

Harold (improvisation)

Compiled by [John Mauldin](#)

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Harold is an improvisational long-form. Developed by [Del Close](#) and brought to fruition through Close's collaboration with [Charna Halpern](#), Harold has become the signature form of Chicago's [ImprovOlympic](#) and is now performed by [improvisational comedy](#) troupes and teams across the world.

Close's book, *[Truth in Comedy](#)*, is the definitive text on the form. It describes a "training wheels Harold" as three acts (or "beats"), each with three scenes and a group segment. With each beat, the three scenes return. By the end of the piece, the three scenes have converged.

Structure

A typical Harold is 30 to 40 minutes. Given three unrelated scenes A, B, and C, the structure follows:

Opening

1A

1B

1C

Group Slot

2A

2B

2C

Group Slot

3A

3B

3C

Opening

The basic form starts with an "opening." After getting the audience's suggestion, the ensemble explores it for a few minutes in either an unplanned or a pre-chosen structure. Textbook structures include:

- A cocktail party that ebbs and flows between conversations.
- Monologues that rotate among cast members.
- Invoking the suggestion in the style of an occult ritual

Rarely is the opening about the suggestion. It serves a starting point to discover three patterns or themes which connect by the end of the opening, just as scenes connect by the end.

The first beat

Following the opening are three completely unrelated two-person scenes. Each may use such information from the opening as:

- Details, such as location
- Themes and patterns, such as troubled family life
- Tangential information, such as a throwaway line

As the suggestion inspires the opening, the opening is a launching point for the first set of scenes.

The group slot

Following the third scene, the entire cast returns to stage, for either a group game or a group scene that returns to the initial suggestion.

In a group scene, the focus rapidly jumps between characters. A textbook structure is the Advertising Meeting, where the entire cast must come up with an ad campaign for a new product.

More abstract group scenes are group games. There is less focus on individual characters and more on a concept, such as a series of "10-Second Lessons".

The second beat

The second set of scenes heightens what was established in the first set. What it is heightening will differ from school to school. At the ImprovOlympic, the characters and

relationships are heightened. A tool for this is a "Time Dash," where the scene picks up at a different point in time than last left. A scene between a newly married couple with problems can take the second beat to show them on their tenth wedding anniversary.

After the second beat is another group game/scene that returns to the suggestion.

The third beat

The final set of three scenes (the third beat) connects themes, characters, situations, and games from the whole piece. Often scenes merge into each other, avoiding the need to return to all three. The third beat is usually the shortest.

Name

The odd name came from a joke response to the question of what this format should be called, to which [W.A. Mathieu](#) suggested "Harold". According to Close, the joke was a reference to the Beatles movie [A Hard Day's Night](#), which had been released a few years previously. In this film, when a reporter asks George Harrison what he called his haircut, Harrison replies, "Arthur."

Other Elements of Harold

Monologues:

Monologues are the whippets of Harold: quick, inspired, inspiring moments of individual clarity. They can be opinions, memory images, a quick story, a fact, or a song. They occur during the opening and at any point throughout the Harold. A group game can be entirely monologues. If you are inspired to do a monologue, step out front and commit to it. A monologue can clearly edit/end a scene, or it can be in the middle of a scene, at which point the players freeze and then continue the scene as if there was no break. They should not comment directly on the monologue, but just listen to it and allow it to enter the group consciousness. It will be integrated in subtler ways if you don't let it immediately affect the scene.

Edits

are intuitive, after a while you can hear the beats
when there is a peak in energy
when the game or action is coming full circle
after a big laugh

When there is agreement on future action or location

When there is a strong statement of a thesis, belief, a resolution

Don't ever practice preventative editing. Trust that a scene will find its natural edit and don't edit too soon just because you think a scene is dying.

Be prepared to take the stage after an edit, even if it's not your turn.

Mix it up. You can sweep, but in general discoveries require more than one player, so try not to leave players alone on stage. The stage should never ever be empty.

Experiment incorporating "thematic" edits. If the suggestion was "water" try editing with the sound and movement of water, or edit with a memorable sound or movement from the opening.

Loosening of structure

The above is the training wheel Harold. Feel free to loosen the structure by mixing up characters and the order when you feel strong and comfortable, or when Harold calls for it. Don't be afraid to go out with no idea, and be prepared to play with any person, or character, with whom you might find yourself on stage. Trust in discovery, and ye shall be rewarded.

Be aware of levels- of varying and stretching the emotional levels and energy levels. Structure comes organically when you learn to listen to levels like you would listen to or create music--time for a quiet section, time for chaos, time for a rapid-fire succession of scenes or walk-ons.

Don't be afraid of the silences, there can be just as much power in a silence as there is in screaming. Too much screaming or too much silence becomes boring.

Long-form improv thrives on slow comedy, listening, honesty, support, agreement, and intelligence. There are no mistakes because you weave mistakes into strengths by justification. Your primary job is to make your stage partner look good, and listen carefully to every thing that transpires. Connections then occur organically.

Practice Yes And, abandon yourself to the good of the whole, turn the other cheek, give gifts, and try to truly love each other. But only while on stage. To commit too rigidly to these tenets in real life, Del would say, would be insanity.

The Fundamentals of Agreement

by Kevin Mullaney, Upright Citizens Brigade

When working with a script, an actor knows a lot about the scene they are about to perform. They know where the scene takes place and who their character is. They know the relationship between themselves and the other characters in the scene. They know what they are going to say. And if they are properly prepared, they know what their character wants and what actions they will do to try to get it.

When an improviser begins a scene, they know none of these things. They face a stage that could become any setting they can imagine. They can play any character they choose and so can their scene partner. Their choices are infinite. So at the beginning of an improvised scene, the most important thing they must accomplish is to decide on the circumstances of the scene. And the most important tool for deciding those circumstances is agreement.

Simply put, an improviser must agree to all facts and circumstances that their scene partner establishes via dialogue, behavior or action. If I say that I'm a plumber, you must agree that I'm a plumber. If you act like you are in a car, I must accept that. If I say that we are in an airport bar, set down your luggage and grab a drink.

For instance, let's say a player named Molly begins a scene by sitting down and beginning to type something. Next her scene partner Jed enters and says, "I've got those numbers for your report, ma'am," and hands her some papers. The two of them have begun to create the circumstances of the scene. You might think that there isn't much to this scene, that they don't have much that they can agree on yet. Actually they already have quite a lot. Namely, that Molly is using a device with a keyboard; she's working on a report; and that Jed is helping her with the report. This seems pretty obvious, but you would be surprised how often a player will respond by saying something like, "I'm not working on a report, you moron. I'm writing the great American novel." That is the opposite of agreement. That is called denial.

Agreement doesn't just apply to indisputable facts. It also applies to those things that might not be said, but are implied in our actions or our words. In the example above, we might assume that the characters work together in an office, and that Jed works for the Molly (he called her ma'am, after all). It's possible to come to other conclusions about what facts have been implied, and it would be fine to act on them. But whatever the players add to this scene, they need to add information which fits with everything they have established and implied.

Yes Anding

Beyond simply agreeing with their partner, players should add information to the scene with each action or line of dialogue, at least at the beginning. This is often called "yes-anding" your scene partner. Again in the example above, Jed didn't just enter the scene and say, "I see you're typing." That would have simply stopped at agreement. Instead, he added to the circumstances of the scene. They now know that they are working on a report together, and they are one step closer to having a good scene.

Yes-anding is crucial to creating interesting and unique scenes. A good visual analogy is that of a ping pong game. One player serves the ball with their first line of dialogue or their first action. The other player returns the ball by responding to it. Each time the ball crosses the net, a new piece of information is added which makes the scene more specific. A scene shouldn't begin with one player establishing everything by themselves. If you want to initiate a scene about a father and son pirate team who are about to attack a British merchant ship during the American Revolution and who are struggling with their incestuous feelings for one another, write it out as a sketch. Don't initiate it. It's too much information for one player to establish without the input of their scene partner. It's like refusing to serve the ball. What's the point of improvising it with a partner? Instead, establish one or two things with your first action or line of dialogue and wait to see what

your scene partner will do with it.

Other Facets of Agreement

One thing that agreement means is being agreeable at the beginning of a scene. This is not a universal truth, but it is a good principle to guide you through the beginning of a scene. Make choices that keep your characters in relative harmony. Don't argue with each other. Choose a point of view which agrees with your scene partner. Choose to like the situation that your character is in. What happens all too often at the beginning of a scene, is that one player will pick a fight with the other, many times over issues that are completely trivial. Nothing can tank a scene faster than a fight over something trivial.

You should also generally be agreeable about actions proposed by your scene partner. If your partner says, "Let's give the dog a bath," then you should start running water in the tub or fetch the dog. Don't think about it, don't debate it, just do it, especially if it is an action that you can do on stage in the place you have established.

What if your scene partner suggests doing something that your character would not want to do? All the more reason for your character to do it. We as an audience like seeing characters do things they don't want to do. For instance, your scene partner begins a scene by saying, "Finish your spinach, or you won't get dessert." Well, first thing to know is that you shouldn't argue about it. Be agreeable, eat your spinach.

There is a bit more to it, however. The initiation implies that you do not like spinach, otherwise why would they insist that you finish it? You have to agree to that as well. You don't like spinach. What do you do then? I just told you that you can't argue about it, that you have to eat it. You do. You just don't have to like eating it. It can be quite fun to watch a character do things they don't want to do. So always remember: Do the thing that your character doesn't want to do.

Differences of Opinion

One thing that agreement doesn't mean is that the characters (as opposed to the players) must have identical opinions. If one player establishes that they are standing outside a pink house, the other player must agree that the house is pink. However, if the first player says that they like the color of the house, the other player could decide that their character isn't so enthusiastic about it. Facts require agreement, matters of opinion don't.

This can be a tricky concept for a new improviser or for one that has been brow beaten by teachers who never let characters disagree on stage. There are some teachers out there who believe you can never say the word "no" in an improvisation. They are dead wrong. You can. Often you can create really incredible scenes with characters who can't agree on anything at all. Note here that the players are still agreeing on all matters that are factual. Their character just might not have the same opinion on it.

This doesn't mean to pick fights over trivial matters. While differences of opinion are not technically denial, the arguments that they cause are often destructive to good scene work, especially for beginners. Your first choice in any scene should be to make your character like the situation they find themselves in. Choose not to argue especially over little things. If it seems natural to have a dissenting opinion about the matter at hand, then give it a try. Even then, make sure you are not simply arguing. It's much easier to keep a scene moving when the dissension is mild rather than a vicious argument.

Respect, Trust and Yes Anding

Agreement cuts both ways. You shouldn't establish something your scene partner won't want to do. That doesn't mean something their character wouldn't want to do, but instead something that they themselves would be uncomfortable doing on stage. This is almost always a judgment call and the standard is quite different depending on the sensibilities of the performers and the level of trust between them.

For instance, it might not be a good idea to start a scene by saying, "Take off your pants so I can *%*()^* you." There are some improvisers who would jump at the chance to do that scene, but many others would not. If you make an initiation which makes your scene partner uncomfortable and they refuse to agree to it, you have made the mistake, not them.

Higher Levels of Agreement

Let's say your scene partner starts a scene by saying something like, "I'm really hungry. I wish I had something to eat." They have initiated a problem. It might seem like responding with, "Look there's an apple tree. Let's get an apple," would be a good idea. However, by solving the problem you have denied them. To yes-and a problem, you make the problem worse. A better response might be to say, "There's a restaurant down the road, but it will take a couple of hours to get there on foot." In effect you are saying, "Yes you are hungry, and you won't be eating anytime soon."

Creating problems and making them worse is a great tool for making interesting scenes. Discover a zit on the face of a character who is vain. If you find yourself in room with a dangerous looking robot, make the doors locked. If someone is looking for their lost dog, tell them that you saw one get run over. If someone asks if their wedding dress makes them look fat, say yes.

Another common mistake players make is to defend themselves. It's a natural tendency to do this in real life. But it doesn't help you in an improvisation. If someone accuses you of something or establishes that you have a negative character trait, don't dispute it, agree to it. If they say, "You're always so mean to me." Be mean to them. If they accuse you of cheating on them, admit that you have and be proud of it. If someone makes your character a racist, embrace that trait. It is fun to be an @%(*&\$ on stage, and if someone establishes that about your character, treat it as a gift.

What if your scene partner establishes something absurd or crazy? Do you agree with it? That depends on what exactly they initiated, but there are generally two different ways to deal with it.

The first way is to treat the initiation as absurd. Say that you are in the stands at a little league baseball game with the parent of another child. And suppose that they tell you if their child loses that they are going to kill the child's dog. Obviously, they have established themselves as an absurd character, an exaggeration of an overzealous little league parent. If you were to simply say, "Oh that's nice." You aren't yes anding the fact that they are crazy. In a way you are ignoring it, and thus denying them. Your job then is to be the "straight man" in this situation and to treat them as absurd.

The second way to deal with this initiation is treat their absurdity as if it is the most normal thing in the world. Say to them, "I hope you kill it in front of them. That will teach them the importance of good sportsmanship." In the first example you are taking their initiation and making them an absurd character. In the second example you are making the world of the scene into an absurd world.

At first glance, agreement is a rather simple and straightforward concept, one basic rule among many that every improviser must learn. But it is far more pervasive than that. Agreement is the very foundation of improvisation and it affects every aspect of your improvised work. It is the closest thing we have to a golden rule or a fundamental theorem. Agreement will never be something you master and then move on from. Instead, it will continue to guide you and challenge you with every scene you create.

Improvisation as a playwriting tool

By Jeffrey Sweet

First, to clarify a common misconception: improvisation and ad-libbing are not the same thing. An ad-lib is analogous to static electricity. Static electricity can only be discharged as a single jolt of energy. A spark. It may be startling, it may get your attention, but it dispels its charge in an instant, and you can't run anything on it.

True theatrical improvisation, on the other hand, is like the current you access when you plug into an electrical outlet. From the outlet you get a steady stream of power that can keep a light lit, sustain a motor, keep something running. If you keep faith with improvisational principles, it will keep a scene running. Despite the impression created by many so called improvisational comedy troupes (and the TV show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*), it is not jokes. It is not bits or shtick. It is not one upmanship. It is a marriage of the logical and the intuitive. The experience of working improvisationally has changed my ideas about the stage and the way to write for it.

At first look, there appears to be a contradiction between the traditional view of the dramatist and the improviser. The usual image of playwrights is of lone figures in close proximity to cups of coffee, hunched over keyboards, trying to pull out of their internal stews characters and stories and the words with which to make them vivid. Playwriting would seem to be among the most private of endeavors. Improvisers, on the other hand, create in cooperation with and the company of other improvisers.

But improvisers and dramatists face the same challenge: how to sustain dramatic action that compels the attention of the audience. Improvisers have a number of techniques to address this task. I have been particularly interested in how these may be adapted to playwrights' purposes.

A word or two on how this interest was stimulated. I grew up in a suburb of Chicago. It is common now to think of Chicago as one of the garden spots of American theater, but in those days the mid sixties it was a pretty bleak landscape. Except for Second City. Second City was (and is) what Peter Brook calls a "poor" theater. Not "poor" qualitatively, but in the sense that it made a virtue out of its lack of material resources. Opening on an investment of \$10,000 in a building that had formerly housed a Chinese laundry, it featured little by way of props and costumes. The basic elements were a stage, some lights, some chairs and a resourceful pianist to the side. In this Spartan setting, a cast of five or six actors usually in their twenties would perform for a sophisticated audience a couple of swift hours of scenes, mostly comic.

The gang at Second City were cultural heroes to me and many of my theater -obsessed friends. But I had no illusion that there was any place for me there. I wasn't going to pursue a performing career, and it didn't have any need for a playwright. Almost all of the material that graced that unprepossessing stage had its origins in late night improvisations the cast whipped up in response to audience suggestions after the formal show. The best of this material was polished and refined in rehearsal, but to overmake my point it was developed not from someone like me pounding away at a keyboard, but from the spontaneous but disciplined interaction of a cast trained in a common technique.

I came to New York to find a theater that might have use for what I wanted to do. During my college years, I couldn't help but notice that a lot of the people whose work I most admired in theater, film, and television had clocked serious time at Second City or companies such as the Compass, the Committee and the Premise, which shared Second City's methodology: Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Paul Sills, Alan Arkin, Barbara Harris, Shelley Berman, Paul Mazursky, Alan Alda, Paul Sand, Gene Hackman, Buck Henry, Melinda Dillon, Robert Klein, and so on and on and on.

I was writing about a theater that had I had a hunch that there was something about the training for this kind of work that developed and encouraged these talents. I wanted an excuse to meet

and learn from these people, so I decided to write an oral history. For more than three years, I ran around the country talking to Second City alumni. The focus of my interest was how they applied their improvisational techniques to what was going on in the society around them and so produced a continuous theatrical chronicle of the postwar years. I was also interested in how they related their work at Second City to their later careers as actors, directors, writers and producers. Since no need for playwrights, I thought I was taking a vacation from playwriting. Sometime in the middle of the project, however, I realized that I was learning more that was concretely useful to me as a playwright than I had from anything else I had ever done.

I was told the story of a TV producer who had heard that a couple of the guys at the New York branch of Second City were funny. He was putting together a broadcast. Would they like to do one of their sketches? They said sure. He asked for a copy of the script. They said to him, "You don't understand. There is no script. This is something we built on our feet. Every night it changes a little." The producer said that for TV he needed a script so that camera shots could be called. So the guys recorded the scene with a tape recorder, transcribed it and sent the transcription in script form to the producer. The producer read it and said, "I see maybe one laugh here." They didn't do the broadcast. What was funny about the scene did not translate to the page.

And that's when I realized that material that can work brilliantly on the stage indeed may not look like much on the page. What works on the page I call literature. So here we had an example of a piece of material that succeeded in performance and failed as literature. Conclusion: dramatic material is not necessarily literature. It doesn't have to play by the same rules as literature or be measured by literary standards. It is not primarily about words that will look good on the page; it is about creating the opportunity for actors to create compelling behavior on stage.

This simple idea required me to completely rethink how I approached writing for actors. And it made me understand better how great literary artists Henry James, Ernest Hemingway, Mark Twain and so forth could stumble so badly in shifting their focus from the page to the stage.

The person most responsible for the flowering of improvisational theater in America was Viola Spolin. In trying to direct young people in the thirties, she was determined not to treat them as marionettes, but to solve staging problems through what she called theater games. These aren't games in the competitive sense they aren't won or lost, and no points are awarded. Rather, they are structures designed to stimulate play.

For instance, at one point she was dealing with a teenage girl and boy who were supposed to be rehearsing a romantic scene. Being shy, they were playing the lines with their arms wrapped around themselves. So Viola invented a game called Contact. The rule of Contact: for every line you say to someone on stage, you have to make physical contact with that person in a way consistent with the intent of the line. The two young performers began the scene again, now putting all of their concentration and ingenuity into addressing the challenge of the game. They were distracted from their self-consciousness by the challenge of the problem, and the scene suddenly came to physical life. Much of what they found was retained for the final performance.

So the essence of improvisation is solving problems in the moment. And solving them so that the by-product is theater.

Viola ultimately wrote and, in 1963, published a book called *Improvisation for the Theater* (Northwestern University Press) in which she articulated her theatrical philosophy and presented rules to the scores of games she invented. It has gone through dozens of printings and Viola lived to see it commonly accepted as the bible of improv (she died in 1994). Since she published it, others have invented more games. In London, for example, the Royal Court's Keith Johnstone created games that involve people who negotiated over status (a logical emphasis given the institutionalized British class system). His very valuable book is called *Impro*. But then I find most people can.

While working on my book (Something Wonderful Right Away, published by Limelight Editions and worth every penny), I took some improvisational workshops with one of the Second City directors, Sheldon Patinkin (yes, he's Mandy's cousin). Sheldon disabused me of the idea that improvisation is necessarily comic or that it requires fast wits. What it requires is the determination to make active rather than passive choices, to not deny realities established by other players, and to pursue objectives as truthfully as possible from within the logic of the character you're playing. I was relieved to find that I could do this.

. After all, we all improvise everyday. We are constantly improvising, coping, adjusting our behavior in the pursuit of our real life objectives. If I get on a bus and discover I don't have the proper change, I may improvise by asking if anyone on the bus can break a bill. If I run into a friend on the street, we certainly don't have our conversation pre written. We open our mouths confident that words will spring to our lips to convey whatever information or ideas we wish to exchange. We are all of us coming up with spontaneous strategies to deal with the unforeseen obstacles that arise as we pursue our goals, large and small

The difference between this and improvising theatrically is that when you do it on stage, you assume the identity of a character outside yourself and are in pursuit of objectives organic to that identity in the face of obstacles presented by the other players' characters. All this requires is the imagination and empathy to put yourself inside the logic of a character and behave accordingly.

In fact, my first experimentation in this area resulted in a short play. Some years ago, I wrote an outline about a man named Frank whose best friend, Marty, tries to enlist him in a lie to his wife Diane to cover his (Marty's) infidelity. I turned on a tape recorder. Two friends and I improvised our way through the scene three times. I typed up a transcript of this session, edited together the sections I liked most and interwove them with new material that occurred to me in revision. The result, a piece called Cover, was published in Samuel French's

Plays from Actors Theatre of Louisville and has been produced dozens of times. In 1979, I was one of the founding members of a group of playwrights, actors, and directors called the Writers Bloc who met regularly to investigate new material. At one of the meetings, I mentioned my belief that improvisational training would help some of the writers understand better how to write for actors. Members of the group suggested we form a subgroup to explore this kind of work. So, for several weeks, we spent Sunday afternoons playing many of Viola Spolin's theater games.

At one of these sessions, someone suggested that we improvise to music. My instant thought was that this was an idea that could quickly lapse into pretentiousness, but I remembered Second City director Del Close's opinion that in such situations the most constructive response is not, "No," but "Yes, and ." So I said, "Yes, and this is how we'll do it: we'll sit in a circle and, as the music plays, any one person in the circle may initiate a scene with any other person in the circle. Only no scene may go longer than six lines." My thought was that if we limited scenes to six lines, there was less likelihood that we would nose dive into tedium and self indulgence.

And so we played. And we quickly discovered the power of six lines three pairs of exchanges between two characters. In our first go at it, as something by Claude Bolling played on the hi fi (remember hi fi? remember Claude Bolling?), we spun out several dozen short scenes, each a little dramatic haiku. It quickly became apparent that this tiny form stimulated an economy of dramatic action that could be powerful in its concentration.

Excited by our first foray, we turned the record over and took another pass. The second time through, there was another development: instead of each six line scene being contained unto itself, members of the group began building off of each other's little scenes. For instance, if two players in one corner of the room decided to play parents, two other players could choose to play their children. A whole community of characters swiftly emerged story lines were sustained, secrets were created, hidden and dramatically revealed, ironies bloomed. Out of our cooperative

imagination, ingenuity and energies we created a soap opera that none of us individually would have dreamed up.

Six Lines has become a staple of my workshops. Here's a sample from one from a session in Miami. This group started off with the understanding that all of the scenes would take place on a ship that had been chartered for a private cruise by a fairly conservative group. One actor began by saying to another

ALAN: Roger, I think you should get Liz back to your cabin.

ROGER: Oh come on, Alan, she's just having fun.

ALAN: We've all seen Liz have this kind of fun before, and we know where it can lead.

ROGER: You've got yourself worked up for no good reason Relax, have a drink.

ALAN: It's what Liz is drinking I'm concerned about.

ROGER: I appreciate your concern, but nobody elected you cop. So back off.

Then the second six began with one of the actresses addressing the actor who played Roger:

LIZ: I don't know what the fuss is about. I just thought the gang would be interested in seeing my scar.

And very swiftly we were into a series of scenes that unraveled this tight little society.

The members of the Writers Bloc did indeed find that improvisational work helped them write more vivid scenes. In the meantime, having seen Cover flourish, I decided to see whether I could generate a full length play from an improvisational base.

A couple years back, Susann Brinkley, the producer of Alice's Fourth Floor on New York's 42nd Street, was kind enough to offer me space and time on her stage to work with interested actors, writers and directors. We played the classic theater games, and then we began lending the skills we had developed to each other. There was no single procedure. Sometimes one of the gang would bring in the first draft of a scene. After we read it, we might discuss it and then, by setting up an improv based on its central action, add elements characters, props, activities to heighten what was already there. The writer was encouraged to take as a gift any or all of what he found useful. Frequently he brought a new, richer draft of the scene to the next session.

Sometimes, someone would simply have the idea of a dynamic she wished to explore. Perhaps it was a relationship that she thought had particular potential. For instance, if the scene were about a brother and sister, she would cast the two from the group and establish the location and time of the scene. And then, privately with each actor, she might tell each what he or she wanted out of the other character. The wrinkle was that the characters were supposed to go for what they wanted without explicitly asking for it. (Very interesting what people will resort to when barred from asking for what they want.) Again, whatever promising emerged was a gift to the person who generated the scene to use as she wished.

At one session, I realized that we only had a half hour left. Including me, there were three men and two women present. Trying to figure out a Situation that would support this configuration, I proposed we play a scene about three couples who are in the habit of vacationing together, only this particular vacation, one of the wives doesn't show up. No, our improv on this premise was by no means a finished product, but there was enough Promise in what resulted that I thought there was a play to be developed out of it.

For purposes of economy, I decided to make the piece about two couples instead of three, and I decided to make the abandoned spouse a wife rather than a husband. Two actresses Beth Lincks and Kristine Niven improvised with me for a few sessions, exploring aspects of the characters. I taped these sessions and transcribed passages I thought could be the basis of something.

Ultimately, maybe five of the resulting pages of the script were drawn from these transcripts. The rest I wrote at my keyboard. But what I wrote was with Beth and Kristine's voices in my ear, or at any rate the voices of the characters as they played them. (They eventually played these parts in a production in Lake Placid, and, yes, they do have program credit and participate in the royalties.) The result, a play called *With and Without* is a particularly colloquial, actor friendly script. It was produced this season at the Victory Gardens Theatre of Chicago and the Main Street Theatre of Houston. The reviews were enthusiastic and it was nominated for the 1995 American Theater Critics Association's playwriting award

Ordinarily, the task of the actor is to create behavior to support the text supplied by the playwright. This is what rehearsals are for. The director is there to help in the exploration of compelling behavior and to make certain that there is a consistency of style and approach. When the process is working at its best, the illusion is created that the dialogue is the spontaneous byproduct of the characters pursuing their goals. Sometimes, of course, the actors have difficulty figuring out how to justify passages as written. Sometimes the writer has assembled words that cannot be spoken naturally. Sometimes the logic of the actions of the characters isn't clear.

Material that is developed from improvisation tends to be different by virtue of the difference in the way it was generated. Because in improvisation the behavior comes first, the dialogue is always an extension of behavior. So dialogue that has emerged out of improvisational sessions is by definition speakable (it originated in people speaking), and actors don't have to create the logic of the behavior (as they do with normal written material) so much as rediscover it. The feedback I get from performers confirms this. Michael Tucker, who appeared in a radio broadcast of *With and Without*, told me that it was one of the rare scripts in which he didn't feel the urge to rephrase anything to make it more playable.

I'm not claiming to be alone in working this way or making these discoveries. For years, Mike Leigh has similarly been building his work (such as the well received films *Life is Sweet*, *High Hopes*, and *Naked*) out of sessions with a regular stable of actors. I recently saw an Off Broadway production of his play *Ecstasy*. It offers little by way of memorable language or great speeches, but it features frequently riveting behavior and some of the most compelling performances I've seen in New York lately (and incidentally, the production won a 1995 Obie Award).

When I interviewed him, Mike Nichols said of working improvisationally at the Compass, "There was no way to be on stage like that and not learn about the structure of scenes, about the connections with an audience. And what it finally gave us, and something I felt with Elaine [May] always when we were in front of an audience, was almost arrogance. A feeling that, 'I can handle you guys.'"

I make no claims of being an improviser in Nichols's league, but I know what he means. The confidence gained from being able to generate a scene out of thin air with another player is transferable to facing a blank page. And that, ultimately, I've found to be one of improvisation's greatest gifts I haven't suffered from writer's block in years...

Jeffrey Sweet is the author of *The Dramatist's Toolkit*.

Del Close

“Fall, then figure out what to do on the way down.”

-Del Close

Del Close played Polonius once in Hamlet, and won a Joseph Jefferson Award for it. But the role he really wanted to play was Yorick. He had to die to do it, but now he may get his wish. Under the terms of his will, Close, who died March 4, 1999, has left his skull to the Goodman Theatre.



Del Close was born and raised in Manhattan, Kansas and attended Kansas State University, after touring with a side show act for a period of time in his teenage years. In 1957, at the age of 23, he became a member of the St. Louis branch of the Compass Players, the direct precursor of The Second City, which opened in December, 1959. Most of the St. Louis cast went to Chicago, but Close chose New York and a budding career as a hip, young stand-up comic in competition with Lenny Bruce, George Carlin, Bob Newhart, etc. That same year he also appeared in the Off-Broadway musical, *The Nervous Set*, of which an original cast album exists.

Close came to Chicago in 1960 and more or less made it his home for the rest of his life, always gravitating back there after a few months or even years elsewhere. Perhaps he understood instinctively the advice Paul Sills gave Stuart Gordon some years later: “Come to Chicago, they Close directed and performed at The Second City until he was fired (major substance abuse problems) in 1965. He spent the next five years in San Francisco eating acid and touring with the Merry Pranksters on their famous psychedelic

bus, creating light images for the Grateful Dead, and working with The Committee, a North Beach equivalent of Second City which Close helped organize. It was at The Committee that he first began seriously to develop his ideas and techniques of long-form improvisation, although Second City had experimented with long-form as early as 1962.

Close returned to Chicago in 1970, and set up a free, open-to-all workshop at the Kingston Mines Company Store, the cafe attached to the Kingston Mines Theatre Company on Lincoln Avenue (where the parking garage of Children's Memorial Medical Center now stands). He drilled his students - everyone from acid-dropping love children to a vice-president of the Foote, Cone and Belding advertising agency - in the basic principles of improv and theatre games, and in the specifics of "The Harold", a long-form improv technique developed by Close.

At a time when most improvisation mainly focused on creating single scenes, Del devised the Harold as something not unlike a sonata form. Several themes would be established, a community of characters would be introduced, and then the resulting scenes would play off each other in comedic counterpoint - characters from one environment moving to another and phrases and images recurring, each time accruing new meaning. Going to this from conventional sketches was like going from arithmetic to calculus. (Why was it called the Harold? When he introduced it, one of his students said, "Del, you've invented something, you get to name it." Del said, "Well, the Beatles called their haircut Arthur, so I'll call this Harold." He later regretted the flipness. "Probably my most significant contribution and it's got that stupid name.")

The weekly public performances at Kingston Mines sometimes had as many as 20 performers participating. After a few months, Close hand-picked a dozen of his best, and moved operations down the block to the Body Politic for twice-weekly workshops and Sunday night performances. He named the company the Chicago Extension Improv Company, as an extension of his San Francisco work. The best-known players to emerge from the troupe were "Broadway" Betty Thomas, Dan Ziskie, Brian Hickey and Jonathan Abarbanel.

Before leaving Chicago again in 1972 to perform for Paul Sills in a Story Theatre production at the Mark Taper Forum in LA, Close and the Chicago Extension had begun to explore scenario improvs based on dreams. The techniques the Extension developed after Close left became Dream Theatre, which continued at the Body Politic over the next five years, although with different personnel. Close returned to Chicago in 1973 as resident director at The Second City, a position he kept until 1982. It was during this decade that he taught and directed a long list of TV and film comedy greats including John Belushi, Bill Murray, John Candy, Don DePollo, George Wendt, Audrey Neenan, Eugenie Ross-Lemming, David Rasche, Shelly Long, Anne Ryerson, etc.

Upon leaving the troupe, Close pursued legitimate acting opportunities with a number of theatres, including Wisdom Bridge, Remains, Goodman and Steppenwolf. He won his Joseph Jefferson Award in 1985 in a radical Hamlet directed by Robert Falls at Wisdom Bridge. Close also did TV and film work, appearing in "The Untouchables" and "Ferris

Bueller's Day Off' among others. It was during this period that Close finally beat his long heroin addiction (although he continued to smoke cigarettes and marijuana), in part truly shocked by the excesses and death of John Belushi, and in part because, as he told Jonathan Abarbanel, "I've decided I want to live." Close was enjoying his new theatrical vistas, as well as a successful professional partnership with Charna Halpern and ImprovOlympic, which allowed him to concentrate on further development of The Harold, and on team improv.

Close was 64 when he died of complications due to emphysema the evening of March 4, 1999, just five days shy of his birthday. He left no survivors, although he claimed to have fathered an illegitimate child by a woman in Minneapolis sometime in the late 1950's. His body was cremated, as he wished. His skull is expected to be given to the Goodman Theatre to await the company's next Hamlet.

Close was one of three titans of improvisational theatre who put it on the map, refined it, and turned it into the fixture of comedic and acting technique which it has become. The first was Viola Spolin, who started the work in the 1930's with her development of theatre games - originally for children - as exercises in imagination. She didn't utilize them for public performance. It was her son, Paul Sills, who was able to take theatre games and use them as the basis for development of satirical revue comedy. Sills and a group of brilliant cohorts, including Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Shelly Berman, Sheldon Patinkin and others made this work the focus of various company experiments in the mid-1950's, including the Compass Players in Chicago and St. Louis.

In 1959, The Second City opened, co-founded by Sills, Howard Alk and Bernard Sahlins. Close arrived on the scene a year later. Within three years, both Sills and Alk had left the troupe to pursue other ventures. Alk continued to work in the improv field, but died young. Sills has retained improv and theatre games within his artistic repertory - it is part of the basis of his Story Theatre - but has not devoted his career to it. Close, then, became the third titan of improvisation after Spolin and Sills, and the only one to devote his artistic life and best theoretical thinking to it. He fully understood pain and suffering as a basis for comedy, as well as the nature and limitations of the comedic form. The Harold, the scenario, long-form improv - call it what you will - is his personal legacy to the field; while his own boundless, sometimes manic drive as a charismatic teacher and director have done more to establish improvisational theatre around the world than anything or anyone else. The explosion of improv troupes and teams and classes (the Museum of Contemporary Art offers an improv class, for example), and the inclusion of theatre games and improv exercises in standard acting curricula, are the result of the work of Spolin and Sills and Close. With specific regard to long-form improv and Close's own contribution, that legacy will grow even greater through the next generation, as his students and acolytes inherit the world of comedy.

[This bio appears on the iO \(Improv Olympic\) website and is courtesy of the Internet Movie Database.](#)

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