

The subculture of improv

Business



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In the late 1950s, a group of University of Chicago graduates wanted to create a place where intellectuals like themselves could gather to mingle and watch live entertainment. Bernard Sahlins, Howard Alk, and Paul Sills were all well acquainted with the world and business of theater and comedy, but wanted to open a place of their own. Much later, in the 1990s, Matt Besser, Amy Poehler, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh ventured to do the same thing.

The products of each endeavor were, respectively, the Second City and Upright Citizens Brigade comedy theaters. Improv theaters are often called “island[s] of lost toys” (Subculture of Improv) because the people who perform in and watch shows there are usually intelligent but outcasted people who haven’t found their place in the world, and have made this community their place. The Second City was an unexpectedly successful endeavor that created a one-of-a-kind community and subculture within the culture of entertainment. In Chicago, Sahlins and Sills had each been on the board of other theater companies, the Playwrights Theater and the Compass Players, respectively, that had folded in the mid-50s. Although the companies had folded, the “ symbiotic actor-audience relationship and ensemble-based satire created through improvisation” (Thomas 4) endured. The three men opened the Second City in 1959, and many members of the Compass Players made up the original cast.

The name of this new company was a stab at the nickname Chicago had donned for years – Chicago always came in second because New York was “the First City” – so they decided to take pride in this name. The Second City became an instant hit among intellectuals and hipsters in Chicago, with

satires touching on “ almost all the foibles of everyday living from suburbia to fallout shelters” (Thomas 5). Seeing heightened versions of people, politics, and society in general, with a few intellectual allusions thrown in, was highly appealing to the founders’ University of Chicago colleagues. This type of comedy, similar to early incarnations such as *The Importance of Being Ernest*, has always been a favorite among cerebral people who weren’t amused by “ slapstick,” or comedy for the sake of comedy. As the Second City gained momentum in Chicago, a sister branch opened in Toronto, Ontario under the same name. From this outpost, SCTV (Second City TV), a show set at a fictional television station that would broadcast ridiculous and incompetent local programs; their ridiculous talk shows, advertisements, soap operas, and newscasts were similar to the sketches performed on *Saturday Night Live*.

This form of comedy became immensely popular in the 70s, and both Chicago and Toronto became hubs of comedy in the years following the opening of the Second City. Multiple comedy clubs and theaters opened up in both cities, but they all stood in the shadow of the Second City theater. Each city had its own brand of comedy: Chicago focusing more on political satire and Toronto focusing more on social satire (because politics have never been particularly exciting in Canada). In 1975, *Saturday Night Live* premiered from New York City, featuring four cast members from the Second City within its first five seasons (Evans). It became extremely popular, creating a buzz in the entertainment world that drove many people to Chicago in the 80s to check out the comedy scene.

Many people, such as Bernadette Berkett, were being hired out of Chicago because “ people were taking Chicago seriously as a place to find new comic talent” (Thomas 117). Even performers from the Toronto branch joined the cast of SNL and other serious comedic programs. Soon, many comedic performers joined the Second City theaters so they could be noticed by people such as Lorne Michaels of SNL. A decade later, comedy icons in the media today performed at various comedy theaters in Chicago, including the Second City. After being a part of many comedy theaters in Chicago, comedians Matt Besser, Amy Poehler, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh moved to New York City in 1996.

In 1999, they founded the Upright Citizens Brigade, an improv theater. The founders of UCB wanted to preserve the same fundamental actor-audience relationship they had experienced at the Second City. They brought improv forms learned from the Second City with them to UCB, and also created new forms of improv specific to their theater, such as the “ Harold” (Swilley) and “ ASSSSCAT 3000.” ASSSSCAT is a longform improvised show in which a monologist takes a word from the audience and gives a monologue pertaining to that word; the improvisers then create a series of scenes based on the monologue. ASSSSCAT is particularly popular due to the uniqueness of the show and the frequent special guests.

Comedy “ nerds” are known to wait outside the theater for hours and hours before an ASSSSCAT show to ensure a spot at the once-in-a-lifetime show. The Upright Citizens Brigade was different than the Second City in that UCB was focused more on improv than Second City was (though SC had one improv segment at the end of each performance), and the founders also <https://assignbuster.com/the-subculture-of-improv/>

created a school that taught people improv and sketch comedy. One of the most important differences between the Second City and Upright Citizens Brigade is that the performers at the Second City earn a salary for their work, while performers at UCB do not. Both theaters have training centers, and the one at UCB charges about \$400 to attend. Many people interested in professional comedy face a problem with the lack of pay at UCB and high costs of training; although they could perform at other theaters in New York, “they’re full of people who want to go to UCB because that’s where you get seen,” (Zinoman). UCB holds to their no-salary policy in order to maintain a “creative vibe”.

The “vibe” at improv theaters is distinct: an intimate setting paired with spontaneity (which is synonymous with the art form) creates a warm, safe, and carefree environment. Co-founder Matt Besser believes that if UCB paid performers, it would assign worth to their shows (Zinoman), which is far from what he and his colleagues believe improv and comedy represent. The Upright Citizens Brigade charges a fee to view shows for the sole purpose of keeping the theater running, but it is not a business. Unlike that of the Second City, the foundation of the Upright Citizens Brigade was not a business venture. The founders never wanted comedy to be a vehicle for capital; UCB embodies the desire for comedy as a vehicle for creativity, insight, and community.

“When we started the UCB it was always important for us to have a good audience rather than make money,” Poehler said (Behind the Scenes of Asssscat). Their non-paid actors allowed them room to keep ticket prices low, drawing young audiences from all backgrounds into one congregation. Soon

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enough, as the theater gained popularity and publicity in the early 2000s, UCB became the new place to find new recruits for Saturday Night Live and other comedy programs, much like Second City had been in the 70s and 80s. Many performers from UCB end up gaining recognition in the professional comedy world, and eventually become celebrities, as Amy Poehler had. Celebrity status is, no doubt, tough to adjust to for these humble, low-key performers, but the majority of them successfully stay out of the spotlight outside of work.

Recently, Amy Poehler and Tina Fey hosted the Golden Globes, drawing in the award show's largest audience since 2004 (Harnick). Although the Poehler and Fey have gained publicity and reverence not only for their hosting abilities, but also for their acclaimed work on the shows Parks & Recreation and 30 Rock, respectively, both comediennes and other alumni return to the UCB family to do an ASSSSCAT show with current cast members. Considering the fact that many comedy fans are introverted, the Internet has created other ways for performers to connect with their audiences. Both UCB and the Second City have channels on YouTube on which they post original sketch-videos. The Second City has a somewhat stronger presence on the Internet than UCB does - their YouTube channel, The Second City Network, is an adjunct of their secondary website of the same name, which features videos from their channel, news in the realm of comedy, satirical articles, and more.

The original content from the website has been featured on Comedy Central, G4's Attack of the Show, NPR, The New York Times, and more ("The Second City Network"). The UCB's YouTube channel hosts members' creative video <https://assignbuster.com/the-subculture-of-improv/>

content as well as behind-the-scenes footage. The behind the scenes and documentary-like footage gives fans at home a taste of what the theater's "vibe" is like, and encourages them to want to experience that in person. Improv is an extremely important, fundamental piece of comedy because it teaches performers to think quickly, creatively, and collaboratively. In addition, the spontaneous, unplanned shows only happen once, which creates a sense of community between the actors and the audience that cannot be replicated. Since comedians and fans of comedy are usually people who feel alone or without purpose, this sense of community is extremely important because it creates a comfort zone that many of them have never had before.