the spectator knows nothing and has no time to grasp anything at all to hold onto. It is almost as though the audience is pushed into the deep end of a pool and forced to swim without any prior knowledge. There is no time to do anything but become immersed in the humor of the immediate present, which is what Stein sought all along;

Your sensation as one in the audience in relation to the play played  
before you your sensation I say your emotion concerning that play is always  
either behind or ahead of the play at which you are looking and to which you are

listening. So your emotion as a member of the audience is never going on at the same time as the action of the play.

This thing the fact that your emotional time as an audience is not the same as the emotional time of the play is what makes one endlessly troubled about a play, because not only is there a thing to know as to why this is so but also there is a thing to know why perhaps it does not need to be so. (Cardullo, 450-451)

Stein was constantly searching for a perfect synthesis of performative reality in which the spectator would not be troubled by the constraints of prior knowledge or any other upheavals in one's suspension of disbelief. As she saw it, the greatest detriment to the spectator's involvement in the production at hand was typically language. After viewing a play in French at the age of fifteen, having no way to understand the play at the time, Stein was convinced of language's ineffable ability to stymie audience engagement (Davy 116). Her future consorted efforts at playwriting would include what she came to term "entity writing" rather than "identity writing" (Davy 111). With entity writing, Stein looked to create "the 'thing-in-itself' detached from time and association" (Davy 111). She looked to create language that existed as a construct of itself, subsisting off of the immediate moment, with no grounding in the past or the future. Of course, this is exactly the type of construction that 5 Second Films inhabits. Another short, entitled "Time" consists of only three words. A man in a suit and a man holding a stopwatch take their positions. The man with the stopwatch says, "Ready? Go!" to which the man in the suit keels over and dies. The man with the stopwatch then clicks the watch to stop it, and sadly states, "Time" (5secondfilms.com, 2011). The minimalistic use of language is

merely there to facilitate the absurdity of the events and amplify the immediate surprise upon an incongruous ending. With a video entitled "Time" and a man with a stopwatch, audience expectation is that some sort of race or timed event will take place. Of course, the surprise comes when the race at hand is actually the passage of one's life, as the other man falls over to his death right after the start of the watch. The misdirection that is given from the two initial words spoken creates the comedic event, and does not give the viewer enough time to wonder about the dead man's family, or his pet that he left behind, or the girl he had been seeing at work. None of these hypothetical situations were broached, and, because they were never broached, they never managed to complicate the humor at hand.

### Comedy Does Not Have a Time Limit, or, How Adult Swim Tries to Prove Me Wrong

Of course, Stein's efforts were to create entire onstage spectacles, shows that were not necessarily short in chronological length, but rather were monopolizing to the observer's attention. While the discussion thus far has been about the compression of comedy into its most base, exemplary, Steinian form of immediacy times surprise times exaggeration, it does not necessarily mean that pure comedic content cannot exist on a long-form scale. Episodic length has absolutely nothing to do with the formula as long as efforts are taken to insure that explicit plot and character are not overvalued.

Around the dawn of the explosion of new media, which made the internet a veritable sounding board for comedic creators, Cartoon Network was putting together a line-up of late-night programming for adults, almost all of which was comical in nature. The line-up was entitled Adult Swim, and its flagship show was *Aqua Teen Hunger Force*. A thirty minute show

in which a milkshake named Master Shake, a wad of meat named Meatwad, and a bag of French fries named Frylock, all live their day-to-day lives in a rented home in the suburbs of New Jersey was the closest semblance you could come to any discernible plot. Their origins are never explained (to any verifiable degree of accuracy), their occupations are never discussed, and their relationships are actually never even called into question. The series begins with the characters merely inhabiting their home and has never looked backwards or forwards to any sort of linear timeline. Very rarely does anything occur in any episode that actually carries over in consequence to any other. If a character dies in a specific episode they come right back in the next, with no mention made of the previous endeavor. Other than a few ancillary characters who circle back through the series and whose motives remain the same, every story exists in its own vacuum, which allows any viewer to tune in and, hopefully, experience a visceral reaction to the absurdity on screen. The weakest points of the series, in fact, are those that callback a very specific character from a previous episode that requires any prior knowledge. The series' strength lies in its ability to produce laughs out of the absurdity of these characters' lives.

Through these inconsistencies in language, character development, and plot structure, *Aqua Teen* harkens back to Stein's methodology of immediacy and Landscape Drama. Stein was concerned with language and the impediment it created between the audience and the emotional present of the spectacle at hand. Additionally, plot and exposition fall into the camp of detracting from an audience member's emotional presence rather than adding to it. While the episodes all fit into the same 15-minute structure, *Aqua Teen* still manages to produce the effect of immediacy in that it does not value plot or character above humor. Regardless of the

length of the program, if immediacy, surprise, and exaggeration come before plot and character, the comedic structure is stronger.

Almost a century after her writing, *Aqua Teen* and other subsequent Adult Swim programs have taken cues directly from Stein's methodology, whether consciously or not, in that they downplay moments of narrative importance. To most programs in the Adult Swim circuit, finding the moments of pure comedic attachment are far more important than plot or backstory, and generating a laugh is principle above all. This focus on the emotional present of the audience, the focus on eliciting a laugh, is exactly what makes comedy most directly in line with Stein's concepts.

### [Adult Swim is Better than Language, or, What Could Who What?](#)

At this point we have hashed out the divergence in comedic history; the path in which dramatic comedy and pure comedy separated and grew to form two distinct forms of comedic endeavor. We have also allotted a theory for concise pure comedy, that of Gertrude Stein's Landscape Drama. The negation of language, plot, and character development are what Stein stressed most vehemently and what adult swim emphasizes in their programming. *Aqua Teen*, while the perpetual predecessor to the surreal comedy movement, and certainly a major player in the exponential evolution of comedy into its most authentic form, is still a step removed from Stein's overarching theme of Landscape Drama, though. For all its wonder and fantastic ability to stand alone as an immediate humorous moment without support from any back story or chronology, *Aqua Teen* still exists in a pseudo-realistic framework in which it typically utilizes language in a standard fashion.

Stein saw language in any normative fashion as a detriment to the action onstage or screen, as it would allow the viewer to think and address one's prior knowledge of events, which Stein warned that, "In order to know one must always go back" (Cardullo, 451). Essentially, stating that any sort of pre-conceived notions or concepts would rip a spectator directly out of the world of the play. Whereas *Aqua Teen* fails to fully embody this, however, its predecessors have made great strides in actuating Stein's ideals. The closest that Adult Swim has come to this level of inanity is Eric Wareheim and Tim Heidecker's *Tim and Eric Awesome Show, Great Job!* Another show from Adult Swim's line up, *Tim and Eric* regularly borders on the unintelligible with its humor. This final frontier of language is all that stands in the way of the comedic form fully encapsulating Stein's landscape ideals. Ironically, a genre that blossomed during the silent film era and that has always relied on its physical nature and universality of themes, has yet to fully undertake Stein's offer to let go of her termed "identity writing" and fully buy into the thing-in-itself as it exists without association to time (Davy, 111). Wareheim and Heidecker do come close, however, as their sketch show typically relies on quick editing techniques and anachronistic jump-cuts during clips to induce a sense of confusion and surprise. In one sketch entitled "Humpers" a man sits at a bench while another man, on a phone, in a suit, approaches. He sits as well and the man on the phone asks to see the already seated man's work. As the man on the phone is looking over the first man's portfolio, the first man sees two men darting from tree to tree in ill-fitting spandex. Eventually, the camera moves to only view the darting men and all dialogue fades away as the song *Cotton-Eye Joe* by Rednex starts playing. The two men that were darting are now simply humping anything and everything they can find between quick jump cuts of the camera for an egregious ninety

seconds. The sketch is roughly three total minutes, half of which entails two men randomly thrusting into whatever they can find. It is beyond absurd, and the comedy of the situation comes from the entirely innocuous business meeting in the park between two people that becomes interrupted by two men who simply accost anything in their path. The complete lack of explanation and care for any sort of coherence makes the clip absolutely hysterical and brings the immediacy of the moment directly to light. As Tim and Eric thrust onto whatever device or plant they can find, the viewer is unable to wonder what the characters are feeling or who they are going to fall in love with, the viewer is forced to simply appreciate the insanity onscreen and live in the present as there is absolutely no guarantee of any sort of developmental narrative payoff. The immediacy of the moment is amplified by the surprise inherent in the fast cuts of these two, nonsensical men.

### **Sure, Sketch is Great and All, but Have You Seen Improv?**

And yet all of this still leaves Stein's theory wanting. For all of the circumvention of language and traditional narrative, each of these previous three examples exists as meticulously-scripted and produced art forms. The medium of film and video leaves little room for error, and even the most spontaneous of ideas, from inception to final edit, take an immense amount of time, effort, and dedication. While certainly capable of surprise and poignancy to an audience, the fact remains that entries in this medium hardly come about in any sort of impromptu or impulsive manner. They are rigorously edited and work shopped in front of fellow writers and comedians in order to assess their completion. Interestingly, where the efforts of the screen may fail Stein's attempt at achieving a narrative that perfectly

connects with her audience, the stage may prove superior. Improvisational comedy, in its long-form delineation, manages to perfectly keep the audience and the performers on the same emotional time, due to the fact that the show is literally being made directly in front of the audience. In an interview with GQ magazine, when asked how he manages to produce laughs that may not have been on the written page, Bill Murray launched into a diatribe in which he basically elaborated the importance of improv comedy in all aspects of comedy, not merely that of improv's own form;

I have developed a kind of different style over the years. I hate trying to re-create a tone or pitch. Saying, 'I want to make it sound like I made it sound the last time'? That's insane, because the last time doesn't exist. It's only this time. And everything is going to be different *this time*. There's only now. And I don't think a director, as often as not, knows what is going to play funny, anyway. As often as not, the right one is the one they're *surprised by*, so I don't think that they have the right tone in their head...But you asked how you get the comic pitch. Well, obviously a lot of it is rhythm. And as often as not, it's the *surprising* rhythm. In life and in movies, you can usually guess what someone is going to say—you can actually hear it—before they say it. But if you undercut that just a little, it can make you fall off your chair. (2010)

Murray's subtle condemnation of directors and the attempt at recreating something as simple as a scene, or merely a line, perfectly equates with Stein's premise. Anything written on the page unfortunately comes from a place of pre-determination and, therefore, is slightly off the mark from Stein's concept of immediacy. Improv, however, can manage to create and engage emotional time from moment to moment with the audience, pulling the audience with the

performers onstage as the show is physically being created, right in front of their eyes. The presence that improvisers have to have just to keep a scene alive is paramount to the scene's success. The audience never has a chance to look out of the time onstage because the performers themselves do not know what will come next, or even necessarily what came before. It is their job to write out each and every part of the scene as it is occurring, which best defines Stein's mentality of existing in the present, for the present onstage.

Stein's concept of immediacy still has yet to be entirely implemented in any form or genre, and yet, it is certainly closest with pure comedy. The development of comedy, from an elongated, forcefully-fit genre that was formatted to resemble drama, to the current offshoot (pure comedy) which we are addressing as a much more intangible, delicate style in which the surprise of the "unique moment" reigns supreme, advocates Stein's methods of immediacy and entity almost perfectly. With more scholarly pursuits and an effort to redefine the form, much could be done to create a new model for narrative that we have not yet seen. We are on the cusp of a newly definable genre in which the advantage of new media in the realm of experimentation will hopefully open doors to better understanding what comedy is and what it will become. Through Stein's concepts of the immediate present and the simple comedic goal of instant gratification, pure comedy should be able to better define itself as a construct independent from drama and typical narrative design through these understandings and methodologies.

## CHAPTER FOUR: IMPROV, OR, HOW I LEARNED TO STOP WORRYING AND LOVE THE FORM

While drama may succeed best over a ninety minute spectacle, comedy needs only the time it takes to set up and properly explore a comedic pursuit, or a “bit” as it is better known in the community. This pursuit can be anything ranging in length from 5 seconds in the realm of the digital short, to 22 minutes when discussing the American sitcom. In this manner, what we have come to define as sketch comedy, and, even more to the point, improv comedy, has seen the closest approximation on a stage to comedy’s purest form. While multitudes of different productions touting their comedic intent crop up every year, they are typically fodder for poorly constructed, trite romantic subplots that have been around since the days of *Commedia dell’Arte*, in some documented fashion or another. Unfortunately, these storylines have become so ubiquitous over time, that they are actually viewed as overwhelmingly cliché and boring to a society inundated with their proliferation.

In an attempt to make them more appealing to audiences, both screen and playwrights alike have added nuances of character development, structural incongruity, and plot device to the genre of comedy which does not fit to fulfill its initial purpose of simply inducing laughter. All these other narrative accoutrements only seek to weigh down comedy and stunt the growth of a joke or routine. They are not necessary to convey humor, rather, they are necessary to build empathy within an audience and to excite suspense and curiosity as to what will occur onstage. These dramatic principles seek to embolden their namesake: that of drama. As for pure comedy, these principles do a disservice to the genre’s goal of strict mirth. This overt homogenization of the form has led to its even more muddled definition over the years, as we

see most notably in Awards shows, namely, the Golden Globes. Rather than delineating between the two forms of comedy, that of dramatic comedy and that of pure, “comedy” becomes an umbrella term that engulfs a massive bastion of narrative and creates a disorienting picture of what comedy truly is and what it aspires to be.

The Golden Globes category for comedy, for example, is billed as “Best Motion Picture – Comedy or Musical,” a combination of what could be two incredibly different art forms (Ellwood, 2012). And the nominees typically showcase exactly what this diversity means for comedy. For the 2013 year, nominees included *The Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*, *Les Misérables*, *Moonrise Kingdom*, *Silver Linings Playbook*, and *Salmon Fishing in the Yemen*. Three of those movies were explicitly advertised as comedies, of those three, one was touted as an alternative romantic comedy (*Silver Lining’s Playbook*), one was sold as an ensemble about aging and finding your place amongst friends (*Best Exotic Marigold Hotel*), and one was billed as the quirky, offbeat, feel-good comedy of the year. The crux of these films is hardly that of laughter, but of catharsis through identification with character and plot. So many things have precedence over laughter in films of this matter. If laughter occurs it is not the goal but merely the result of humorous anecdotal moments in the plot. In essence, you have five different movies all supposedly representing humor’s answer to drama, when, in actuality, they are drama’s answer to comedy. Described best by a master of comedy writing and performance over the past twenty years, Conan O’Brien deftly describes comedy as simply “making these neural leaps that shouldn’t happen. They’re illogical” (O’Brien, 2012). Absurdity and embellishment are the name of the game, not naturalism and plot structure. Yet, over the history of comedy, the form has been co-opted to adhere to drama’s form to the point that

feature length dramatic comedy that we see currently, is more dramatic in structure than comedic.

### Stylization and Development of the Form

Perhaps the problem falls in that comedy is not only different in form to drama, but that comedy consists of multiple, entirely different components. Where drama is typically lauded for its ability to portray characters in the most fully-embodied, three-dimensional, naturalistic sense, pure comedy actually benefits from archetypal, structured characterizations that quickly epitomize a definitive set of traits and assumptions about a character. In this way, the audience is able to immediately latch on to who this person on stage or screen is without the need for extemporaneous backstory that only convolutes the scene. In the 5 Second Films short entitled “What Do You Want for Christmas?” the sketch opens with a little girl sitting on Santa’s lap as she says, “For my parents to get divorced and end this charade.” The camera then pans over to a man and wife. The wife is staring directly at the man while screaming unintelligible complaints into his ear. The man looks directly at Santa, while the wife continues to berate him, and licks his lips. Santa responds by putting on lipstick while saying “Santa can do that” directly before the scene fades to black. That is the very last beat. We do not learn any of the character’s names, we have no idea how the parents came to be married in the first place, and we especially do not discover how the little girl came to discover her parent’s shamble of a marriage.

The utter lack of information and character development in the scene, which in a dramatic context would be seen as an outrageous flaw in the writing, actually looks to enhance

the comedy. The basis of the game, the fact that Santa will actually give the little girl what she wants by destroying her parents' marriage, does not benefit from backstory or intensive cultivation of character. In fact, it may prove detrimental. What we have are archetypal characters that make the joke quicker to the punch and more hilarious. The little girl is the prototypically snarky, over-educated child, loaded with plenty of comedic cache. The mother is an overbearing, nagging wife: classic comedic fare. The father is clearly completely checked out of his marriage and is stereotypically looking to cheat his way to happiness. Santa, a pre-loaded character in Western culture, is playing against his own archetype of jolly, innocuous, and safe, by portraying a hyper-sexual, borderline lecherous character. The comedy springs forth out of both the misdirection of Santa's characterization as the typical kind, old man to a creepy, sexualized solicitor, as well as from the absurdity of a little girl so cognizant of her parent's façade of a marriage that she beseeches Santa's assistance in separating them.

All of this, which has taken me roughly a page to describe, is conveyed entirely in five seconds. 5 Second Films, and pure comedy as a whole, is able to exist in an insular, contained form in which everything that is superfluous is stripped away in order to accommodate the greatest amount of laughter with the most minimalistic story elements. Character development, while incredibly important in every other form of drama, is not necessary for pure comedic excellence. Charlie Chaplin's iconic character, The Tramp, for example, is an example of how a dearth of exemplary character development can actually benefit the comedic medium. The character that Chaplin developed from his traditional drunken archetype became the most famous fictional character in history in under a year, and yet, no one ever even knew his true name (Kantor, 2009). There was no insight into the character's childhood, no

discussion of the specific boyhood dreams of the character, not even any dialogue, save for a few critical title cards. Chaplin's Little Tramp took the country by storm literally without a name and paved the way for a bastion of comedic shorts to come after him. Joe Franklin, renowned actor and comedian remembers the true impact Chaplin had on popular culture best; "At one time people didn't say, 'let's go to the movies,' they'd say, 'let's go see Charlie Chaplin.' Charlie Chaplin was the movies" (Kantor, 2009).

### Playing to the Top of Your Intelligence

All that being said, truthful characterizations enhance narrative no matter what the genre. While expansive backstory and character exposition do next to nothing to inform pure comedy, playing a scene to "the top of your intelligence," typically merits stronger moments in pure comedy. The phrase, "top of your intelligence" is a euphemism from the Upright Citizens Brigade which simply means that you occupy a character with all of your faculties, always trying to play scenes truthfully and without acting solely to procure jokes, but rather, to embody a character caught in a comedic moment. One can certainly be an archetype of a character, but still play the character truthfully to the best of his ability. Some of the strongest sketches actually consist of some of the most sincere portrayals in acting, because these portrayals make the absurdity of the situation pop even more.

Typically in Harold structure in improv and even in sketch comedy, the premise of the scene works off of a two-person scenario. It is why the golden era of Hollywood saw so many fantastic duos. The overarching comedic principle of character is that each truly adept scene only needs a straight man and a foil to succeed. The straight man acts as sincerely and

appropriately as possible to any given situation while the foil takes the duo through wild, uncharted territory, either creating conflict between the two or immersing them both in conflict with the outside world.

Of course, all the same can be said for plot. Whereas the most-acclaimed dramas are praised for their story's conceptual innovation or complex narrative structure, some of the most memorable comedies of all time follow the simplest, most basic (and oftentimes flawed) plot developments. In *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, for example, the entire movie is predicated on Arthur's quest for the grail, though adventures are had along the way, the story is a simplistic quest narrative and follows said narrative until the movie's resolution. 1978's *Animal House* merely sees a wayward fraternity lose its university affiliation. 1980's *Caddyshack* literally follows the events surrounding a golf course and its highfalutin customers. And to address the newest slate of comedies on the market, hits like *Anchorman*, *Step Brothers*, and *Dodgeball: a True Underdog's Story*, it can be argued that plot development simply exists as a by-product of the comedic events surrounding the main game of each film. This creates a chasm that does more than differentiate the comedic and dramatic forms, it also differentiates the styles best utilized by either genre, as well.

The dramatic form has progressed into a form obsessed with the utmost of sincerity in its representations of reality. Western narrative has reached a point of extreme naturalism in which the closest approximations to reality, no matter how gritty, stark, and biographical they may be, are seen as the goal of dramatic creation. The greatest example of this newfound pinnacle of artistic achievement would be Christopher Nolan's take on Batman. Nolan's hyper-naturalistic portrayal of a comic book character that dresses as a bat to instill fear into the

hearts of his foes has produced both incredible critical reception and incredible box office returns. Nolan's pain-staking efforts to produce an entirely naturalistic iteration of what can basically be surmised as a laughable comic book character from the 1940's exposes a marked cultural preference towards naturalistic sincerity in the dramatic form. Even in the development of theatrical technology, we have seen the progression towards a naturalistic state of storytelling in the integration of first color, then sound, followed by surround sound, high definition picture, and even gimmicky campaigns such as 3-D. Despite all of these definitive advancements that have moved us from black-and-white, silent, borderline-presentational styles of acting and narrative, to sweeping, crisply-defined, IMAX-quality levels of representing reality, comedy still has yet to be truly enhanced, critically or financially, by these efforts to produce entirely naturalistic modes of story.

### That's the Name of the Game

Comedy in its most definitive format simply involves the founding of a comedic "game," or a unique, awkward premise, and then exploring the conflicts that arise out of this premise. Matt Walsh, one of the founders of the Upright Citizen's Brigade, gives a fantastic definition for the improvisational definition of "game," that has become so difficult to nail down, "The game of the scene is basically the dynamic comic engine or structure of a scene that continues to make it funny and it's the thing you focus on, and it's basically the ball you want to keep up in the air" (*The Subculture of Improv*, 2012). Rather than the prototypical masculine narrative's construct in which action rises around a singular central conflict born out of an intrusion of the stasis of the story until an eventual climax occurs, comedy looks to actually produce more and

more seemingly superfluous conflicts around a central “game” in the hopes of keeping the comedic moment afloat. For the comedic moment, the very crux of the scene, play, film, sketch, etc., centers around the unusual. It does not regard itself with character, extensive plot, or exposition. It is purely born out of the moment of either misdirection, misinterpretation, misnomer, confusion, or surprise. The unusual element in narrative *is* comedy. There is never any need to actually solve the conflict until the absolute end, for then the unique situation is solved for all parties involved and the comedic moment ceases to be. Bill Irwin, one of the greatest living clowns, when speaking directly about comedy as a whole, described the most basic formula for comedy as merely, “Get into trouble. And then get further into trouble. And then try to get yourself out of trouble, and think you’re out of trouble. Then find out that you’re in deeper trouble. Those are the rules” (Kantor, 2009).

Best displayed by my two graphs below, it is more readily discernible that drama seeks progression along a distinct course, whereas comedy looks to encapsulate a premise, and exhaust its comedic capability through the use of repetition and surprise. Additionally, there is no need to explore any sort of in-depth character analysis, because the focus is not on a humanistic approach to embodying a character, but rather, a continual dotting on the game of the scene: any of the classic silent film stars’ first comedic sketches, for example, would typically employ a brief narrative around a central, circular premise, or better-coined, “game.”

## Ideal Comedic Narrative

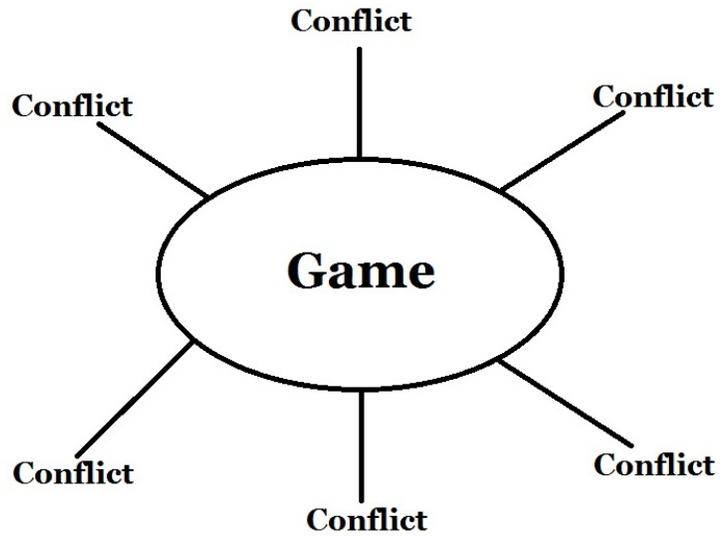


Figure 2: Components of the Ideal Comedic Narrative

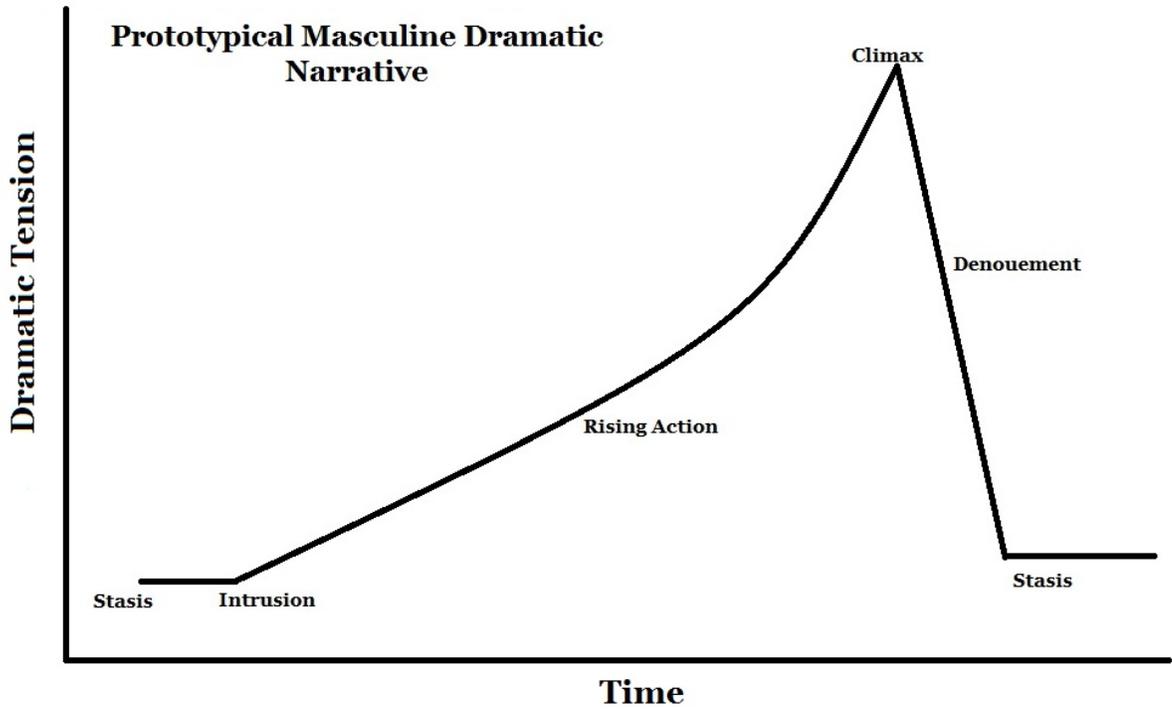


Figure 3: The Prototypical Masculine Narrative in Graph Form

Charlie Chaplin's classic feature film *The Circus*, for which Chaplin received an Academy Award before they were even called "Oscars," is an exceptional example of the concept of "game" brought to life. Within the feature, a bit develops in which Chaplin plays a circus hand that is chased straight into the cage of a sleeping lion. After accidentally locking himself into the cage, Chaplin encounters a multitude of conflicts that seek to keep him entrapped in the lion's den and further provoke the animal to awaken. The central game of the scene is merely Chaplin trying to escape without waking the beast. The conflicts that arise around the game (or what can realistically be thought of as the CENTRAL conflict) include a locked door, a tiger in the opposing cage, Chaplin's own clumsiness (which could have been a game in and of itself), and a barking dog. With the solution and conclusion of each of these miniature conflicts, a new conflict would arise in its place, continually reinforcing the central game. If you take this scene in its own context, independent from the feature, you still have a fully-realized comedy, obviously shorter than the feature itself, but perhaps also obviously stronger. There is no need for character development, exposition, plot device, or any other ancillary narrative function. In fact, Chaplin managed to fully realize the story sans dialogue. In bypassing the superfluous elements of narrative, the story is boiled down to its most basic objective: that which is funny, or, moments of conflict in which the audience is surprised by the pronounced absurdity in the face of Chaplin's demise.

### **The History of Game, or, How Comedy Nerds Created a Science Around the Art Form**

The concept of "game," began in improv comedy institutions stemming out of Chicago, and has come to be crystalized in the improv comedy workshops of the Upright Citizen's

Brigade, as well as with the proliferation of the internet and New Media. A veritable training ground for the up-and-coming comedy elite, the Upright Citizens Brigade began in New York as an off-shoot of members of Chicago's premiere improv academy, ImprovOlympic. The original cast, consisting of Matt Besser, Amy Poehler, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh, landed in New York City in 1996 and by 1999 had already founded and opened the doors to its improv training facility. UCB's proliferation and the emphasis that I devote to their academy throughout this thesis are in direct response to their methodology and its direct corroboration with my theories. The Upright Citizens Brigade, amongst all the other multitudes of improv schools and workshops, touts the importance of "game" above all else, over character, plot, impressions, etc. In an article recently written in an effort to define what "game" truly entails, Erik Voss of Splitsider.com interviewed some of the leading names in improv comedy from across multiple schools in order to ascertain what, exactly, the meaning of the term is, as there is a decent amount of ambiguity around the art form that proudly asserts its independence from anything written or recorded. Voss himself describes "game" as "a technical term with various definitions depending on who you ask" (Voss, 2012). Its elusive quality makes it one of the most highly contested principles of improv, not just for its intrinsic semantic ambiguity, but also because of its genuine importance to the art form. The game of the scene, ideally, is what makes any comedic scenario function and, hopefully, thrive. Without a well-defined game for improvisers or comics to rally around, a scene onstage can easily fall apart or meander into something devoid of comedic value. When sitting down with Matt Besser, one of the four founding members of UCB, Voss received this enlightened quote; "The game is the scene. When I hear people say, 'The game's just part of the scene,' or 'You may or may not have a

game,' to me, that is ridiculous. That's absurd" (2012). This valuation of the game makes every scene in UCB's comedy community contingent around a unified form. By marking out exactly what makes a scene funny, as opposed to heart-wrenching or terrifying or suspenseful, the Upright Citizens Brigade has managed to catalyze a movement in comedy in which a quantifiable means of success can be broached by following a definitive formula, something that drama has taken for granted for centuries.

Again, improv, like the rest of comedy, is a form of artistry that has received little to no formal attention in terms of academic writing or research. There are basically two tomes published on the entirety of the form and both are written by Charna Halpern, a disciple of the proposed founder of contemporary improvisation, Del Close. With few definitive resources to pinpoint exactly what the form itself entails, there is much deliberation over what the terms and conditions of the form actually constitute. What one teacher may define as "game" does not necessarily align with another, especially when jumping from school to school. That being said, the Upright Citizens Brigade seems to be most in line with the aforementioned Close's description of the term.

Close is regarded as the father of modern-day improv and helped to actuate the form known as The Harold: the preeminent format for long-form improvisational comedy. I will re-address the Harold shortly, but speaking to UCB's authority as the leading institution of the improvisational form, the Upright Citizens Brigade has managed to hone their teaching efforts around that of the comedic game and then focus solely on improving upon that first beat: "One of their goals was to standardize the language of improvisation, with a more narrowly tailored definition of game as a pillar of their philosophy. The UCB definition pertains to the scene as a

whole, not merely a pattern within it” (Voss, 2012). In essence, they teach students how to effectively create comedy, as this technique could be applied to sketch or any form of scripted work. As Besser further says, “We always compare our scenes to sketch comedy because we believe a great improvised scene is something that you can write out and it’s a great sketch. And if you look at great sketches, they’re not all over the place. ... It’s all about one thing” (Voss, 2012). Essentially, the UCB teaches more than just improv, they teach the fundamental balance of what comedy is, what constitutes a comedic situation onstage. And it is because of this emphasis on being not only great comedic performers, but also comedic writers, that precedence is given to them above all other schools.

### **Improv is Young. Too Young.**

Interestingly, improvisational comedy exists as the closest live approximation to the previously mentioned pure comedy that I argue has existed ancillary to dramatic comedy throughout the ages. Without any sort of formal script or preconceived notion at all, improvisers go onstage every show with nothing but the form of the show they are going to produce, which is typically a Harold or some sort of Harold derivative. Much like Stein’s interpretation of immediacy, there is never any chance for the audience to check the playbill or become enwrapped in the backstory of the scene, as the story is literally being created onstage directly in front of them. The audience is viewing a comedic spectacle unfold entirely organically onstage in front of them as the performers struggle to write, direct, and act all at the same time with the goal of each scene being that of laughter. Within Gertrude Stein’s errant search for the juxtaposition of both the performance’s and the audience’s emotional

time aligning, she focused on the deconstruction of language to keep the audience's minds and attention at bay, to better keep an audience from leaping forward in thought to either the oncoming act or the previous one. However, Stein was also writing in a time long before improvisation as a delineated form even existed.

Viola Spolin, long touted as the "grandmother of American improv" began her most rudimentary teachings and exercises in the 1940's through a system of games that she hoped would help produce a better crop of actors. Spolin herself, did not have a solidified concept of improvisational comedy until decades later, especially long-form improvisational comedy as we have come to define it in America. It was not until her son, Paul Sills, helped form the Compass Players in Chicago in the 1950's that improvisational comedy had any sort of formative root or tangible arrangement of any sort.

Unfortunately, Stein passed away in 1946, leaving almost no capability for chronological overlap, therefore creating a definitive stamp on her work before the option of improv comedy could even pervade her radar. The concept of an entire scene or multitude of scenes being created on the spot in front of an audience in the moment was absolutely foreign to her, and yet, it seems most in line with what Stein sought in the theatre. Rather than utilizing immediacy through the breakdown of language, perhaps Stein would have much rather preferred a form that had the capability to utilize language as one of its components while still maintaining the immediacy that she desired. Immediacy is a guaranteed byproduct of improv comedy as the audience is unable to step outside the immediate present of the scene, since it is being created directly in front of them. While improv is the closest form of performative art that comes to encapsulating Stein's theories, it doubles as the stage's closest art form to pure

comedy, as well. The ability to constantly sustain itself in the present while only working to obtain laughter makes it as integral in the discussion about Gertrude Stein's Landscape Drama as it is in the discussion on comedy's purest form.

Improv comedy, unfortunately, has come to be an ambiguous term in and of itself. What the general populace identify as improv can be seen most notably on shows such as *Whose Line is It, Anyway?* However, this is only one form of improvisational comedy, and, consequently, not the form that this paper seeks to investigate. Improv of the sort that can be seen on *Whose Line is It, Anyway?* is considered short form improv. Short form consists of small, miniaturized games ("games" in the sense of actual games with rules, motives, players, etc. rather than the "game" of the scene. Again, we can thank the thoughtless and lazy founders of improv comedy for putting close to zero effort into differentiating terms). These games have defined rules and a clear winner at the end based on the completion of tasks that look to incite laughter in their successful completion. The Dating Game is a common example of a typical short form game, in which three of the improvisers act as "contestants" on a dating game show. They are given identities from audience suggestions that they must try to portray to a fourth improviser who acts as the candidate who chooses his date. The fourth improviser is not privy to the other three's identities and must correctly identify who they are by asking a series of questions. Obviously, celebrity impersonations and gender-bending typically lend themselves most commonly to the comedy of the scene, and usually a game such as this takes absolutely no longer than five minutes to finish. An entire short form show can run anywhere from one to two hours, and will contain a multitude of games in a similar fashion, all with the goal consisting of cheap laughs. Again, this is not the form of improvisational comedy that is

closest to Stein's theories of immediacy nor is it the closest to pure comedy. The style of improv which I endorse at length as our closest theatrical approximation to pure comedy is long form improvisation. Long form, like short form, can theoretically take a multitude of styles. While there are obviously different breeds of long form, the goal is always the same, laughter elicited through the creation of scene-based improv comedy, with scenic components of base plot and character that are created entirely organically. Additionally, while there are certainly multiple breeds of the form, one is dominant far above the rest. The Harold, a structure crafted by Del Close in the 1970's, is the most universal of all long forms and is centrally taught at the UCB. While it may seem superfluous to discuss the exact structure of the Harold, the understanding of the form gives way to a better understanding of how Stein's theory of immediacy most perfectly aligns with that of my definition for pure comedy.

### Harold and Mode, or, Laughs Come in Threes

Harold structure consists of six to eight improvisers taking the stage as a unit. Granted, on rare occasions, Harolds have been completed with as few as four members and as many as twelve, but the ideal number of performers to have in queue ranges between six and eight. The improvisers will come out and address the audience, asking for a word of suggestion; "One suggestion provides the inspiration for an entire show" (*The Subculture of Improv*, Jason Mantzoukas, 2012). Once granted a word from the audience, the team will begin to play a short opening game, typically a game involving word association or the linkage of free thought, in order to build upon a number of ideas. An example of one of these short opening games is simply called popcorn monologue, in which, after a word is procured from the crowd, one of

the members of the troupe will launch into a monologue about a personal experience that they are reminded of by the word of suggestion. As they are about to finish, another member of the troupe will begin a monologue off of the first performer's monologue, and so on until each member of the troupe has given a monologue, or until the team feels that they have a sufficient amount of material to work with. The goal of these early games is to create a rich template of ideas with which to improvise the upcoming scenes around. Ideally, the performers will describe possible "games" in their monologues which can be used later by the other performers.

Improv literally leaves the audience without the ability to lose interest in the present, simply because the past and the future do not exist. The story and any exposition that it needs to establish itself, are all being written in real time, right in front of the audience. There is nowhere for the audience to mentally hide if their minds start to wander. If they lose sight of the scene for any second, they could lose an important part of the game and be out of sync with the action onstage. The performers and the audience are creating the performance in tandem, as close to immediacy as can possibly be attempted, especially in the form of a Harold, where the first three scenes are completely original, and have almost no place of reference other than the words of inspiration from the original game. These first three scenes can come out of absolutely anywhere, in fact, they are encouraged to deviate from the words of suggestion with the concept of thinking from "A to C," or more plainly, being inspired by a thought that was inspired by a previous thought, rather than going directly from the word of inspiration. In other words, if the word of inspiration was "cow," rather than going to "milk" you could go to "ice cream." Going from "A to C" means skipping "B." It makes for a richer

palette of ideas. These concepts come directly from the Upright Citizens Brigade's training curriculum. The second three scenes, while building off of the first three, do not have to identically correspond with any of the characters, timelines, or settings of the first three, they merely have to uphold the games being played. In essence, these three scenes could be in entirely different locales and time periods, with completely different characters, as long as they stuck to the same game format. Again, this keeps the audience as in the dark as the performers are as to what the action will be and how it will unfold. By the third set of scenes it could be argued that at least an audience would have the ability to latch onto the pattern of each individual game and start to predict where that would lead the onstage spectacle, however, the third beat of a Harold allows for the intermingling of all three scenes into one, giant, final scene, which generally means that the audience is again on the edge of its seat, uncertain as to what it will be given in terms of formatting onstage. It could see three, defined beats played out that play on top of the previous two beats before it, or it could bring all three games together in an act of condensation where all six performers bring their characters onstage.

Below are two graphs that best attempt to outline Harold form. The first one is a beautifully designed graphic from Dyna Moe of [NobodysSweetheart.com](http://NobodysSweetheart.com). She is a student and graphic designer for the Upright Citizens Brigade in New York. The second graph is a skeletal construction that I created to try to further break down the form into its most simplistic collection of beats.

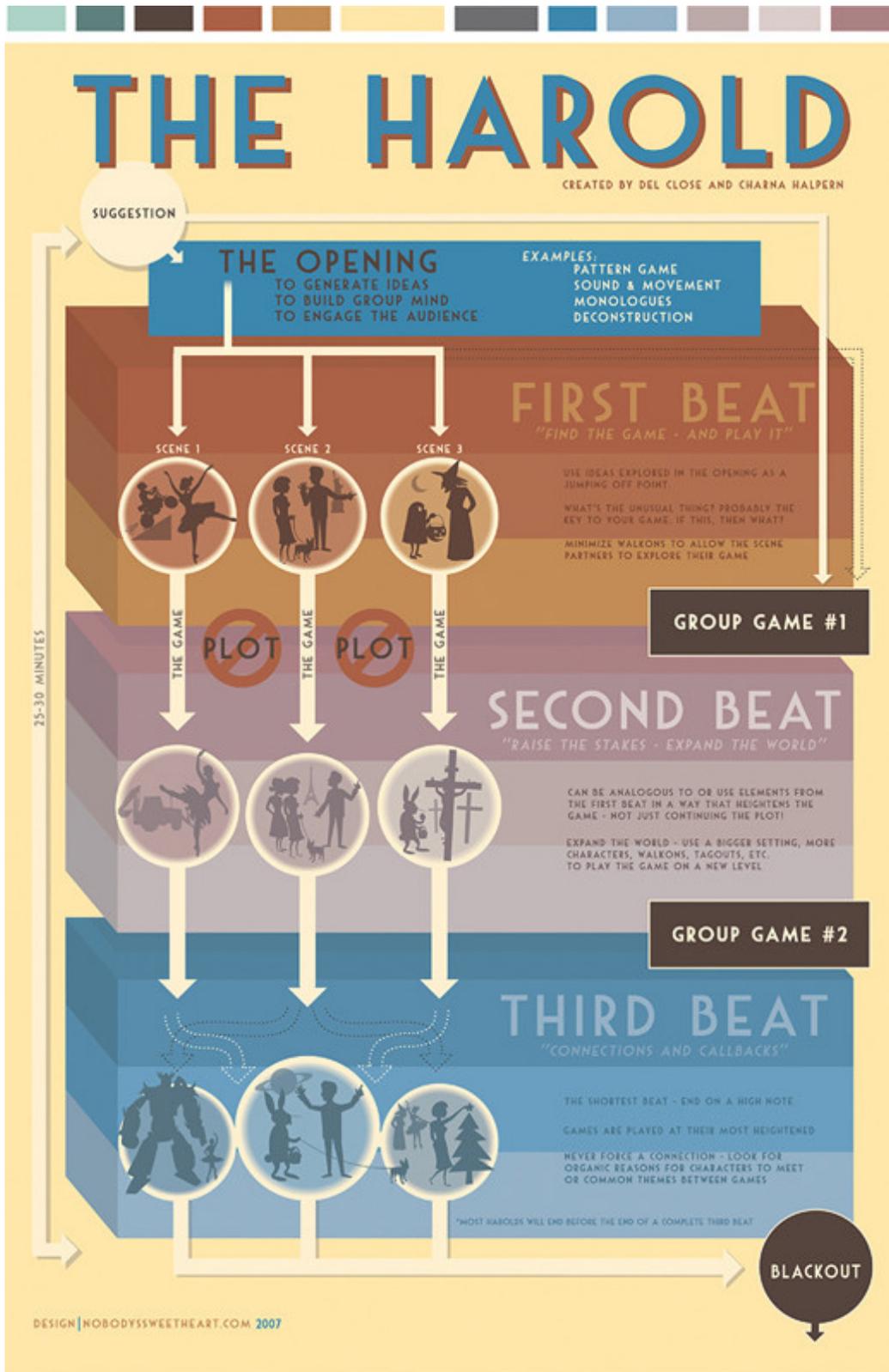
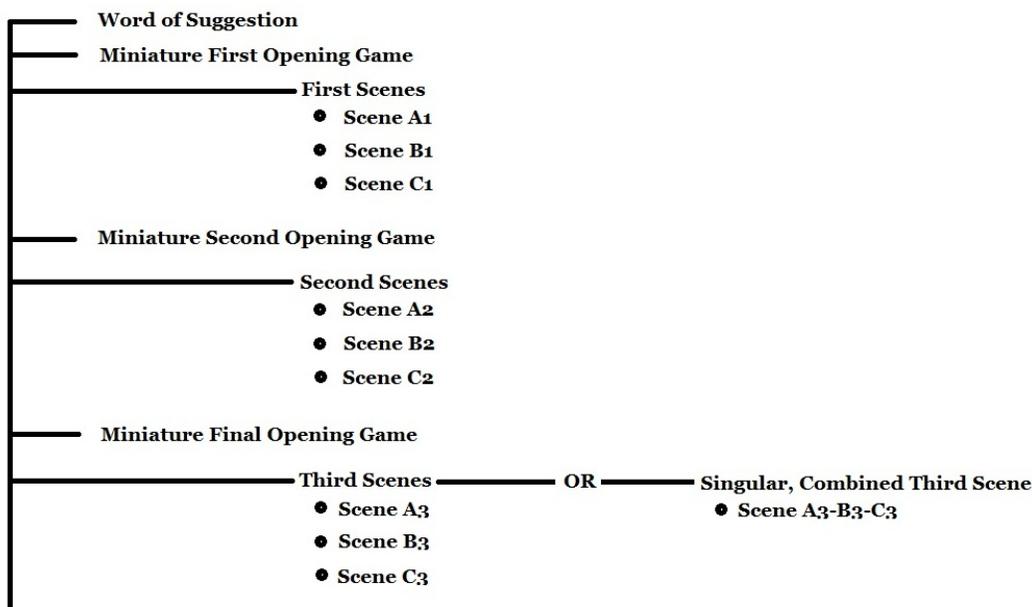


Figure 4: Harold Structure by Dyna Moe

As noted above, between the first and second beats, plot is negligible. In fact, it can be argued that plot is actually detrimental at times in that it can cause improvisers to lose the game of the scene and instead become bogged down in trying to remember and reconnect useless expositional information and backstory to connect beats.

## Harold Structure



*Figure 5: Skeletal Framework of Harold Structure*

In the even more simplified chart above, the Harold’s basic, three-act structure is plainly seen. By the third beat, the game of each of the three scenes has been solidly established and all scenes can either play out their own, independent third beat, or they can intermingle to create a mammoth, singular third beat.

Ellie Kemper does a fantastic job of elucidating what the Harold consists of in the most concise possible terms; “There’s three scenes going on and then there’s three different chapters of those scenes. And then in the third act, you kind of try to wrap everything up

together” (*The Subculture of Improv*, 2012). This constant state of the unknown leaves an audience without any option to leave the immediacy of the moment, for nothing else exists outside of the present on an improv stage. Certainly, during the second beat of the second scene, the audience may begin to wonder about the characters in the first scene, but it will do them absolutely no good, as those characters may never return again. Everything onstage is entirely disposable; “Everyone feels on this ‘journey’ together, and everyone’s having this experience together because the performers don’t know what’s going to happen and the audience doesn’t know. And as opposed to a play where the actors know the story, so, you don’t feel that sense of danger, cause you feel like things will go right” (*The Subculture of Improv*, Ellie Kemper, 2012).

The Harold is comedy’s perfect staged form. It is constantly generating new material while keeping the audience guessing as to what new scene will open up next; “You can’t manufacture discovery” (*The Subculture of Improv*, Jason Mantzoukas, 2012). It generates surprise constantly and organically by keeping the audience guessing as to what new scene will open up next. It creates a built-in generator of surprise. Surely, you could stand onstage and generate set-ups and punch lines all night, but eventually the audience would at least latch on to the form in which you were distributing comedy. The Harold continually yanks the proverbial rug out from under the audience’s feet. Right when they think they know what is coming next, a new scene appears, with little more than a slight reference from the scene preceding it to link the two together. Essentially, long-form most perfectly aligns with Stein’s theories insofar as to maintain a semblance of audience intrigue and captivation that of which no other theatrical form can boast.

It should be no surprise, then, that improv comedy is slowly becoming more and more prevalent in the comedy community. The Upright Citizen's Brigade opened a second theatre in New York (their third theatre, in total) in late 2011. Multitudes of up and coming comedians pour through the UCB training grounds and Harold teams each night in an effort to network and grow their material and talent. The Upright Citizens Brigade has become the breeding ground for the contemporary comedy movement and everything associated with it. With top-ranking alumni in the world of comedy, such as Aziz Ansari, Paul Scheer, Rob Riggle, Patton Oswalt, Pete Holmes, Zach Cregger, Trevor Moore, Donald Glover, DC Pierson, Ben Schwartz, Scott Adsit, Doug Benson, Nick Thune, Rob Huebel, and Anthony Jeselnik, who continually drop in and work with up and coming comics, UCB continues its influence over the narrative form through its students' success. As the principle training ground for up-and-coming contemporary comics in the comedy industry, UCB and its insistence upon analyzing comedy from an intellectual standpoint has revolutionized the genre. Hopefully, with more comedians concerned about honing their craft, and with a definable plan of attack on how to do so, the research and creation of more prolific, fantastic comedy is right at our fingertips.

## CHAPTER FIVE: THE SHORT ONE

Of course, Stein's concepts of immediacy would take to the stage differently from that of the screen. Dramatic narrative and action, up until the last century, was regulated to the stage, simply due to technological constraints. However, with the inception of film, and even later, the internet, we have been given an entirely new medium with which to explore the dramatic form. So while improvisational comedy exists as the closest representation of pure comedy on the stage, it still relies on the architecture of the scene to encapsulate its humor and to buoy it in front of an audience for an allotted amount of time. While there is no staged form closer to Stein's concept of immediacy than improv, which is literally predicated on the concept of living from moment to moment, improv still is one step away from our definition of pure comedy in that it has a definable end result. Rather than existing purely for the sake of comedy, improv has a structure, more so an anatomy, that it seeks to validate upon its performance. There is an outline in place that the improvisers seek to stay true to, and the comedy must come organically from within these confines. Again, while this is absolutely minute, and while we are arguing staunchly for improv's utmost importance in the search for the perfect comedic form, improv still technically falls short of the perfect resemblance to that of pure comedy. For if the comedy cannot exist within a scene between two human beings, it likely will not be seen in long-form improv. It is at this juncture that I want to reintroduce *5 Second Films* and what they mean for the propagation of pure comedy.

Granted *5 Second Films*, much like improv, exists within a construct. The time limit with which I have argued so frees up the creators of the series to focus purely on the comedy of the scene also acts as a restraint if they ever wanted to expound on a joke or perhaps play the

game of the scene a multitude of times. Having acknowledged this slight limitation, it is not *5 Second Films* specifically that we are arguing for as the beholders of pure comedy, but the example that they uphold for the rest of the digital generation. *5 Second Films* is emblematic of what comedy could be in the coming generations, if it is left unfettered. The problem is that the digital realm in which *5 Second Films* operates, by comparison, is much like that of the cinematic realm at the turn of the twentieth century. The internet and the digital short currently have plenty of freedoms in the way of content, form, and medium, precisely like that of cinema 100 years prior. As history is wont to repeat itself, however, it is obvious that impending corporate attempts at monetizing the World Wide Web will be swift and merciless. The Hollywood studios of the early twentieth century managed to assert dominion over the medium of cinema in order to best bleed the art form for every last compensatory measure it possibly could. In formatting film to adhere to a business model, the studios drafted the two-reelers of the very first days of film into feature length, dramatic comedies that would give audience's greater reason to leave their homes and plunk down a larger fee to view. This is the fear that comes with the infringement of the corporate realm on the free usage bastion that is the internet. It is only a matter of time before corporations find a way to monetize internet content and create a business model for up-and-coming comedy, therein formatting it to best create template-based art, as it has been done throughout history. With this impending corporate takeover on the horizon, it is imperative to identify what makes this form of clipped comedy so valuable to the reevaluation of the comedic form.

Stein's concept of immediacy pertains to improv perfectly. It also, however, pertains very nicely to the short fare of sketch comedy in a highly-abridged format. When little more

than a few seconds are spent on an entire premise, the viewer is left almost incapable of looking backwards or forwards in time to any sort of character development or dramatic device. They simply have to stay involved with what is happening onscreen or else lose the concept and the comedy of the narrative entirely. In this way, the shorts of *5 Second Films* and other internet sketch troupes affectively use speed to their advantage in disorienting the audience. By keeping their timeframes infinitesimally short, the artists force themselves to establish the game of the scene incredibly quickly, almost humorously so. In doing so, the audience is constantly in a mental race to understand and interpret the game in time for the punch line, or multiple punch lines, to land and actually make sense. In essence, a truncated running time ensures that the audience's full focus will be on the game, or the humor, of the scene, rather than the characters, the spectacle, the camera placement, etc. This compendium of the comedic form enables comedy to focus solely on its end result, that of laughter. While the goal of this thesis is not to delineate any discernible, specific time frame which is "perfect" for comedy, it can be said that what most practitioners would consider incredibly abridged, would probably be absolutely perfect in the comedic arena. Obviously, there needs to be a freedom to experiment with time and every joke or game will have a different allotment of time that it will need to properly establish itself. Again, however, we can agree that in a majority of cases, less is more.

The silent era of comedy in the twentieth century is typically remembered with such reverence due to its unassailable structure. With the silent era comedians, their work existed purely to obtain a laugh. Each short was constructed around a game and only existed for as long as the story of the game needed to be told. During this time, comedy was beloved and

brought comedians household fame at times instantaneously. Unfortunately, however, these comedic endeavors were never valued in the way that more dramatic fare was. Further, once the Hollywood moguls extrapolated comedy to make it feature length, it was never able to fully live up to its own succinct, cinematic origins. It can then be ascertained that the reason comedy receives such castigation from critics would be due to its occupation of an elongated timeframe in which all other elements that are superfluous to comedy are allowed to flourish and make note of themselves. Some of the best comedy writers in history may not have been the best writers of character, or plot, and that does not necessarily make them weak writers, especially not in the genre that they inhabit. In a feature-length work such as *Billy Madison*, for example, Adam Sandler is typically derided for his childish, one-note characterizations that seem to all stem from the same titular character of said work. However, there are a multitude of hilarious, ridiculous moments in Sandler's fare, particularly *Billy Madison*, that are moments of comic ingenuity. For example, the scene in which Billy is derided by the test administrator for answering so foolishly to the final exam question is classic comedy. Madison answers confidently, the music swells, he finishes with victory in his eyes and the crowd cheers. All this occurs before the crowd and Madison die down into a lull, during which the test administrator calmly looks at Madison and says, "Mr. Madison, what you have just said is one of the most insanely idiotic things I have ever heard. At no point, in your rambling, incoherent response were you even close to anything that could be considered a rational thought. Everyone in this room is now dumber for having listened to it. I award you no points, and may God have mercy on your soul" (Sandler, 1995). Of course, this monologue ran through my mind multiple times while writing this thesis, but the point is that the set-up of victory, followed by a sedate

deconstruction of the hero, in effect proclaiming him a fool, is classic comedy. The merit of *Billy Madison*, however, is hardly upheld by critics. Many will be quick to condemn the work for its poor character development and absurd plot, in that an adult would have to go back through grade school and complete every level in order to gain his inheritance. These elements, however, are the result of an over-inflated running time and a society that puts emphasis on dramatic components rather than comedic ones. Forcing a narrative that could have perhaps yielded best results within a 45-minute, much faster-paced runtime to occupy an 89-minute one will engender contrived and weak character and plot constructions, which will, obviously, bring about a weak narrative when assessed from a dramatic standpoint. And yet, the moments of humor in *Billy Madison* are quoted continuously and by multitudes of fans of all sensibilities, which is something worth examining. The greatest comedies of all time are typically recounted by fans by specific lines, rather than premises. When one remembers a favorite comedic movie, such as Mel Brooks' *Blazing Saddles*, or *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*, one cannot help but quote, out loud, direct passages from the film. Comedies are remembered for the moments of laughter they induce, not necessarily the brilliant plot twists that they execute or the sweeping character developments that they procure. In fact, the plot synopses to most of the greatest comedies ever are mere skeletons for running the game of each individual joke. The plots look to simply buoy the comedy. Unfortunately, however, Western civilization strives to uphold dramatic factors of plot and character and values them above all else. The concept of appreciating jokes and the successful execution of game has never been on the table in terms of critical analysis. In fact, these terms are almost without definition in modern academia. Without any effort to examine and interpret the form through

the ages (Aristotle's work would count, but being that his treatise on comedy was lost, it becomes easier to see the disconnect in modern academic study and comedy) comedy has been held up to the same standards as drama throughout the years, and for this, comedy suffers.

Of course, the simple argument for dramatic comedy would be that dramatic comedy at its most adept is pure comedy in succession. An amalgamation of pure comedic bits strung together by a plot and narrative sequence that interweaves all these jokes and makes them unified in their intent. Again, however, this evokes the principles that Gertrude Stein so avidly covered in her treatise on Landscape Drama. Stringing together an unrelated series of sketches in sequence could still be acceptable as no narrative elements of plot or character are capable of taking you out of the immediate present. However, the minute that you look to assert unification throughout interconnected comedic bits, you create shifts in emotional time. Dramatic comedy, by its insistence to resemble its sibling drama's structure, creates a regiment for itself that it can hardly keep, and thus sets itself up for failure against a narrative comparison to drama.

We have established that pure comedy is any form that exists solely for comedic gain. Devoid of any sort of extraneous narrative developments in character or plot, the purest of pure comedy consists solely of that which induces laughter in the audience; "Comedy is about jokes, rather than character, plot, and all that stuff" (*The Art of Stand-Up*, Frank Skinner, 2011). Again, in an attempt to stray from the overinflated, feature-length fare which has brought comedy into a level of subordination to drama, the concise, direct form of humor intrinsic in the sketch comedy of digital shorts has proven to be an invaluable tool to help redefine comedy.

We are finally at a point in history when comedy has a legitimate outlet to exist in a sustainable, succinct format. Without studio intervention, comedy is able to thrive in its intended form. In this way, the hyper-miniaturized style of *5 Second Films*, and really the entire digital generation, has helped to revolutionize the form. Before the digital generation, comedy had to be able to draw crowds in from off the street to a theatre for an extended period. Or comedy had to merit a studio spending millions of dollars on its production and distribution. Either route involved bloated narratives that detracted from the comedy of the situation, rather than added. And, in turn, comedies were seen as weak in response to their dramatic brethren. However, with the proliferation of affordable technology in the hands of artists who are willing to experiment and have nothing to lose, the era of the digital short has managed to bring us even closer to the purest form of comedy.

## CHAPTER SIX: THE BUTTON

Then, of course, there is the button. It is a notorious term used to describe the end of a scene, bit, or leg of a Harold. The button is typically the last moment of comedic catharsis, or laughter, at the very end of a scene that accentuates the entire piece and ties it together. It is typically the moment of highest comedic cache that is derived from either a reversal of the game, or a direct correlation to an earlier conflict circling the game that was dismissed. In the case of Charlie Chaplin's scene in *The Circus* that was mentioned earlier, the button comes when an overconfident Chaplin looks to assert his bravado over the lion and bravely approaches it. As Chaplin gets too close, the typically docile lion roars to life and sends Chaplin running for his life out of the cage and, as we later see, up a telephone pole (Chaplin, 1929). The button on any scene usually comes at the immediate end, leaving milliseconds for a denouement or any sort of "resolution" which could literally be described as the audience's acknowledgement of what they have just witnessed. Typically, in sketch, the scene will end immediately upon the full realization of the button. In improv, a cut will come from the backline directly on the actuation of the button. When done correctly, the audience should be laughing at the button into the beginning of a new scene.

This is the final moment in which misdirection is most adeptly utilized to produce laughter or admiration within a crowd. Admiration is almost as desired as laughter because a crowd's admiration at skillful maneuvering, whether in the moment by an improv troupe, or on the page of a sketch troupe, equates to the audience's appreciation and acknowledgement of being truly surprised. After taking a rather hyperbolic stance on the issue of pure comedy in this thesis, the only true button that I could attach would be to state what should be the

obvious: there is no one, true form for comedy, or any other dramatic genre, for that matter. Art is impossible to quantify to such a degree. If a 90-minute feature is producing laughter in the theatres, then that is absolutely fantastic. If the newest Judd Apatow-produced comedy manages to induce chuckles while portraying active, living characters, then we need to recognize and salute that as a competent and successful endeavor of comedy.

Even if we can reason that pure comedy is the definitive format for the strongest crop of comedic enterprise, the question still stands to ask what pure comedy truly is. Is it long-form improvisational comedy, which brings about the fullest embodiment of Stein's theory of immediacy? Or is it miniature digital shorts, which have no technical specifications or limits, but only exist insofar as to accommodate laughter, thereby making them perfect representatives for the genre of pure comedy? In truth, both constructs are flawed, as improv is bound by the restraints of the framework of the form it exists within (meaning that there is a structural rigidity, regardless of how small, that improv forces comedy to occupy). If a Harold consisted of a four minute scene, a ten minute scene, and a thirty-five second scene, audiences would be confused, and possibly displeased. The structure that looks to create, at the very least, a uniformity of time and form, does put pure comedy into a very specific entity that it may not best flourish in at all times, in every instance. One of the greatest conceits of long-form improv is the revelation that theatre-goers experience when a successful Harold wraps around and cohesively reconnects with itself; "You can use the visual example of taking a ball or something and pouring like paint over it, and you can see, like, there's one point where all the information begins and then it just kind of goes everywhere. But at the bottom of the ball it sort of comes back together" (*The Subculture of Improv*, Matt Walsh, 2012). This conceit,

however, is counter-intuitive to the ideology that pure comedy can exist without any definitive form other than what is necessary to make one laugh. Conversely, while the digital short manages to exist literally without boundary (anything from five seconds to five minutes constitutes a sketch or short, and anything from live actors to animation is conceivable), it does elude the concept of immediacy that Gertrude Stein so brilliantly cultivated.

While I have pinpointed long form improv as the closest stage approximation to pure comedy, and the digital short, or sketch, as the closest screened approximation to pure comedy, we are still left with certain inadequacies in both forms. The important thing to note from this discussion, however, is the gradual slope with which we finally arrived at these two artistic mediums. Improv has barely been around for more than fifty years, and the revolution of the digital short is little more than five years old, itself. While there is still progress to be made, it can effectively be surmised that humanity's movement towards the idealized comedic narrative is certainly progressing. Throughout history we have actively taken steps towards a new paradigm for pure comedy, and, as can be seen throughout this thesis, the quest for pure comedy's true form is an evolutionary enterprise. As narrative has shifted to accommodate technology, commerce, and the ever-evolving human capacity for understanding, narrative's form has shifted with it. While initially comedy had to bend to fit the parameters of the City Dionysia and what would become the Western standard for dramatic conception, comedy has recently begun to be able to function autonomously from drama, in the forms that best accommodate its end result, laughter. The proliferation of the digital medium and the equipment to record in the said medium has paved the way for miniaturized, succinct, condensed narratives that lend themselves perfectly to comedy. Both long form improv and

digital shorts encapsulate comedy for comedy's sake, without any pretense about superior character development, plot device, or spectacle.

Over the last century humanity has taken in and processed more narrative than at any other point in given history. The current point at which we stand as a group of creators is among the most adept in history. The years of processing mounds of different narrative forms and the multitudes of stories that have inundated popular culture have led us to a point of synthesis in modern culture in which we are able to view and appreciate certain constructs of the narrative that we simply may not have been able to hundreds of years ago. Would Neoclassical audiences have been able to handle improv? Of course not, the locations and characters are literally forced to change by the design of improv's form. Would audiences of the Renaissance have been able to handle five second clips in which little more than three words are uttered before the punch line is revealed? Arguably, no. However, we, as a current society can because we have assimilated such a glut of stimuli and narrative understanding simply from existing in our narrative-barraged culture. One of the reasons that *5 Second Films* works is that they take for granted that their viewers are cultured and informed enough that they can comprehend certain references without ever having them explained, expositionally. Does this run the risk of ostracizing one's audience? Of course. Does it also, however, endear the audience with a semblance of trust that permeates from the creators? It certainly does. Part of the beauty of this diagnosis of comedy as a form is the notable progression towards a quasi-quantifiable destination. It actually appears as though the form is moving towards a new place of discovery. And whether it is contingent upon technology to help facilitate it, or whether it is simply a question of waiting for the human race to catch up to its own artistic

capabilities, the fact of the matter is that advances have been made, and they have seen a clearly-defined outcome.

The principle stands, however, that comedy is typically marginalized in our society amongst the arts. Merit is obviously placed upon dramatic narratives rather than comedic ones in terms of relevance and importance to the landscape of drama as a whole, which is wildly unfair. Comedy almost has a duty to help audiences cope with difficult issues and to expel tensions which would otherwise fester in popular culture. Comedy permits audiences to come to terms with issues and facets of life that are otherwise swept under the rug. The genre can be argued to be just as pivotal to humanity's narrative catharsis as drama, if not more so. And yet comedy is rarely celebrated as the deft and intellectually-stimulating genre that it is. The biggest problem that we have seen from this negation of comedy's importance is the aforementioned utter lack of academic interest into comedy. With two degrees in all of the Western world dedicated to the study of comedic production, it can generally be agreed that the form is seemingly not seen as something worthy of academic inquiry. And it is because of this lack of exploration and discovery within the form that we have seen such slow experimentation and innovation throughout the years. With increased merit comes increased resources devoted to the study of the form. And with increased study ideally comes increased understanding, assessment, and creation. Advocating for the proper structuring of the comedic form is advocating for a stronger form, one that can, ideally, demand more respect. And in doing so, can demand the allocation of artistic reinvention that criticism and scrutiny are supposed to entail. While it may seem trite to come at comedy arguing over which form it best complies with, the intent is to find the best way in which to convince the rest of the world that

comedy is a perfectly honorable artistic endeavor, and that it is more than deserving of our attention and dedication. In essence, to convince the world that something being “funny” does not mean that it is not equally important.

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