

## Improv on TV: Can't We Just Get Along? By Matt Fotis

---

Improviseational performance and television have had a long and rocky courtship. Improv has been on the tube for decades, with a recent explosion of shows. Improv specific programs like *Whose Line is it Anyway?* have proven successful, while shows using improvisation and improv techniques like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and even *Saturday Night Live* have changed the way people view and make television. One can argue that reality television, one of the new dominant forms of programming in the last decade, is really a form of improvisation. Yet improv and television have never tied the knot. There exists a tension between the two forces that continually threatens their coexistence.

So why haven't improv and television achieved the same harmony and success that the traditional sitcom, evening news and sporting events share with television? There has been a growing trend of improv on television, but most shows have failed to find sustained success. Despite this history, producers are still willing to put improv on the air because it is relatively cheap, creative, new, energetic and funny. Improvisational theatre artists, who feel somewhat pigeonholed by the small theatrical niche that has been carved out for them, are likewise eager for more improv on television. As iO Artistic Director Charna Halpern, one of the leading figures in improvisational theatre has said about the future of improv, "Right now I'd like to see more TV."<sup>1</sup> The impetus is there, but there seems to be stagnation.

Therefore I will be undertaking an analysis of improv on TV. After a brief examination of improvisational theatre and its components (after all we can't really discuss improv on television if we don't know what improv is) I will be looking at the television show *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, which is the most widely known and successful form of improv on television, has had the greatest impact on improv onstage and onscreen, and has a complicated and tricky legacy. I will then be

looking at the ways in which *Whose Line* has created friction and tension between stage and screen, focusing on audiences, players, and editing. Finally, I will be exploring just why there isn't more improv on TV, and how improv and television might be able to coexist in harmony.

### **What is Improv Anyway?**

Improvisational theatre is quickly becoming one of the more popular forms of theatrical performance, “percolating near the edge of being the next big thing.”<sup>2</sup> Its ostensibly never ending percolation, however, may stem from the misunderstanding of scholars, practitioners and audience members about the art form. Its meaning remains elusive, and improv itself is still not seen by many as a legitimate form of artistic expression.<sup>3</sup> This is largely due to the rise of short-form improv in the highly commercialized and manipulated forms propagated by television shows such as *Whose Line is it Anyway?*, *Wild 'N Out*, and *Thank God You're Here*.

Televised improv presents a distinct brand of performance, but in order to fully comprehend improv on TV let's step back and briefly look at the different types of improvisational theatre. The most prevalent form of improv performed today is what Amy Seham has classified as Chicago-style improv-comedy, which originated in the 1950s with the advent of The Compass Players. Seham defines Chicago-style improv-comedy as “a form of unscripted performance that uses audience suggestions to initiate or shape scenes or plays created spontaneously and cooperatively according to agreed-upon rules or game structures, in the presence of an audience – frequently resulting in comedy.”<sup>4</sup> Or as Annoyance Theatre founder Mick Napier more simply states “Improvisation is getting on stage and making stuff up as you go along.”<sup>5</sup> While there is obviously a great deal of skill, practice and preparation that is needed to make improv relevant and entertaining, Napier's simple assertion cuts to the core. What makes improv unique and attractive to performers and audiences is the spontaneity and ephemeral nature, the risk and possibilities of an unscripted performance; it's almost like the magic of live theatre on acid.

Contemporary improvisational theatre can be divided into three main genres: short form, long form and sketch based improv, or what I call scriptprov. They all share several common theories, such as agreement, yes and, etc., but they also have sharp divisions both theoretically and in performance. Developed in part from the theatre games of Viola Spolin (and to a lesser extent Keith Johnstone), short form improv has become the most widespread genre of improvisation both onscreen and onstage. It is usually shorter in nature and heavily reliant on games and gimmicks to propel the action forward. Long form is based on scenes and relationships and more closely resembles a one-act play (or an episode of *Seinfeld*, *30 Rock* or *The Office*; none of which are, despite rumors to the contrary, improvised). Long form is often misconstrued as one long scene (read one long boring scene), when in fact long form can actually consist of a collection very short scenes. Scriptprov is written work based on or derived from improvisation such as the work done at The Second City, or to an extent on *Saturday Night Live*, and is often referred to as sketch comedy.

Since short form improv has found the most television success, let us briefly take a closer look at its structure. Short form exists in three categories: team competitive format, individual competitive format and the team non-competitive format.<sup>6</sup> The team competitive format is modeled after professional sports and features two or more teams of improvisers competing against each other in improv games. This style has been used very effectively onstage by the Theatresports and ComedySportz improv franchises. On television it is best exemplified by MTV's *Wild 'n Out*. The show pits two teams of improvisers against each other in a series of competitive games that usually center on quick and easily recognizable jokes, even sinking so low as to trade "Yo Mama Jokes." The show routinely ends with a competitive one-liner game based on making fun of the other team that often devolves to petty school-yard insults. It is here that we see the first tension between improv and television: time. ComedySportz works in much the same way as *Wild 'N Out*, yet the improvisers have the added luxury of time. More accurately it is not the improvisers but the

audience that has the added luxury of seeing everything play out in real time. What is put onstage is what the audience sees at ComedySportz, while *Wild 'N Out* benefits greatly from the editing room. I will be exploring the concept of editing improvisation in more detail later, for now it is important to note that television simply does not have the same luxury of time, which is manifested on *Wild 'N Out* through cheap and fast jokes.

Despite *Wild 'n Out*'s seeming reliance on lowest common denominator comedy, the show is one of the first to present a racially diverse cast, something that improvisational theatre has long struggled with. As Jill Bernard says “the difference between long form and short form is if the six white guys are wearing matching shirts or not.”<sup>7</sup> Amy Seham's *Whose Improv is it Anyway?* does a marvelous job of exploring issues of race and gender in improvisation, which has been dominated by young, white, heterosexual males. This has lead many, including the father of long form improv Del Close, to assume that women aren't funny.<sup>8</sup> But improviser Amanda Rountree argues that it isn't a question of funny, rather it is about energy. She says that “improv that is fast, funny, attacking” has a male energy, while improv that focuses on “the intuitive, the connection with others, and the emotional availability and vulnerability” is more feminine.<sup>9</sup> Successful improvisers possess both male and female energies, but due to the overwhelming male majority often times the more aggressive male energies dominate. While improv is becoming more diverse, women still struggle with the white male orientation, either receding to the background or trying to adapt to a more aggressive male attacking style. *Whose Line* tended to focus on the more aggressive male style of performance, and as we shall see featured a predominantly white male cast, so it reinforced the idea that improv is fundamentally dominated by (white) male energy.

While *Wild 'N Out* represents the team competitive format of short-form, *Whose Line* is the most prevalent example of the individual competitive format. As the name suggests, this style features individual improvisers who compete against each other in a battle of quick wits and fast

jokes. The structure is very similar to the team format, with a greater emphasis placed on the individual with games that highlight a solo performer or individual talent such as the singing game Hoe-Down. *Whose Line* is famous (or infamous) for pigeonholing performers into playing the same game over and over. For example, while on the show Wayne Brady almost exclusively performed in the same small handful of singing games to highlight his unique talents. He rarely, however, was allowed to showcase any of his other improv or acting abilities. The non-competitive team format is identical to the competitive team format with the exception that there is only one team and obviously there are no winners and losers, and therefore of no interest to television executives.

While improv is totally spontaneous, there is still a guiding set of rules and structures. In short form the game is the overriding influence. A game is simply “a formal structure imposed on a scene before it starts.”<sup>10</sup> Players follow the rules of the game, such as with Party Quirks where one player is the host of a party. Each of the guests has a quirk given to them by the audience that the host must then guess throughout the course of the scene; the game becomes playing the quirks and how the host and guests incorporate the quirks into the scene. Short form’s reliance on games makes it appear to be the ideal improv genre for television. Games usually last from four to seven minutes, can exist independent of all other action, feature lots of jokes, and due to their basic structure have a relatively high rate of success and a repeatable structure. Games are perfect for short television segments and commercial breaks since the action can be easily stopped and started again without losing any continuity (or viewers). The repeatability of games – each game has a basic gimmick that can be exploited time and again – removes some of the unreliability of other improv genres while maintaining some of the spontaneity that makes improv unique.

### **Improv on TV: A Shaky Balancing Act**

The rise of *Whose Line* and improv on television in many ways is comparable to the “Disneyfication” of Broadway in recent decades. The Disney shows have brought new audiences to

Broadway, but have done so at the expense of other shows. Similarly, the growth of improv on television has been a verifiable catch-22 for improvisational theatre. The immense growth and popularity of *Whose Line, Wild 'N Out*, and other shows has greatly increased improv's exposure and presence on the theatrical landscape. However, the genre of improv on display is highly controlled and often times runs contrary to and violates major tenets of improvisational theatre. By far the most successful and influential televised improv show is *Whose Line is it Anyway?* The success of *Whose Line* has been instrumental in getting people, especially younger people aware of and involved in improv, but as *Whose Line* alum and consultant Ron West notes "kids need to realize that *Whose Line* is not the pinnacle of improvisation quality. It just happens to be the most visible. McDonald's is not the best restaurant in the world even though it is the most visible."<sup>11</sup>

Television's impact on the performance cannot be underestimated. The simple fact that the improv is televised instantly skews the performance and muddles its definition. As Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White state in *The Improv Handbook*, "Clearly, the medium of improvisation is wounded once cameras enter the picture. As soon as the audience knows that mistakes could have been edited out, a lot of risk evaporates, and risk is a primary reason for an audience to see an improvised show."<sup>12</sup> The failure to recognize that 1) the improv on display is being manipulated; and 2) that improv exists in other radically different forms is one of the main sources of tension between the two forms. Perhaps an even bigger reason for tension is the failure to launch. With its mass distribution television is supposed to create a new level of acceptance and knowledge, yet improv hasn't really received the major boost that many other forms experience.<sup>13</sup> Of course there has been an increase in the number of people familiar with improv and attending performances, but it has come at a cost. In an interview with iO's Jason Chin, improviser Craig Cackowski summed up the feeling among many improvisers about *Whose Line*, "It's not the improv I know [and] it's not what I want represented as improv."<sup>14</sup>

While the show has many elements of traditional improvisational theatre, the television show also manipulated the form. The success of *Whose Line* led the show to turn into a repeatable commodity that could easily be reproduced and sold. While tightening artistic control to capitalize on success is not solely a television phenomenon, its impact is greater. Through the show's commodification came an ever tightening stranglehold of the improv on display. The formulaic structure also became very limiting and frustrating to the performers. Colin Mochrie, one of the stars of both the British and American versions of the show, expressed his view of *Whose Line*: "We're always trying to get different stuff on and they're sometimes afraid to mix things up because it's worked the way it has. It just makes it harder for us because we're with the same people all the time, we do the same scenes all the time, and it's hard to find something new and different...but they don't seem to get it. For some reason these network executives don't get it."<sup>15</sup>

Mochrie further elucidated the balancing act that *Whose Line* represents for the improv community: "I would like to think of it as an introduction...*Whose Line* is great for what it is, it's a lot of fun...but it's a very schtick kind of improv, which is valid in its own right, but there are other kinds that I think people should really get into. So if it gets people interested, that's great."<sup>16</sup> Televised art is a balance of pros, namely the increased audiences and exposure, and cons, the highly commercial and manipulated form of improv on display. But do the pros outweigh the cons, or vice-versa? Perhaps the questions don't matter in the long run since the proverbial cat has already been let out of the bag, but they are important in terms of understanding why improv and television haven't gotten along.

Many see short form improv as performed on *Whose Line*, *Wild 'N Out*, *Thank God You're Here* and other shows and question its intrinsic value, viewing it only as an empty medium for cheap jokes and meaningless entertainment.<sup>17</sup> Because of short form's popularity and wide exposure this stereotype has been extremely damaging to the greater improv world. Therefore *Whose Line*'s

popularity can be seen as two steps forward, one giant step backward. Televised short form has greatly expanded improv's exposure by introducing improv to millions of people, but it has also merited it a place near the bottom of the theatrical hierarchy somewhere between performance art and children's theatre. The paradox deepens when one considers that without televised improv's commercial success, there might not even be a viable theatrical counterpart.

### ***Whose Line is it Anyway?* and the birth of improv on TV**

While it is not the first program to feature improvisation on television, *Whose Line* is one of the earliest and by far the most successful fully improvised show. It proved that improv could be put on television all by itself and people would tune in. As the show evolved, and crossed the pond, it seemingly became less and less about improvisation and more and more about performers and television. Some have yet to come to grips with the fact that improv onstage and improv onscreen are different, so they have come to loathe the program. More importantly though, are those in the field that understand the distinction, but are concerned about the lay audience member who does not. Over the last ten to fifteen years *Whose Line*, perhaps more so than any other program, book, person or theater has shaped general ideas and impressions, both positive and negative, about improvisational theatre.

Originally born as a radio show, *Whose Line is it Anyway?* made its debut in Britain in 1988, and ran successfully for ten years before being imported to the United States in 1998, running until 2003. The show features a non-improvising host who "scores" the various games. The scoring is completely arbitrary, especially in the American version where it is used more often to heighten the action and generate banter and interplay between the performers. Generally there are four improvising contestants that compete in a variety of short form games. The evolution of the contestants provides an interesting look at how the show – and improvisation changed.

Initially the British version featured an eclectic and rotating cast. Improvisers from London's Comedy Store Players were the stalwarts of the cast, but writers, actors, comedians and others were brought onto the show, many of whom had never improvised before. As the show matured and became more popular, the producers began bringing in American performers with a higher gag per minute ratio (or male energy). The result was that the show got funnier, there were fewer games that failed or dragged on, but stagnation set in over the show – never a recipe for sustained success in improvisation. The producers found what worked, and as television producers are apt to do, began formatting the show in a highly familiar and repeatable way. Very few new games were introduced, and “by the end [of the British version] the shows had become essentially indistinguishable, offering exactly the same games, exactly the same performers (and in some cases exactly the same jokes), week in and week out.”<sup>18</sup>

When the show was brought to the United States the rigid format was locked down even further. While the British version featured a varied cast, at least initially, the American version featured three regular players – Ryan Stiles, Colin Mochrie and Wayne Brady – with only the fourth spot rotated. Even this “open spot” generally was filled with Greg Proops, Brad Sherwood, Jeff Davis or Chip Esten.<sup>19</sup> This semi-permanent cast had a profound influence on the show. Even more so than the British version, the American version featured only a small handful of games that were repeated week in and week out. This is partly due to the idea that if a game works keep doing it, but it also relates to the semi-permanent cast. Games were chosen that would highlight particular players and their skills. Wayne Brady would almost always participate in a singing game, Mochrie and Stiles would almost always team up in a buddy system game like Props or Infomercial and so on.

Games existed to highlight players or give them an outlet to tell jokes, both of which fly in the face of the main tenets of improvisational theatre that preach an ensemble approach and highly

discourage joke telling. Improvisational theatre lets humor come out of characters, relationships and connections. As Close says, “A thousand cheap laughs can never compare to one intelligent chuckle. Don’t cheapen yourself or lower yourself to get a laugh...which would you rather be known as, the village idiot or the artist with the insightful intellect?”<sup>20</sup> These contrasting ways of getting laughs has caused some tension, with stage improvisers arguing that *Whose Line* made improv seem like a form of buffoonery instead of an art form (the tension goes both ways since stage improvisers assume that their way of generating laughs is not only different, but superior).

The limited number of games and players meant that the American version also imported some of the staleness of the British version. But four improvisers working together night in and night out also had huge advantages. A cohesive ensemble is essential to improvisational theatre since the group is creating a performance out of nothing, so trust and knowledge are paramount. This began to enter the televised realm, which created:

a relaxed, mischievous atmosphere...as running jokes developed between the performers and their mutual teasing began to be as entertaining as the improvised games themselves. This gave the show an excitement and a freshness which—for some years—few other shows could match. Most theatrical improvisers would look in horror at the easy laughs, lazy shtick and scene-killing gags which paraded across their television screens... But most theatrical improvisers would also have given their left leg to have the kind of ease and charm these four demonstrated.<sup>21</sup>

And many more would have also given their right leg to be on the show. One of the sources of tension is the great animosity that stage improvisers have for the show, part of which stems from the idea that *Whose Line* is not really improv, and part of it comes from jealousy. As Mochrie notes, “I think a lot of improvisers hated it because it was successful. And improvisers, we’re a jealous lot. I don’t think anyone involved with the show thought this was the way to do improv.”<sup>22</sup> This animosity, jealousy and tension stems from the fact that the performers, especially from the American show, have been catapulted into a level of fame and popularity unknown to most stage improvisers. This performer paradox helps to illuminate the greater paradox of the show, namely its

far reaching appeal and commercial success that put product and individuals ahead of process and ensemble.

As we have seen the growing emphasis on the performer changed the content of the show, and influenced ideas about improvisation. Games featured on *Whose Line* tended to focus on individual skill and wit, and often were willing to forgo quality improvisation for a cheap laugh.<sup>23</sup> The individualized improv developed and encouraged by *Whose Line* runs counter to what many argue is essential about improv, and violates one of the main concepts of improvisational theatre – to support your partner and make them look good. As Halpern notes in *Art by Committee*, “the only way to look good is to make one another look good by justifying one another and taking care of one another’s ideas. That means that everything we hear is the most important idea in the world... This is ensemble work, and either we all sink, or we all swim.”<sup>24</sup>

Instead of following this idea of support and ensemble, which is one of the three main rules of improv known as The Kitchen Sink Rules,<sup>25</sup> *Whose Line* performers often went for cheap laughs at the expense of other improvisers or audience members, which is an improv sin called pimping. Incidentally pimping was the main crux of the recent improv television show *Thank God You’re Here*, where a celebrity host is blindly thrown into a situation with professional improvisers that generates laughs by exposing the host’s ignorance of the situation. Rather than developing comedy out of an ensemble, *Whose Line*, *Wild ‘N Out* and other televised improv shows attempt to create the most laughs per minute, which is easier to achieve by highlighting individual performers and skirting basic improv techniques and philosophies.

Highlighting individual performers does foster a joke-at-all-costs atmosphere, but it also is extremely helpful in marketing the show and creating audiences. A small improv theatre does not rely on star power the way a television show must. They have the luxury of only pulling in an audience of fifty to one hundred a night, whereas a show like *Whose Line* must pull in millions of

viewers to stay on the air. Creating a fan base and following is much easier if the audience has performers and games that are familiar. The talent and personality of Stiles, Mochrie and Brady became as important, if not more so than their improvisational talent. The interaction and interplay “off-stage” between the cast was what set the show apart from its contemporaries, not the improv.

Yet what many stage improvisers overlook or ignore in their outrage over the show, was that *Whose Line* began focusing on the individual because short form improv does not have the same type of sustainability that the traditional sitcom or television show (evening news, reality TV, home improvement show) possesses. Every three to five minutes audiences are asked to invest in a new set of characters. None of those characters stick around (or are rounded out in any way due to time and game restraints) so there isn’t the usual connection that exists between an audience and a character. There isn’t anyone to pull for, root against, or watch change. Every game, every episode, every season is different, which is part of the allure, but it also lacks traditional connections that can leave an audience tired or indifferent. In the theatre, companies have overcome this obstacle by implementing a sporting motif. ComedySportz and Theatresports structure their performances as much like a sporting event as possible, so that audiences can cheer for one team “making their involvement seem more vital.”<sup>26</sup>

On television, the problem is addressed by focusing on the actual players. *Whose Line* began presenting a regular cast so that audiences could root for their favorite improvisers. The performers then became the stars of the show, putting improvisation second to the improvisers. The American version especially featured various running gags and inside jokes.<sup>27</sup> Yet while this would be disastrous for stage improvisers trying to build a group mind and ensemble piece, it actually was one of the more attractive aspects of the show. This has created a tension in improvisational theatre, which preaches the group over the individual. Scores of improvisers have been introduced to the star system, so they find it difficult to meld into a theatre group that is about community. While

short form can exist with stars (although groups structured this way usually fold or have high levels of turnover), long form improv is almost impossible to do with a star system, so it has even more ambivalent feelings about the player showcasing.

As *Whose Line* developed in America, the individual became the focal point, and the joke became the pinnacle. This is beneficial for a television producer trying to market a show, but it is potentially disastrous to an art form based on ensemble, and herein lies perhaps the greatest tension between television and improv. *Whose Line* seemingly suggests that to be successful on television, improv needs to be stripped of its fundamental principles and theories. Therefore scores of audience members and future improvisers were presented with a style of improv and performer that is actually completely counter to the main idea of theatrical improvisation. As Patricia Ryan Madson notes, the show has “been a mixed blessing for the improv world. Television viewers now equate improv with the fast-paced utterances of Wayne Brady and his witty cohorts. Yes, these funny actors are creating comedic sketches on the spot. However, improv as a method is used for much more than comedy. It is also a time honored way to explore dramatic situations or the nature of a character in the theatre.”<sup>28</sup> While *Whose Line* has introduced improv to millions, according to many stage improvisers, new performers and audiences need to be untaught the improv ideas that they’ve learned from the show.

### **Who’s Editing This Anyway?**

Of course in any analysis of improv on TV, one cannot ignore the fact that it’s improv on TV. The difference between live and taped improv is huge, as West notes “it’s not about improv; it’s about TV.”<sup>29</sup> This can be seen in the individual marketing of *Whose Line* as well as the focus on the end product rather than any duty to represent improvisational theatre. The elephant in the room for improv on TV though is editing. Editing is a huge part of televised improv and another source of tension. Anything can be taken out of the televised show, with games usually spliced to

represent the best snippets from the live performance. Usually a single taping of *Whose Line* will feature upwards of thirty games, with a single show consisting of only six games. Of the games that do make it on air the producers “take out about half, easily. Like when they do Scenes from a Hat it seems to go on forever, but the final product looks great because it is cut down.”<sup>30</sup> Because *Whose Line*, *Wild ‘N Out* and other shows features so many individual games that rely on quick jokes, like Scenes from a Hat and World’s Worst, it is common for them to tape twenty minutes of the performers telling one-liners and then editing the tape until only the best are presented. Obviously the performers are still improvising, but only the best makes it into our living rooms. Because of editing, and because the show was often funny, many thought it was scripted. Sherwood commented on the idea that the show was planned, “Everyone thinks we had advance knowledge of what was going on, and that we were primed by the producers and given the suggestions in advance. But that’s not the case; we were *actually* making it up.”<sup>31</sup> As Richard Vranich notes in *The Sunday Times*, “a lot of people have seen improv on television and are a bit skeptical about how real it is.”<sup>32</sup>

Due to the success of *Whose Line*, stage improvisers often face a similar mindset from audience members. Audiences assume that the group decided before the show what the plot was going to be, which jokes to tell, what bits to include, etc., when in fact everything was created onstage. The idea that stage improv has been edited is highly insulting to performers, and creates frustration with improvised television. Even for audiences that do not bring in editing assumptions, there is a different make-up and expectation. Audiences in television know that what they are seeing has been edited, while audiences in improvisational theatre know that what they are seeing has not.

What creates tension is the fact that utilizing the benefits of television—namely editing—cannot and should not be totally condemned. It would not be more beneficial for the producers to air the games that fail. It is simply important to note that what makes it to air has usually been manipulated. This doesn’t mean that the improvisers are not skilled. Many stage improvisers scoff

and cringe at the improv on screen, but any of the *Whose Line* cast would more than hold their own onstage. As Sherwood notes, “we needed to be good improvisers that could deliver right on the spot in a two-minute scene; get a bunch of laughs out. I think a lot of improvisers do long-form and stuff where the jokes are built into the characters and it develops over time; but on the *Whose Line* format you didn’t have time to do that.”<sup>33</sup> As Sherwood alludes, improvisers on television, however, aren’t truly improvising; they are being comedians. The distinction is slight (and non-existent) for the lay audience member, but it is one that is imperative in understanding some of the hostility stage improvisers have toward the show. The players on television simply have a safety net that does not exist in live performance.

The removal of the safety net, however, is what makes improv improv, and the use of editing completely dismisses *Whose Line* and other televised improv as improv in the eyes of many stage improvisers. What makes improv unique and attractive to performers and audiences is the spontaneity and ephemeral nature, the risk of total failure balanced against the possibility of seeing something beautiful being built right before your eyes. As Close said, “Audiences come to our theater because they know they aren’t simply watching a performance; they’re an intricate part of the process.”<sup>34</sup> Television removes this vital element.

Not only does editing remove the ephemeral nature and spontaneity of improvisational theatre, but there are several more layers to editing that impact the relationship. On *Whose Line* players edit themselves, knowing what will work and what won’t work on television (and knowing what will work and what won’t work with the producers). Stage improvisers edit themselves as well during performances, its part of the art form. But they don’t do it in the same way. Onstage an improviser might edit themselves from telling a funny joke because it doesn’t fit into or serve the greater good of the scene or piece; the joke and personal glory is sacrificed for the good of the piece and team, usually resulting in a better and bigger payout later (and probably for another player). On

screen the opposite is true. Players edit themselves to make sure that they are showcased; or that their joke makes it into the living rooms of millions of people. I'm not suggesting that everything is completely selfish, but as we have seen televised improv rewards the individual while stage improv rewards the group. Unlike their stage counterparts, the players on *Whose Line* and other television shows have an incentive to get themselves on air as much as possible. Many of the stars of the show went on to future success on other television programs, as product endorsers, or even as talk show hosts. For the players, pure improvisation was not their main goal; being successful and getting on screen trumped improv tenets like yes and, blocking, and not telling jokes.

A lot of the self editing of players comes from their own self interest, but a lot of that self interest comes from the producers, who have the most editing power. We've seen how producers have edited the program through selecting games and players that are easy to repeat and market. But it is easy to forget how powerful these choices are, and the far reaching impact that they have had. By showcasing the individual, the general public now believes that improvisation is a spontaneous and more frenetic form of stand up comedy. The joke is the king in improv, or so one would believe whose only exposure to improv is through network television. Onstage, improv is so highly collaborative, that if one person is telling jokes and looking out for themselves, the entire piece will collapse. It's just not how it works. The failure to recognize, by both improvisers and audience members, these core differences is part of the reason improv isn't more prevalent on television.

Audiences also have become part of the editing process, and herein lies another great source of tension. Once exposed to the particular style of *Whose Line*, they often reject other types of improvisational performance. This is an important part of the legacy and impact of *Whose Line*, which has been huge and hugely complicated. As Salinsky and White note, "First, people now know what improvised comedy is, [which] is tremendously useful. Second, people now think they know all that improvised comedy can be, and so it can be hard to persuade people that what you're

doing is anything other than *Whose Line is it Anyway?*.”<sup>35</sup> *Whose Line* has helped build an audience that has some fluency in improv, however that audience seems more likely to reject improv that doesn’t fall within the parameters of the television show. Improv that isn’t rapid fire, quick jokes, and star oriented can be jarring for audiences, and building audiences fluent in non-*Whose Line* improv has been a struggle for long form improv in particular.

Improv festivals and companies around the country are struggling with the preconceived ideas that audiences bring to improvisation. As improviser Julie Dumais said in a lead up interview to the Toronto Improv Festival, which features all types of improv performance but showcases long form improv, she “hopes the highly skilled lineup helps change pre-formed opinions audience members might have about improvisational comedy.”<sup>36</sup> The editing works both ways though. General audiences expect *Whose Line* when they go to a show, and if they don’t get it they can be dissatisfied. Stage improvisers also have difficulties dropping their preconceived notions about *Whose Line* and expect audiences to simply drop their ideas about improv and fall in love with the type of performance they are doing. They don’t always explain what it is that they are doing onstage and how it might be different from *Whose Line*, so audiences don’t have a chance to drop their preconceived notions. The failure of both groups to accept the biases of the other group is part of the reason improv isn’t seen more on television, and it is also part of the reason that stage improv hasn’t exploded in the ways many thought it would. One could make the argument that improv has been improv’s biggest challenge in reaching a higher level of success and exposure, not scripted drama. Improv’s own biases, editing practices and lack of cohesion have led to the tension between screen and stage.

Aside from preconceived ideas, the audience plays a huge role in the tension between stage and screen. Jack McBrayer, who plays Kenneth on *30 Rock*, which is not improvised despite many rumors to the contrary but features a cast and writing team trained in improvisation, sums up

feelings about improv on TV: “it’s always been interesting how it doesn’t necessarily translate to television. It’s just such a shared experience between the performers and the audience, who is right there and watching it created in the same moment.”<sup>37</sup> The audience plays such a vital role in improvisational theatre, that one of the main problems in translating it to television is capturing the energy of a live show. Amy Poehler, who was an improviser with iO Chicago and New York’s Upright Citizens Brigade before she was a television star, echoes this belief: “It is such a live feeling. There’s nothing like watching a live performance of, frankly anything.” For Poehler and others, when you put a live art on television you rob it of its ephemeral nature. When a show is live, Poehler says, “they see something that will only be seen once, and only done once. There’s something cool about that. That it’s kind of there and gone. That’s what turns people on.”<sup>38</sup>

While improvisational theatre is reliant on the community between audience and performer, television is a static art. The audience isn’t really a part of the performance, aside from the small studio audience that is dwarfed in numbers by those tuning in. The negotiation of this living art form and one that is two dimensional has been something that improvisers and producers have been trying to perfect for years but haven’t been able to do. Improvisational theatre is an experienced event, as Poehler alluded it only happens once in a specific time and place between a specific group of people. Television seeks a mass audience, removed from the event that is not able to connect or respond to the moment, but must try and create a moment and a community that ultimately is fake and unfulfilling. As David Alfred Charles notes, “captured improvisation is no longer creative *in the moment*; it is essentially an act of reproduction that can be replayed over and over again...fluid moving time is replaced with closed timelessness, generative creativity is removed from the moment of experience and adaptability and site-specific community are all but banished.”<sup>39</sup>

Yet Philip Auslander and others argue for more permeable boundaries between live and mediated performance. He argues that due to the increased use of technology in all types of

performance that there no longer can be an authentic “live” performance. The growing use of technology in performance debunks “clichés and mystifications like ‘the magic of live theatre,’ the ‘energy’ that supposedly exists between performers and events in a live event, and the ‘community’ that live performance is often said to create among performers and spectators.”<sup>40</sup> Unlike Herbert Blau, who argues for the power of live performance because the actor “is right there dying in front of your eyes,” Auslander believes that the lines between live performance and mediatized performance have been blurred together.<sup>41</sup> For Auslander, the breakdown of previous divisions between live and mediatized events, “in which live events are becoming more and more like mediatized ones, raises for me the question of whether there really are clear-cut ontological distinctions between live forms and mediatized ones.”<sup>42</sup>

Poehler and McBrayer’s comments above then can be seen as fighting the wrong fight. The issue for improv on television can no longer be defined by lacking the magic of live theatre, because as Auslander argues we live in an age of performance where technology permeates all forms of performance. A much more pertinent argument about audiences is the idea that high audience interaction and participation is a prerequisite for improv. As we have seen the concept that audiences must be actively involved in order for a performance to be improvisation is not only false, but also an incredibly difficult energy and experience to recreate on television. Most of the improv on television, and all of the improv on network television, is short form and therefore presents a style with high audience interaction. But programs like HBO’s *Curb Your Enthusiasm* demonstrate that audience participation is not required for an improvised show to flourish.

*Curb Your Enthusiasm* is patterned after what is known as a scenario play, which derives from commedia dell’arte, and was used in the rebirth of improv in the 1950s by The Compass Players. Scenario plays have a basic plot structure but no set dialogue. Larry David, “the reigning king of improv on TV,” took the scenario play idea and put it on screen (the films of Christopher

Guest likewise can be considered scenario plays).<sup>43</sup> The show has won awards and acclaim, and yet long form improv hasn't really made the leap to television, and audiences haven't sought out long form onstage. Why?

Long form improv faces several similar problems on television as it does onstage. Foremost, people simply are not very familiar with long form improv. Audiences do not know what to expect, and often times (if groups fail to explain themselves at the top of the show, which is a common problem in long form that stems in part from artistic arrogance and elitism) do not always know what is going on. Even those exposed to shows like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* still aren't seeing actual long form improv. Instead they are seeing highly skilled actors working within a set framework without dialogue. Long form improv onstage usually does not feature a set plot structure where the players simply have to fill in the dialogue. Instead, the players are coming up with everything as a group and on the spot. Due to this lack of familiarity, long form encounters other problems as well. When done well, long form can so closely resemble a scripted performance that audiences do not always believe that what they are seeing is improv. Long form improv can have complicated narrative plot structures, three dimensional characters, and pretty much look like a scripted play. When coupled with the lack of continual direct audience participation that is a cornerstone of short form (and therefore seen by audiences as an essential component of improv), audiences question if what they are seeing is actually improvised. As Smith notes, this can lead to other issues: "If there's a problem in the scene's logic, or when a set or costume piece isn't there, audiences are disappointed because they're likely to expect things to be 'perfect,' like in a rehearsed show."<sup>44</sup>

### **So Where Does that Leave Improv and TV?**

Producers (and audiences) are not only editing the content they are sending out, they are editing the content they are not sending out. As Dan Koiss said in an article about the improvised show *Thank God You're Here*, "it's funny to see someone come up with a quick-witted joke; it's

astonishing to see a team invent an entire well-structured, hilarious scene from scratch.”<sup>45</sup> So why doesn’t that happen? Improv seems highly suited for television—it’s cheap, inventive, creative, funny, fresh and fun to watch—yet it hasn’t quite worked out that way. As Kois says, “seasoned improv performers can cook up 30-minute scenes onstage that are wilder, funnier, and more emotional than most sitcoms can dream of being—and sitcom actors don’t have audiences rooting wholeheartedly for their success.”<sup>46</sup>

So what’s the problem? Why can’t improv and television tie the knot and live happily ever after? Perhaps the answer lies in the type of improv that has been featured on television. As we have seen *Whose Line* has sparked controversy and tension between television, the improv community and audiences. So is there an alternative? Can we get these two to the table to talk out their differences and see if there is a way they can not only coexist, but flourish? Like Ross and Rachel, can’t improv and television see they were meant to be together?

Television has already paved the way for improv through shows like *Whose Line*, but I believe the future of improv on TV exists in its ability to produce what Jason Mittell has labeled narrative complexity. Mittell cites *Seinfeld*, *Arrested Development* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm* as examples of programs that invert the traditional sitcom plot for narrative complexity. I would also add programs like *Lost*, *24*, *30 Rock*, *The Office* and even *The Simpson’s* to the list. While only one of these shows actually uses improvisation, they all share similarities with improvisational ideas and structures. Describing *Seinfeld*, Mittell argues that the “show revels in the mechanics of its plotting, weaving stories for each character together in a given episode through unlikely coincidence, parodic media references, and circular structure.”<sup>47</sup> If this sounds like a familiar structure, that’s because it is one that is very familiar to long form improvisation, particularly the Harold. As Halpern and Close note, connections are what make audiences tick; “a Harold audience will react as if they’ve seen a Michael Jordan slam-dunk when they watch players remembering each other’s ideas and

incorporating them back into their scene. We have witnessed standing ovations when a player pulls together eight different trains of thought in one brief monolog.”<sup>48</sup>

Mittell goes on to explain the ways in which *Seinfeld* works, in opposition to the traditional sitcom structure:

In conventional television narratives that feature A and B plots the two stories may offer thematic parallels or provide counterpoint to one another, but they rarely interact at the level of action. Complexity, especially in comedies, works against these norms by altering the relationship between multiple plotlines, creating interweaving stories that often collide and coincide. *Seinfeld* typically starts out its four plotlines separately, leaving it to the experienced viewer’s imagination as to how the stories will collide with unlikely repercussions throughout the diegesis.<sup>49</sup>

Contrast this with the Harold, which starts out with three opening scenes. It is not through individual jokes or ridiculous plot lines that a Harold generates laughs, but is in the way the players weave together the three different and unrelated story lines and connect them together in the end.<sup>50</sup> In other words, the plot is not what is solely interesting, it is the process by which it is created.

This interwoven plot structure is a staple of long form improv, and can also be seen in *Arrested Development* and *Curb Your Enthusiasm*. The former often featured up to six revolving plot lines in any given episode, while *Curb* has extended “the coincidences and collisions across episodes in a way that transforms serial narrative into elaborate inside jokes.”<sup>51</sup> Again, this is similar to improvisational theatre. Although usually done within a single performance, ideas and coincidences often find their way into unrelated scenes, creating “inside jokes” that are only funny based on the connection with an earlier event. This form of humor – created through call backs and connections – is a hallmark of long form improv. As Mittell suggests, this narrative complexity, with multiple plots and story lines bumping into one another, results “in unlikely coincidences, twists, and ironic repercussions.”<sup>52</sup>

This style of comedy is becoming increasingly more popular on television. Likewise it has been a hit with critics, with all of the shows mentioned receiving numerous accolades and awards.

This is partly due to the unique experience they provide for audiences. Much like improv, which provides a one of a kind experience by creating a show from audience suggestions in the moment and never to be seen again, these shows and this style helps to recreate that insider feeling. As Mittell argues, these shows not only allow viewers to enjoy the story lines and characters like a traditional sitcom, “but also revel in the creative mechanics involved in the producers’ abilities to pull off such complex plot structures.”<sup>53</sup>

This brings Neil Harris’s idea of “operational aesthetics” into play, which argues that pleasure is derived not solely from a machine’s output, but also in understanding how a machine works. Harris first used the idea of operational aesthetics to describe P.T. Barnum’s stunts and hoaxes. According to Harris, the audience enjoys the performance not based on what will happen, but because of how he did it. By revealing “the machinery” of the narrative, the audience derives a special relationship with the piece and gains satisfaction.<sup>54</sup> The idea of process captivating humans is an old one, after all human beings have been trying to figure out our universe, our planet, our bodies, our purpose and on and on for centuries. The idea also translates to narrative and comedy, where understanding how an episode of *Seinfeld*, for example, is put together (or an improvisational Harold performance) creates as much interest and pleasure for the audience as does the actual show itself.

The idea of operational aesthetics can most certainly be applied to improvisational theatre, and indeed probably applies more directly than it does to scripted television shows. In improv, the process is the product. As Amy Seham argues in *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*, iO – the home of the Harold and epicenter for long form improv, was founded on the idea that “the process *was* the product.”<sup>55</sup> Long form improv, according to Jimmy Carrane and Liz Allen in *Improvising Better*, “is pure process.”<sup>56</sup> Operational aesthetics is based on the idea that one needs to appreciate the process in order to fully appreciate and understand the final product. Audiences attend improvisational

theatre to see the wheels in motion, to be a part of the operation so to speak. If this concept has been successful for television viewers of scripted drama and improv onstage, why can't it apply to televised improv? As Mittell argues, "we watch these shows not just to get swept away in a realistic narrative world...but also to watch the gears at work, marveling at the craft required to pull off such narrative pyrotechnics."<sup>57</sup>

Audiences are swept away by the narrative techniques of scripted shows, which can be seen in the various online fan forums and magazine articles dissecting plot structures of shows like *Lost*. Imagine then the enjoyment and fascination that could accompany a fully improvised show. Not a show like *Whose Line*, that plays it safe with improv and relies on short games, but one that relies on the narrative complexities of long form improv. Walk into iO, The Annoyance Theatre, Upright Citizens Brigade, or a host of other long form improv theaters and you will witness completely spontaneous half hour performances that feature as much if not more narrative complexity as some of our favorite television shows.

Why hasn't this form of improv been transferred to television? Fear, uncertainty and the unknown all play a part, but it is my contention that this is where the future of improv on television lies. As Mittell argues, complex narratives based on operational aesthetics, such as those seen in improvisational theatre, is only now becoming possible on a wide scale. With the advent of DVDs, TiVo and other technology, it is possible to view episodes multiple times, and "it naturally follows that shows would take advantage of this by rewarding repeated viewings. A certain generational savvy about popular culture, in which viewers are active as both critics and participants, has been fortified by the rise of internet culture, making complex narrative structures accessible to larger groups, as opposed to small cliques of superfans. Whatever the reason, it is clear that the operational aesthetic is giving us access to new forms of TV pleasure."<sup>58</sup> This is how improv and television can not only peacefully coexist, but flourish, with improv both onscreen and onstage receiving the boost

it hasn't experienced, and pushing improv from the ever percolating next big thing, to the actual next big thing.

## Endnotes

---

<sup>1</sup> Tom Salinsky & Deborah Frances-White. *The Improv Handbook: The ultimate guide to improvising in comedy, theatre, and beyond*. (New York: Continuum, 2008) 357.

<sup>2</sup> Pat Craig. "Improv is a Great Way to Enjoy Raw Theatre." *Contra Costa Times* August 2004, 42.

<sup>3</sup> People both inside and outside of improv have had the argument that improvisation is not a stand alone art form. Scores of acting teachers and directors believe that it is just a rehearsal tool, while people like Bernie Sahlins of Second City argue that improv is best used as a tool to create written work. Del Close and Sahlins had a rather famous and life long argument about improv's ability to be a viable performance entity in and of itself.

Anthony Frost and Ralph Yarrow chart the development of improv as a training tool in *Improvisation in Drama, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition* (17-62). They examine the ways that improv has been used in actor training from Stanislavsky to Strasberg. In their history they also show the ways that improv has been relegated by many, including Strasberg especially, to only a rehearsal tool, leading to many of the assumptions common among acting teachers that improv is not a performative art in and of itself.

<sup>4</sup> Amy Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001) xvii.

<sup>5</sup> Mick Napier. *Improvise: Scene from the Inside Out*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004) 1.

<sup>6</sup> Jeanne Leep, *Theatrical Improvisation: short form, long form, and sketch based improv*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008) 24-25.

<sup>7</sup> Jill Bernard, Personal Interview. For anyone not familiar with improvisational theatre, it is typical among short form groups to wear matching uniforms as part of the sporting motif. In long form players usually dress in street clothes or more business casual, but do not usually match.

<sup>8</sup> Jeff Griggs. *Guru: My Days with Del Close*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005) 205-208.

Close argues that women try too hard to emulate male energy and comedy: "I think women try too hard to make themselves funny and don't use their intelligence. Instead they put on a funny face or a crazy voice and demean themselves to get a laugh...When women are intelligent and wear their characters like a thin veil, they can stand toe to toe with any man. Sadly, they try too hard" (206).

<sup>9</sup> Qtd. in Smith, 40.

<sup>10</sup> Salinsky and White, 406.

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Leep, 42.

<sup>12</sup> Salinsky and White, 12.

<sup>13</sup> The correlation between television and popularity is most evident with professional sports. The Chicago Cubs and Atlanta Braves are two of the most popular baseball teams in the Major Leagues. Why? Certainly not because of the Cubs record of success, but rather because they have been broadcast for years on "superstations" WGN and TBS respectively. Therefore, millions of people that don't have access to cable sports or are not in an area of a local team become Cubs or Braves fans because they are on television. The Chicago Blackhawks tell a similar tale. For decades the team had very little television exposure (in the nation's third largest market), with ownership refusing to broadcast home games. When Rocky Wirtz took over the team in 2008, the first thing he did was televise as many games as possible. Suddenly, coupled with a young and exciting team, the Blackhawks became incredibly popular in the city of

---

Chicago, leading the NHL in attendance - the Blackhawks went from nineteenth in the league in attendance in 2007-2008, to first in 2008-2009, increasing attendance by thirty percent and setting a club record for a single season.

-“NHL Posts Record Attendance for Fourth Consecutive Season.” *NHL.com*. 12 April 2009.

<http://www.nhl.com/ice/news.htm?id=417969>.

<sup>14</sup> “Jason Chin interviews Craig Cackowski: Inside the improviser’s studio.” *iO.com*. January 29, 2002.

<http://users.rcn.com/improv/www.improvolymp.com/shows/improvstudio>.

<sup>15</sup> Jill Bernard. “An Interview with Colin Mochrie.” *Colin Mochrie.com*. 6 April 2002.

<http://www.colinmochrie.com/articles.cfm?type=127>.

<sup>16</sup> Bernard.

<sup>17</sup> See Smith, xi-xii, for account of improv discrimination in higher education.

<sup>18</sup> Salinsky & White, 14.

<sup>19</sup> Notice the lack of female players in particular, which helped to foster the idea that improv is a male form.

<sup>20</sup> Griggs, 40-41.

<sup>21</sup> Salinsky & White, 14-15.

<sup>22</sup> David Wolinsky. “Colin Mochrie and Brad Sherwood.” *Chicago Decider*. 25 April 2008.

<http://Chicago.decider.com/articles/colin-mochrie-and-brad-sherwood,21/>.

<sup>23</sup> In an episode featuring the game Moving Bodies (also known as Puppets), where one improviser has to physically manipulate the players onstage to get them to move, Colin Mochrie instructed the audience member onstage to play dead. Mochrie even provided the “dead” audience member’s voice creating a totally risk free version where “they might as well have used a doll” (Salinsky & White, 15).

<sup>24</sup> Charna Halpern. *Art by Committee: a guide to advanced improvisation*. (Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 2005) 52.

<sup>25</sup> Also known as the Westminster Place Kitchen Rules, they were developed in the late 1950s by Elaine May, Ted Flicker and Del Close after a performance by the St. Louis Compass Players in the kitchen of the Crystal Palace, which is where the group performed (some accounts say that they were created in Elaine May’s kitchen). They were based on elements present in successful scenes and lacking in less successful scenes in order to achieve a set of guidelines for achieving more consistently successful improvised scenes. The rules still form the basis of improvisational theatre and are considered the only rules that cannot be broken. They are as follows, 1) agreement, 2) throw out the first thought, or make an active choice (many commonly refer to not asking questions as the second rule. This is partially correct, since an open ended question is a passive choice and puts the burden of the scene on the other player). 3) Support your partner.

<sup>26</sup> Smith, 78.

<sup>27</sup> Colin Mochrie routinely played female characters in games, for example. The players also had gags with each other. Stiles was often teased about his height, his custom shoes and his nose. Mochrie was often ribbed for being bald and Canadian. Stiles also routinely made jokes about passing kidney stones. Games such as Scenes from a Hat and Irish Drinking Song quickly turned into outlets for personal jokes and running gags.

<sup>28</sup> Patricia Ryan Madson. *Improv Wisdom: Don’t Prepare, Just Show Up*. (New York: Bell Tower, 2005) 23.

---

<sup>29</sup> Qtd. in Leep, 38.

<sup>30</sup> Leep, 41.

<sup>31</sup> Wolinsky. "Colin Mochrie and Brad Sherwood."

<sup>32</sup> Richard Vranich. "Jokes on a tightrope: What we mean by...improvisation." *The Sunday Times*. 22 August 2004.

<http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/Scotland/article471916.ece>.

<sup>33</sup> Wolinsky.

<sup>34</sup> Griggs, 16.

<sup>35</sup> Salinsky & White, 15.

<sup>36</sup> Amanda Factor. "Explosively Funny." *Torontoist.com*. 27 May 2009.

[http://torontoist.com/2009/05/explosively\\_funny.php](http://torontoist.com/2009/05/explosively_funny.php).

<sup>37</sup> Sarah Hepola. "Jack McBrayer on playing *30 Rock's* Kenneth the Page." *Salon.com*. 6 November 2008.

[http://www.salon.com/ent/tv/int/2008/11/06/jack\\_mcbrayer/index1.html](http://www.salon.com/ent/tv/int/2008/11/06/jack_mcbrayer/index1.html).

<sup>38</sup> Nathan Rabin. "Amy Poehler Interview." *The Onion AV Club*. 31 March 2008. <http://www.avclub.com/articles/amy-poehler,14220/>.

<sup>39</sup> David Alfred Charles. *The Novelty of Improvisation: Towards a Genre of Embodied Spontaneity*. Diss. Louisiana State U, 2003. 129-130.

<sup>40</sup> Philip Auslander, *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992. 2.

<sup>41</sup> Herbert Blau. *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre*. (New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982), 134.

<sup>42</sup> Philip Auslander. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. (New York: Routledge, 1999), 7.

<sup>43</sup> Miki Turner. "Being a movie star 'Works' for Larry David." *Msnbc.com*. 19 June 2009.

<http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/31372434/ns/entertainment-movies/>

<sup>44</sup> Smith, 80.

<sup>45</sup> Dan Kois. "Thank God You're Here: Putting improv on TV? Hardly." *Slate.com*. 19 April 2007.

<http://www.slate.com/id/2164647>.

<sup>46</sup> Kois.

<sup>47</sup> Jason Mittell. "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television." *The Velvet Light Trap*, 58.1 (2006), 34.

<sup>48</sup> Halpern, et al. *Truth in Comedy*, 29.

<sup>49</sup> Mittell, 34.

<sup>50</sup> Halpern, *Art by Committee*, 19.

<sup>51</sup> Mittell, 34.

<sup>52</sup> 34.

<sup>53</sup> 35.

<sup>54</sup> Neil Harris. *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).

Tom Gunning, "Crazy Machines in the Garden of Forking Paths: Mischief Gags and the Origins of American Film Comedy," Kristine Brunovska Karnick and Henry Jenkins, eds. *Classical Hollywood Comedy*. New York: Routledge, 1995, 87-105.

---

<sup>55</sup> Seham, 39.

<sup>56</sup> Jimmy Carrane and Liz Allen. *Improvising Better: A guide for the working improviser*. (Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006) 69.

<sup>57</sup> Mittell, 35.

<sup>58</sup> Jason Mittell and Steven Johnson, “Is Popular Culture Good for You?” *MIT Communications Forum*. 6 October 2005. [http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/popular\\_culture.htm](http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/popular_culture.htm).

---

## Works Cited

“About the Show.” *ABC.com: Whose Line is it Anyway?*. 1998. 5 December 2004.

<<http://abc.go.com/primetime/whoseline/about.html>>.

Avila, Robert. “Out of their heads: Bay Area improv players have a winning strategy for turning San Francisco into a world-class performance city: making it up as they go along.” *San Francisco Bay Guardian A&E*, June 2004.

Auslander, Philip. *Presence and Resistance: Postmodernism and Cultural Politics in Contemporary American Performance*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1992.

---. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. London: Routledge, 1999.

Bernard, Jill. “An Interview with Colin Mochrie.” *Colin Mochrie.com*. 6 April 2002.

<http://www.colinmochrie.com/articles.cfm?type=127>.

Blau, Herbert. *Blooded Thought: Occasions of Theatre*. New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982.

Carrane, Jimmy and Liz Allen. *Improvising better: A guide for the working improviser*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2006.

Charles, David Alfred. *The Novelty of Improvisation: Towards a Genre of Embodied Spontaneity*. Diss. Louisiana State U, 2003.

Coleman, Janet. *The Compass: the improvisational theatre that revolutionized American comedy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990.

Craig, Pat. “Improv is a Great Way to Enjoy Raw Theatre.” *Contra Costa Times* 27 August 2004: to 42.

Factor, Amanda. “Explosively Funny.” *Torontoist.com*. 27 May 2009.

Frost, Anthony, and Ralph Yarrow. *Improvisation in Drama, 2<sup>nd</sup> Edition*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007.

- 
- Griggs, Jeff. *Guru: my days with Del Close*. (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2005).
- Halpern, Charna. *Art by Committee: a guide to advanced improvisation*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 2005.
- , Del Close, and Kim Johnson. *Truth in Comedy: the manual of improvisation*. Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 1994.
- Harris, Neil. *Humbug: The Art of P.T. Barnum*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
- Hazenfield, Carol. *Acting on Impulse: The Art of Making Improv Theater*. Berkeley: Coventry Creek Press, 2002.
- Hepola, Sarah. "Jack McBrayer on playing *30 Rock*'s Kenneth the Page." *Salon.com*. 6 November 2008. [http://www.salon.com/ent/tv/int/2008/11/06/jack\\_mcbrayer/index1.html](http://www.salon.com/ent/tv/int/2008/11/06/jack_mcbrayer/index1.html).
- Hollister, Bob. "Re: Improv Questions." Email to the author. 13 November 2004.
- "Jason Chin interviews Craig Cackowski: Inside the improviser's studio." *iO.com*. 29 January 2002. <http://users.rcn.com/improv/www.improvolymp.com/shows/improvstudio>.
- Johnstone, Keith. *Improv: Improvisation and the theatre*. New York: Routledge, 1989.
- Kois, Dan. "*Thank God You're Here*: Putting improv on TV? Hardly." *Slate.com*. 19 April 2007. <http://www.slate.com/id/2164647>.
- Kozlowski, Rob. *The Art of Chicago Improv: Shortcuts to long-form improvisation*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinmann, 2002.
- Leep, Jeanne. *Theatrical Improvisation: short-form, long-form, and sketch-based improv*. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008).
- Madson, Patricia Ryan. *Improv Wisdom: Don't Prepare, Just Show Up*. (New York: Bell Tower, 2005).
- Mittell, Jason. "Narrative Complexity in Contemporary American Television." *The Velvet Light Trap*, 58.1 (2006).

---

--- and Steven Johnson, "Is Popular Culture Good for You?" *MIT Communications Forum*. 6 October 2005. [http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/popular\\_culture.htm](http://web.mit.edu/comm-forum/forums/popular_culture.htm).

Napier, Mick. *Improvise: Scene from the inside out*. Portsmouth, NH: Heinemann, 2004.

"NHL Posts Record Attendance for Fourth Consecutive Season." *NHL.com*. 12 April 2009. <http://www.nhl.com/ice/news.htm?id=417969>.

Rabin, Nathan. "Amy Poehler Interview." *The Onion AV Club*. 31 March 2008. <http://www.avclub.com/articles/amy-poehler,14220/>.

Salinsky, Tom, and Deborah Frances-White. *The Improv Handbook: The ultimate guide to improvising in comedy and beyond*. (New York: Continuum, 2008).

Seham, Amy. *Whose improv is it anyway?: beyond second city*. Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001.

Smith, Tom. *The Other Blocking: teaching and performing improvisation*. (Dubuque, IA: Kendall Hunt, 2009).

Sweeney, John, and The Brave New Workshop. *Innovation at the Speed of Laughter: 8 secrets to world class idea generation*. Expert Publishing, Inc., 2004.

Sweet, Jeffery. *Something Wonderful Right Away: An oral history of The Second City and The Compass Players*. New York: Avon Books, 1978.

Turner, Miki. "Being a movie star 'Works' for Larry David." *Msnbc.com*. 19 June 2009.

Vranch, Richard. "Jokes on a tightrope: What we mean by...improvisation." *The Sunday Times*. 22 August 2004. <http://www.timesonline.co.uk/tol/news/uk/Scotland/article471916.ece>.

Wolinsky, David. "Colin Mochrie and Brad Sherwood." *Chicago Decider*. 25 April 2008. <http://Chicago.decider.com/articles/colin-mochrie-and-brad-sherwood,21/>.