

The Harold at iO: Twenty-Five Years Later
By Matt Fotis

“Life is a slow Harold.”¹ – Del Close

“This is better than sex!”² – Jim Belushi after performing a Harold

“There is nothing sexier than a perfectly executed textbook Harold.”³ – Rachel Mason, iO Training Center Director

Improvisational performance, often valued as either “a contributory influence for a text-centered style of performance, or as an aberrant (and inferior) variation of this exemplar model,”⁴ is increasingly winning recognition as a legitimate genre of theatrical performance. This transformation seems to be significantly indebted to the creation of an improv long form structure known as “the Harold.” First developed in the late 1960’s by the San Francisco group the Committee, workshopped by Del Close and The Second City in the 1970’s, and transformed into a repeatable structure by Close and Charna Halpern at ImprovOlympic (now iO)⁵ in the 1980’s, the Harold reinvented the possibilities of what could be done with improv on stage. Harold provided a framework within which improvisers could create spontaneous performances worthy of putting before an audience. In doing so, the Harold gave birth to long form improvisational theatre and sparked a twenty five year explosion of improv as a legitimate genre of theatrical performance, “percolating near the edge of being the next big thing.”⁶ iO became the home of the Harold, sparking what Playground Theatre co-founder Rob Kozlowski has deemed the ImprovOlympic Revolution: “the idea of long-form improvisation as an entire artistic movement in Chicago would

¹ Charna Halpern, *Art by Committee* (Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 2005), 126.

² Charna Halpern, Del Close and Kim “Howard” Johnson, *Truth in Comedy* (Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 1994), 19.

³ Rachel Mason, Personal Interview, November 26, 2008.

⁴ David Alfred Charles, *The Novelty of Improvisation*, (PhD diss., Louisiana State University, 2003), 2.

⁵ The International Olympic Committee threatened legal action over the use of the name “Improv Olympic” and the name was subsequently changed to “iO.”

⁶ Pat Craig, “Improv is a Great Way to Enjoy Raw Theatre,” *Contra Costa Times*, 27 August 2004: 42.

not have happened if not for ImprovOlympic. When it came to people's perceptions of what improv could be, ImprovOlympic changed everything."⁷

Second City producer and co-founder Bernard Sahlins, representing the "pre-Harold" perception, which he and others still firmly support, argues that improv is a "technique, a stage tool like mime or fencing."⁸ Although Sahlins's colleague Del Close disagreed, asserting that improv "was indeed an art form, deserving to be elevated to presentational status," the Second City model manifested Sahlins's view that improvisation was primarily a tool or technique and that improv "elevated to a form of presentation failed most of the time, that any scene could benefit from editing, concision, and shaping."⁹ The Harold however, and its successful employment by iO, ultimately gave Close the ammunition to dispute Sahlins. Despite iO's success, Sahlins still sees improv mainly as a tool. This stubborn viewpoint actually helped form iO's ideology. According to Amy Seham's *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*, iO "first defined itself in opposition to Second City, which used an improvisational process primarily as a means of developing a comedy *product*. For ImprovOlympic, the process *was* the product."¹⁰ Transformation of improv wrought by the development of the Harold and iO has been so influential that Kozlowski asserted that it was "the most important theatrical movement in Chicago in thirty years."¹¹ Providing support for Del Close's lifelong quest and deathbed assertion that "improv IS an art form."¹²

But has improvisational theatre moved beyond Harold? Some would argue that since the Harold, improv has been a relatively stagnant form. Prior to Harold improv was ever changing and evolving. Deborah Frances-White however, asserts that for the past twenty five years "Improvisers have mainly spent their time arguing over which work done between the fifties and seventies is the

⁷ Rob Kozlowski, *The Art of Chicago Improv*, (Portsmouth: Heinemann, 2002), 24.

⁸ Bernard Sahlins, *Days and Nights at the Second City* (Chicago: Ivan R. Dee, 2001), 48.

⁹ Sahlins, 48.

¹⁰ Amy Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 39.

¹¹ Kozlowski, 24.

¹² Kim "Howard" Johnson, *The Funniest One in the Room*, (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008), 356.

best, and re-creating it without much progress. Most groups still present some version of...the Harold, rarely deviating...in any significant way. They may find a different way of beginning the Harold...but essentially the form is the same and the quality of the work has not improved from all accounts.”¹³ Therefore this study will investigate how extensive and significant the Harold is for iO company members working today. Twenty five years after its inception, is Harold still the main driving force behind the company and their improvisation? Has this highly ephemeral and risky form become stagnant?

The Harold is widely regarded as the foundation of long form improv. Therefore studying its current use and significance is extremely important. By examining the Harold at iO, the original home of the Harold, a better understanding of current improvisational practice and theory will emerge. Since the Harold is still in use, studying its current form twenty five years after its inception is a significant step in understanding the current state of improvisational theatre. Since the Harold and iO are so fundamental to long form improv, one cannot understand the current state of improv without first understanding iO and the Harold. This study will help to further improv’s acceptance as a legitimate genre of theatrical performance, as well as provide a possible roadmap for the future of improvisational theatre. Furthermore, this study will provide a greater understanding of the Harold as originally conceived and as it exists today.

With improv’s recent boom and the Harold’s recognized influential role in creating that explosion, there is surprisingly little literature available on the Harold, or iO. Several training manuals aimed at improvisational actors provide a superficial discussion of the Harold and how to perform it, but do not provide much in the way of theory or critical analysis.¹⁴ Rob Kozlowski’s *The Art of Chicago Improv* provides a starting point for investigating the Harold and iO, but does

¹³ Tom Salinsky and Deborah Frances-White, *The Improv Handbook* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 31.

¹⁴ *Truth in Comedy* by Charna Halpern, Del Close and Kim “Howard” Johnson is considered the seminal text for learning how to perform a Harold. Halpern’s 2005 sequel *Art by Committee* further explores the Harold, but again is geared toward the performer.

not go deep enough as the purpose of the book is to give an overall view of Chicago improv in broad strokes rather than a finite examination of iO and the Harold. Furthermore Kozlowski's study is now several years old and does not capture improv's transformation over the last five plus years. Jeanne Leep's *Theatrical Improvisation* also gives the Harold a brief study, but is more concerned with providing an overview of the main genres of improvisation. Amy Seham's *Whose Improv is it Anyway?* provides a nice synopsis of the development of iO, but again does not provide much in terms of current work. Two recent biographical studies of Del Close, Jeff Griggs' *Guru* and Kim "Howard" Johnson's *The Funniest One in the Room*, have helped add to the conversation, but obviously focus more on Close and his life rather than specifically on the Harold or iO.

In order to fully understand how extensive and significant the Harold is for iO Chicago¹⁵ today, I will be dividing the study into three sections. Section one will briefly look at the Harold in its original form, as described in *Truth in Comedy*. Section two will focus on the Harold at iO today. This section will look at how the Harold is used at iO, focusing on the training center and a typical iO Harold evening of performances. Section three will focus on groups that have moved beyond the Harold, centering mainly on the improv duo TJ & Dave. To properly analyze Harold's current impact and prevalence on improvisational theatre at iO, I will be supplementing sources such as Leep's book and improv manuals by conducting interviews with graduates of iO's training school and current iO performers, as well as attending iO's improvisational performances.¹⁶

THE ORIGINAL HAROLD

For Del Close "Harold began as a way to get all of the professional improvisers in The Committee on-stage improvising all at the same time... 'I wanted to do a show where we could

¹⁵ iO Chicago is the original iO. iO West in Los Angeles was founded in 1997 and was featured on MTV's *Real World XX*. iO is currently working with ComedyWorx of Raleigh, NC to create an iO South.

¹⁶ See Appendix A for questions.

create *art by committee*.’’¹⁷ It would take him nearly twenty years to mold the Harold into a repeatable and reliable form. The structure came about as Close was looking to expand his work with theme-based types of long form improv that emerged while he was with the St. Louis Compass Players in the late 1950’s. Always a firm believer in improv’s legitimacy as an independent art form, Close, upon his relocation to San Francisco in the early 1960’s after his first of several partings with Second City, began working with The Committee to explore and develop a new form of improv based on themes. In the days of The Committee, the Harold was still in a state of flux, an evolving entity and was used mainly as a tool to create short scripted sketches. There was no set form for the Harold, rather Close envisioned it “as a sonata form. Themes would be established, a group of characters would return again and again in scenes and then the scenes would work off one another. Different characters would appear in one another’s environments. Themes and patterns would emerge and a whole piece would appear in front of the audience’s eyes.’’¹⁸ When Close returned to Chicago and Second City in 1970 he brought the Harold with him and began teaching it in workshops and classes.

While Close kept tinkering with the form through workshops, it was not until he teamed up with Charna Halpern and ImprovOlympic in 1983 that the current Harold was born. Through his workshops Close had come closer to developing an independent long form structure capable of producing a somewhat reliable means for performance, but there was still something missing. While at times brilliant, the form remained too inconsistent. When Close showed Halpern the Harold, which she said was “a little too large and chaotic for the stage,’’¹⁹ she suggested adding her own game Time Dash to the structure. Time Dash is a game that incorporates a three part scene where situations occur and are seen during various spans of time. Along with the insertion of a few

¹⁷ Charna Halpern, *Art by Committee*, (Colorado Springs: Meriwether Publishing, 2005), 7.

¹⁸ Kozlowski, 28.

¹⁹ Halpern, et al., *Truth in Comedy*, 3.

other short games and structures the iO Harold was born. Halpern's added structure gave the Harold a guide map, adding consistency by providing a sort of configuration that could be replicated as opposed to the almost pure chance structure of the early Harold.

A traditional iO Harold is structured much like an episode of *Seinfeld*. Three disparate stories ultimately converge causing the humor to arise from the connections and situations rather than jokes. A traditional iO Harold begins with an opening where the troupe solicits a suggestion or theme from the audience, usually something rather generic like the theme "color" or a word like "duck." The players then do a warm up or opening, which can be almost anything from a completely physical exploration to a simple word association. Ideas, attitudes, phrases, characters and anything else that strikes a performer from the opening is used to explore the various facets of the theme and provide ideas for the improvisers. At some point in the opening, two improvisers step out and begin a scene (1A) inspired by the opening. This is followed by two more scenes (1B, 1C) that also explore the theme but are completely unrelated to 1A or to each other. A group game similar in format to the opener follows, which brings together all of the players to refocus and further explore the theme. The first three scenes (1A, 1B, 1C) return for a second beat, but do not necessarily follow a linear or thematic structure. For example, 1A might be about two rich people. 2A might be about those same two rich people at another point in time, or it might be about the servants that clean their boat. A second group game follows, and then the three scenes return for a final exploration—the third beat, in which connections between the scenes begin to emerge, characters begin to inhabit other environments and the stories begin to come together. The final three scenes culminate "in a finale that incorporates the theme and as many elements from the scenes and games as possible."²⁰ In other words, three completely separate stories or themes all derived from a simple audience suggestion morph over time and somehow come together in the

²⁰ Halpern, et al. *Truth in Comedy*, 19.

end. For Close, the ideal Harold would be “fiercely intelligent, terribly funny and containing nothing whatsoever in terms of plot.”²¹

THE HAROLD AT iO TODAY

Thanks to the Harold iO has become the epicenter of long form improv. Over the past twenty five years the theatre has grown exponentially in terms of size, scope and influence. A quick glance at the weekly show schedule, training center curriculum, and iO marketing reveals that the Harold is still the predominant form at iO. But the Harold itself has changed, and not all teams strictly perform traditional Harolds. As Adal Rifai of iO’s Harold team Hunter Family Crest says “It’s fantastic to do a strict Harold, but more fun for me when you put your own touches on it.”²² Today’s Harold is a much more loosely structured version, and some iO performers and teams have adapted the Harold or moved beyond the structure. Halpern commented on the evolution of the Harold, saying “It’s like learning the notes to the musical scale – you don’t have to sing the same song all the time.”²³ Since improvisational performances are so ephemeral and ever changing, the best way to analyze the role of the Harold at iO today is through the iO training center, and by looking at a typical evening of iO Harold teams.



The iO training center has become the premiere improvisational training grounds in the country, attracting students from all over the world.²⁴ The faculty is made up of the preeminent iO improvisers, all of whom are hand selected by Halpern.²⁵ With roughly 400-500 students at any one time, the curriculum consists of six levels of classes, with each level consisting of an eight week

²¹ Salinsky and White, 11.

²² Adal Rifai, Personal Interview, November 20, 2008.

²³ Halpern, *Art by Committee*, 15.

²⁴ When I was a student at the iO Summer Intensive in 2001, I was the only Chicagoan in the class of 20. Students were from all over the country, and two students had moved from abroad (Denmark) specifically to study at iO.

²⁵ Before Del Close passed away in 1999 all instructors were trained by Close. Since he passed, Halpern is more selective in choosing instructors, and often makes them shadow her own class before allowing them to teach on their own.

block of classes. Aside from classes, students must also regularly attend shows. Rachel Mason, iO Training Center Director, explains that “There are only so many ways we can verbalize what happens in long form. You have to see it on its feet.”²⁶ In class, the Harold “is hurled at them in Level 1... and then broken down more slowly in Levels 2-5B.”²⁷ Levels one through three focus on basic improvisational skills to build up students’ “improv muscle.” Level four is where the Harold is fully introduced and students begin regularly performing full Harolds. Students in level five begin to study and play with other long forms such as deconstruction, montage and LaRonde.²⁸ In 5B²⁹ students must develop two of their own “Harold inspired forms”³⁰ and perform them on the iO stage. Mason says, “Even Del realized that there was something beyond the Harold. We learn the rules to break them. The Harold is the basis of everything but the last step is to fuck with the form.”³¹

As the curriculum suggests, the Harold sits at the core of the training. Everything done in levels 1-3 is building toward Harold, level 4 focuses specifically on the Harold, and level 5 and 5B focus on building and moving beyond the Harold. Because the Harold requires strong improv skills in order to be successful, it is an excellent way to teach the basics of long form improv. As former iO Training Center Director Jason Chin says “The Harold is a codified way to teach long form. You get abstract group work, two person relationship scenes, connections, hopefully metaphors.” Students must master the form, but are then encouraged to move beyond the form. Chin likes to think of the Harold in terms of languages, “Harold is Latin and other forms are the Romance

²⁶ Mason, Personal Interview.

²⁷ Mason, Personal Interview.

²⁸ These forms along with several other Harold derived long form structures are fully explained in Kozlowski’s *The Art of Chicago Improv*.

²⁹ It is called Level 5B because the curriculum used to be set up as Level 1-5 and then “Del.” But after Close passed away and Noah Gregoropoulos took over, he was asked if the level should be called Noah or Level 6. He said, ‘No. Del didn’t have a number and nobody is higher or better than Del. Let’s call it 5B and there will never be class higher than 5.’”

³⁰ Mason, Personal Interview.

³¹ David Patton, *The Pedagogy and Ethics of Improvisation Using the Harold*, (MFA Thesis, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2007), 41.

languages. If you learn Harold well, all of the other forms are easy.”³² iO graduate Becky Duncan described her Harold education as “a starting place you damn well better know.”³³ Current iO student Nick Mikula echoed her sentiments, adding “what I gathered was that once you understand the rules of the Harold, call backs, games, et cetera, it’s up to you to figure out how to use those to best tell your story and explore your theme. So the Harold is just figuring out the tools and from there you improvise.”³⁴

The training center’s approach to the Harold spills over into performance. Because the Harold requires so many fundamental improv skills, many performance teams simply adjust the Harold to meet their needs. There are currently twenty-eight active Harold teams, several House teams, and special groups (such as TJ & Dave, further explored in section three) that perform on a semi-rotating schedule in “shows.” In the iO hierarchy House team is the pinnacle, with those teams given more freedom to stray from the Harold by performing in “shows” instead of Harolds. Shows usually have a limited run, or are an established group that performs on a regular basis like TJ & Dave, or The Armando Diaz Theatrical Experience and Hootenanny, which is the longest running show in iO history. The majority of performances though are by Harold teams in the downstairs mainstage cabaret theatre (non-Harold teams, student groups and “shows” perform upstairs in The Del Close Theatre). While it’s a slight distinction, it is telling that the Harold teams perform on the mainstage, while teams and groups that do not follow Harold are relegated to the theatre’s second stage. A typical evening consists of about four or five Harold teams performing in each of iO’s two theatres. The Harold lineup usually moves from a very young team (both in terms of players and time together) that performs a rather strict Harold, to a more established team that performs a modified Harold, or as Halpern likes to say a Harold where “we’ve taken off the training

³² Patton, 41.

³³ Becky Duncan, Personal Interview, 22 Nov 2008.

³⁴ Personal Interview, 22 Nov 2008.

wheels.”³⁵ Let’s briefly look at one such mainstage Harold line-up featuring Whiskey Rebellion, Troy and Mike Helicopter.

Obviously due to improv’s very nature each performance can be wildly different. So rather than focusing on too many particulars about the actual performances, I will be focusing on the Harold structure employed by each team, which is fairly consistent night to night. The most inexperienced team usually starts off the evening, in this case Whiskey Rebellion. First appearing in July 2007, Whiskey Rebellion has, according to improviser Ben Bowman, “dedicated itself to hitting the Harold with a hardhat mentality... We are on stage to serve the Harold and each other.”³⁶ As a young team, Whiskey Rebellion is encouraged to perform very close to the original Harold structure. The iO belief is that you must first master the Harold before moving on to different and more complex forms, as iO alum Kenny Metroff says, “it’s like learning algebra before calculus.”³⁷ In their performance inspired by the suggestion “hamster,” the group followed very closely to the original Harold structure. One could follow along with a checklist and easily tick off the opener, 1A, 1B, 1C and the games all the way through to the end. They have a slight variation on the structure by using the third beat as a series of quick hitting tag-out scenes, rather than a strict 3A, 3B, 3C format. As Nick Hausman explains their ending run “aims to jumble all of the proceeding scenes together and tie together characters and themes.”³⁸ While this is a change from the original Harold, it is a minor and fairly typical variation, and doesn’t dramatically change the Harold structure.

This slight variation grew out of the group’s performances and growth together. Initially the group, like all new and young groups, performed traditional Harolds. After several months and a new coach, the team started to play with the form slightly. Rather than chronological beats the team

³⁵ Salinsky & White, 354.

³⁶ Ben Bowman, Personal Interview, December 1, 2008.

³⁷ Kenny Metroff, Personal Interview, December 3, 2008.

³⁸ Nick Hausman, Personal Interview, December 2, 2008.

started playing more with themes, and eventually added the running end in the third beat. It's telling that the variations they made were very slight, and all within the Harold structure. Part of this devotion to the Harold comes from iO's philosophy, but it is also due to the fact that in order to create new and different structures players need to be very comfortable and familiar with one another. The Harold structure provides a framework for players to follow, so it isn't necessary for teams to have a wealth of experience playing together. Theoretically any group of iO trained improvisers can take the stage together and execute a Harold. That same group would run into more difficulties without the safety and structure Harold provides. If one has a map it is easier to get from point A to point B even without any familiarity at all with the area. Without the map the journey can be much more tortuous, although as we shall see sometimes more rewarding. Bowman also thinks it's important for the team to evolve together before changing the form. "You have to stay with the classic structure early on so all the members are on the same page. But as you gain trust, you're more willing to break the form. As long as the entire team is there to support and follow one another, you can get very brave. That's really the best thing a team can do - if one player makes a move, it might seem weird. If nine players do it, it seems 'correct.'"³⁹

Troy, a slightly more experienced team had a bit more variation in their structure. While it was still readily apparent where they were in the Harold form, they added on a few twists. This is partly due to the group's makeup. Several members trained not only at iO, but also at The Annoyance Theatre. This is a very common trend as many iO improvisers have studied at iO, Second City and The Annoyance. As Troy improviser Natalie Kossar says, "a lot of people on our team come from The Annoyance school of improv, where basically people are told to chuck rules out of the window."⁴⁰ This cross-pollination of theories has helped lead to the Harold's evolution. For example, rather than the meta-style opening of the traditional Harold where the group freely

³⁹ Bowman, Personal Interview.

⁴⁰ Natalie Kossar, Personal Interview, December 1, 2008.

flows from idea to idea through movement, word associations, etc., Troy implements a group scene as an opener that intertwines monologues. While this is not a radical shift from the traditional Harold, it does help show the ways in which groups are using the Harold for their own purposes, rather than simply playing the form. As Kossar explains “Our team functions better as a whole off of a group scene, where we can remember characters and verbal patterns...[and] is a lot easier for us to deal with and bring back into a second or third beat.”⁴¹ Rather than following form, they have adapted the Harold to suit their strengths. This falls in line with the iO training philosophy, as iO instructor Bill Arnett tells his classes “understand the form, but don’t be a slave to it.”⁴² While the opening variation added new dimensions to the piece, Troy still essentially followed the Harold structure. As Whiskey Rebellion and Troy demonstrate twenty five years later Harold is alive and well, but players and teams are adapting the form, rather than adapting *to* the form.

Part of the reason that Troy and Whiskey Rebellion stay so close to the original Harold structure is due to their experience level. Teams with limited experience on the iO stage are generally held on a rather tight leash. They are expected to master the Harold before they can begin truly altering the structure. Each team has a coach, usually one of the iO instructors or a very seasoned iO veteran performer. The coach works with the team to help each team find their own voice and style. Like the training center curriculum, the coach wants the team to master the Harold first, before altering the structure to suit their talents and vision. The alterations, as we have seen, are usually within the Harold structure rather than any sort of radical departure. The coach not only works with the team in rehearsals, but also gives them immediate post show notes. Halpern also is an active presence at the theatre, and teams that do not make the grade or can’t master the Harold often find themselves out of the iO rotation. With several sets of eyes monitoring each performance, teams are encouraged to stick to the Harold. With so many new improvisers being

⁴¹ Kossar, Personal Interview.

⁴² Cal DeBruyne, Personal Interview, November 24, 2008.

trained there is a long line of performers waiting and willing to fill in the gap. The added pressure keeps younger teams from straying too far from the Harold, lest they find themselves out on the street. As Kossar notes, “at iO they’re kind of strict at wanting people to perform the almighty Harold at all times - so there’s not too much room to mess with it without getting yelled at by the higher-ups.”⁴³ However, once teams master the form they are allowed to adapt the Harold.

Mike Helicopter, who rounded out the evening, is an example of a team allowed to play with the Harold. As the most experienced Harold team of the evening they not only get the opportunity to close the show, but they also are allowed more freedom in their structure. They utilize what performer Gianni Cutri calls “source scenes.” These scenes are two person scenes, the backbone of the Harold, that help establish themes, ideas, etc. Once the source scene has ended, the group then does a mini LaRonde. So after the first scene between characters A and B, “another player can come in and take one of those characters to a different place. So, if character A in the first scene references his strict religious upbringing as an aside, then character C can come in and show an example of that. From there, Character D can come in and swap out Character C to add more detail about A’s upbringing, or alternatively, swap out A to learn more about/add to Character C. And on and on until we spiral out and run out of things.”⁴⁴ After the first source scene has run its course, they play a group scene, followed by another source scene, and then repeat the process one more time. In total, there will be three source scenes by the end of the performance.

While this structure deviates from the original Harold, it follows a similar structure. Essentially Mike Helicopter still follows the three beats of the Harold, but do not faithfully stick to the 1A, 1B, 1C structure. Scenes and themes are more freely integrated and reincorporated, so that the performance does not always go A, B, C. Rather they explore the A beat with one source scene, the B beat with the second, and the C beat with the third. Like a traditional Harold, Mike

⁴³ Kossar, Personal Interview.

⁴⁴ Gianni Cutri, Personal Interview, December 4, 2008.

Helicopter's structure also begins reincorporating ideas, themes and characters. By the third source scene beat (C), characters and themes from the first two source scene beats (A, B) begin to inhabit the stage and inform the work. For instance, in a recent performance the first source scene (A) featured a sexually repressed and conservative husband dealing with his sexually frustrated wife. The second source scene (B) featured a young woman who had been impregnated at a local night club. By the third source scene (C) the husband from the first beat (A) and the theme from the second beat (B) were fully incorporated into the third beat, ultimately resulting in the repressed husband giving birth to a turkey sandwich after he had the audacity to engage in oral sex with his wife.

For Mike Helicopter the Harold is just a roadmap. As a more experienced team they are given more freedom to play with the structure, while of course still sticking in a macro sense to the Harold. The result is simply a reorganization of the scenic beats and themes, and the incorporation of the character exploring form LaRonde. Due to their variations, performers also more freely play various characters. With younger teams like Troy and Whiskey Rebellion, performers generally stick to one or two distinct characters that they play throughout the Harold. With Mike Helicopter, performers play numerous roles. This partly is due to the fact that they have many more than the standard nine scenic beats of the Harold. It's also reflective of the performers increased skill and familiarity with one another. Furthermore, it's a direct result of the freedom they have within the Harold structure. There isn't any fear of "messing up" the sequence or confusing the audience, so players are allowed more creative freedom.

Part of what makes the original Harold so brilliant is that it forces performers to practice good improv skills in order for it to be successful. Finding relationships and patterns, yes and-ing, supporting your partner, developing scenes, reincorporating ideas and creating a group mind are all at the heart of long form improv, and essential in a Harold. Therefore it has been difficult to move

completely beyond the Harold since so much of iO's improv philosophy is embedded in the Harold. Other forms have emerged, such as Mike Helicopter's source scene format, with new forms being created every eight weeks by level 5b students, but most are simply a variation on the Harold. Arena League Football is essentially the same game played by the NFL, just with a shorter field and no sidelines. So too is the modern Harold at iO simply an extension of the original Harold with a few twists. There are a few notable exceptions to this, as we shall see, but the Harold is still the dominant form of performance at iO.

BEYOND HAROLD

While the Harold (and thousands of derivative forms) still predominates the iO stage (and iO's advertising campaign), there are notable exceptions. With the creation of The Del Close Theater in 1999, iO suddenly found themselves with the performance space and time slots to further experiment with the form. The upstairs theater is home to several notable groups, all of whom break from the traditional Harold. As we have seen, iO actively promotes exploration and innovation in their training. While most of this focuses on expanding the Harold into new and different forms, several of the more advanced teams work completely outside of the Harold structure. That said, there is virtually nothing done at iO that breaks from the theoretical tenets of the Harold, i.e. reincorporation of ideas, relationship based scenes, creating a group mind.

The Armando Diaz Theatrical Experience and Hootenanny, The Deltones, Whirled News Tonight, and The Improvised Shakespeare Company all break the Harold form. Armando features a revolving who's who of Chicago improvisers that use personal narrative monologues to inspire and influence scenic improvisation. *Chicago Reader* critic Jack Helbig commented after a show "Every time I think nothing new can be done with long-form improvisation, a show comes along to remind me just how inspired and entertaining pure improv can be when performed by the right

people in the right circumstances.”⁴⁵ The Deltones, the only group listed to perform on the mainstage, pick up where famed iO house team Baby Wants Candy left off by completely improvising a new Broadway style musical every show. Whirled News Tonight’s form Newspeak features an improvised take on current events. Audience members are led to a table with several news publications. They can then cut out any article or snippet that they want and tack it onto a bulletin board. During the show the cast then randomly chooses articles on which to base their improvisation. The Improvised Shakespeare Company asks the audience for a title for a play that has yet to be written, and then creates a fully improvised two-act play in Elizabethan style. *Chicago Tribune* critic Kerry Reid noted that the mixture of Shakespeare and improv results in “a delightful evening that celebrates the best of both iambics and long-form improv.”⁴⁶ Patrick Sharbaugh of the *Charleston City Paper* went even further saying Improvised Shakespeare Company is “one of the funniest, most amazing things I’ve ever seen.”⁴⁷

Another team that totally breaks the Harold form is TJ & Dave. Debuting in 2002, and performing on a semi-regular basis at the Barrow Street Theater in New York since 2006, the duo has become one of iO’s most popular and influential groups. The *Chicago Reader* named them the best improv group of 2008, calling them the “gold standard for group improv.”⁴⁸ *Time Out New York* called TJ & Dave “The best 50 minutes of improv comedy that we’ve ever seen.”⁴⁹ Unlike the typical Harold team they don’t solicit any audience suggestions. They welcome long pauses and silence. They aren’t afraid to take it slow. There are only two performers as opposed to the regular six to ten on most Harold teams. They play multiple characters, often times several within the same scene. They concern themselves with plot and story much more so than a typical Harold, which can

⁴⁵ Jack Helbig, “The Armando Diaz Experience, Theatrical Movement & Hootenanny” *Chicago Reader*, April 28, 1995.

⁴⁶ Kerry Reid, “Improvised Shakespeare,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 13, 2006.

⁴⁷ Patrick Sharbaugh, “Improvised Shakespeare,” *Charleston City Paper Online*, June 6, 2006.

⁴⁸ Ryan Hubbard, “Best of Chicago 2008: Best Improv Group,” *Chicago Reader*, July 1, 2008.

⁴⁹ *Time Out New York*. <http://chicago.ioimprov.com/io/shows/1>

be successfully done without any plot elements at all. Essentially they break most of the Harold's structural elements, while staying true to the scenic relationships that are the base of Harold and all long form improv.

TJ & Dave consists of iO and Second City alumni TJ Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi. They begin every show with the Ike Reilly Assassination song "I Don't Want What You Got (Goin' On)." As the song blares they calmly appear onstage. Jagodowski then begins scanning the audience, making eye contact with whomever he can. Pasquesi and Jagodowski then turn to look at each other. Eventually one of them says something and the improvisation goes from there. The regular opening of a Harold usually starts with the team soliciting an audience suggestion. They then use monologues, group movement, word association, or some other game to explore the suggestion and generate ideas. The Harold opening is usually full of energy and can be rather frenetic. TJ & Dave take it slow, relying on their connection and improv skills, jumping right into the action rather than building an opening full of ideas to later pull from. The duo simply takes the stage and waits for inspiration or a scene to organically emerge. Once it does, "a madcap, multi-character, three act comedy is written, cast, opened and closed before our very eyes. It was one of the funniest little plays no one will ever see again."⁵⁰

Furthermore, rather than following the 1A, 1B, 1C three beat structure of the Harold, TJ & Dave do not follow a set form. They let the characters, environment and story move the action forward. By not locking in to the set structure of the Harold, they allow themselves the freedom to let anything happen. Leaving the Harold structure behind tends to lead to a more plot/story driven performance. By following a more linear plot driven structure and not using the more meta-style aspects of improv, i.e. an opener and group games, TJ & Dave's performances more closely resemble a scripted play. It's telling that most critics refer to TJ & Dave's shows as "plays." For

⁵⁰ John Del Signore, "Opinionist: TJ & Dave," *Gothamist.com*, February 18, 2007.

example, Anne Ford of *The Reader*, a Chicago publication that is highly familiar with improv and has been publishing reviews of iO for over twenty years, says that after TJ & Dave have begun “a *play blossoms*, with both men playing pedestrian characters (impatient businessman, barista) as well as outlandish ones (pet groomer cum drug-dealer, ‘half-retarded’ mailroom clerk).”⁵¹ Likewise the Chicago Tribune recently previewed an upcoming performance thusly: “The long-form, 45-minute *improv play* by comics TJ Jagodowski and Dave Pasquesi is still considered one of the best improv shows in the country.”⁵²

In the improv world eschewing audience interaction is almost unheard of and nearly sacrilegious. Many view the audience suggestion as essential for not only starting the performance, but to convince the audience that everything is in fact improvised. TJ & Dave don’t concern themselves with that. They do not rely on traditional structures or improv tricks that predominate so many improvisational performances. “Their onstage chemistry, comic instincts and never-miss-a-beat improvisation abilities, rather than audience suggestions, keep the evening flowing.”⁵³ They simply state that everything is made up and go from there. Because the scenes emerge so seamlessly, they use more plot/story than most improv, and because Pasquesi and Jagodowski don’t take audience suggestions, they’re sometimes accused of writing their material ahead of time. “‘We take it as a wonderful compliment,’ Pasquesi says.”⁵⁴ Steven McElroy of *The New York Times* noted that “A latecomer could sit through an entire performance by this duo without realizing that there is no script.”⁵⁵ *The New York Post* similarly was struck by the group’s ability: “Most new plays go through endless rewrites, developments, workshops, more rewrites and rehearsals. And yet, most new plays aren’t even good - or at least not as good as the one made up on the spot the other night

⁵¹ Anne Ford, “Life Without a Script: How funnyman TJ Jagodowski fell into improv—and the mysterious affliction that keeps him from leaving it.” *Chicago Reader*, June 5, 2008. (Emphasis added.)

⁵² Doug George, “Cheer up at 5 funny fall shows,” *Chicago Tribune*, October 3, 2008. (Emphasis added.)

⁵³ Steven McElroy, “‘TJ & Dave’ and ‘Two Men Talking.’” *The New York Times*, March 28, 2008.

⁵⁴ Ford, “Life Without a Script.”

⁵⁵ McElroy, “‘TJ & Dave’ and ‘Two Men Talking.’”

by the eponymous stars of ‘TJ & Dave.’”⁵⁶ Quite simply TJ & Dave is “an hour of improv that, subverting the art form’s record of wild inconsistency, is brilliant almost every time.”⁵⁷ Obviously simply foregoing an audience suggestion does not make good improv, but it is indicative of TJ & Dave’s approach. As highly skilled and experienced improvisers they do not need to rely on the traditional crutches of improv and the Harold. Rather they simply let their experience, talent and years of working together take over. Improviser Cal DeBruyne sums it up best: “It’s ridiculous how good they are. Like a guitar player watching Stevie Ray Vaughn play, you know you’ll never be as good as him, you’re a little bit jealous, but happy that someone can be that good at it.”⁵⁸

As we’ve seen, twenty five years later the Harold is still the dominant form at iO. While performers no longer strictly and solely follow the original structure, every performance, even TJ & Dave, is rooted in the Harold and iO’s basic improv philosophy. Trusting your partner, agreement, relationship based scenes, listening and supporting your partner/team are evident in every iO performance. Teams today are allowed more freedom with the Harold structure, with more experienced Harold teams like Mike Helicopter reformatting the basic premise of scenic beats in a new packaging. Shows like TJ & Dave use the improvisational principles of the Harold, but do not follow the structural elements. It’s safe to say that twenty five years after Harold revolutionized improvisational theatre, it is still alive and well.

⁵⁶ Frank Scheck, “One Act, One Hour Wonders,” *New York Post*, February 1, 2007.

⁵⁷ Steve Heisler, “Shadow of a Doubt,” *Time Out Chicago*, December 13-26, 2007 (Issue 146).

⁵⁸ Cal DeBruyne, Personal Interview. 22 November 2008.

Appendix A – Interview Questions

-Do you think that long-form improv has been stagnant? Is the Harold in its current state essentially the same as it was twenty-five years ago? Why do you think more radically different performance styles haven't emerged?

-What is the goal of the iO training center?

-How does the 5b level work?

-What are the current goals of iO? Where do you see iO and the Harold going in the next twenty-five years?

-Can you tell me more about your experience mediating in Cyprus?

-How did your involvement with CERN come about?

-How did iO West get involved with *The Real World*? What did you hope to accomplish on the show, and how successful were you? What do you think the show did to/for improv?

Current Students/Performers

-Why did you decide to take classes at iO?

-How was the Harold introduced to you? How was it taught (i.e. "Harold is the ultimate form." "Harold is a starting place." Etc.)

-What did your class do in 5b?

-How do you view the Harold?

-How do you use the Harold in your work?

-What do you hope to gain from working at iO?

-What teams or individuals working at iO interest you? Why?

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Interviews

Jill Bernard
Cal DeBruyne
Ben Bowman
Joe Bozic
Paul Brittain
Karisa Bruin
Rob Churchwell
Sean Cusick
Gianni Cutri
Becky Duncan
Rex Graff
Nick Hausman
Scott Hogan
Bob Hollister
Brendan Jennings
Vicki Kunz
Natalie Kossar
Sarah Maher
Rachel Mason
Kenny Metroff
Nick Mikula
Jeff Murdoch
Leslie Nesbit
Katie Rich
Adal Rifai
Kathryn Thomas