

Never Done Before, Never Seen Again:
A Look at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre and Hidden Collections of Improv Comedy

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Introduction

All forms of live performance have a certain measure of ephemerality, but no form is more fleeting than an improvised performance, which is conceived in the moment and then never performed again. The most popular contemporary form of improvised performance is improv comedy, which maintains a philosophy that is deeply entrenched in the idea that a show only happens once. The history, principles, and techniques of improv are well documented in texts and in moving images. There are guides on how to improvise, articles and books on its development and cultural impact, and footage of comedians discussing improv in interviews and documentaries. Yet recordings of improv performances are much less prevalent, despite the fact that they could have significant educational, historical, or entertainment value. Unfortunately, improv theatres are concentrated in major cities, and people who live outside of those areas lack access to improv shows. This limits the scope for researchers as well. Of course, to understand what improv is, or to learn how to do it, there is truly no substitute for watching a show. While this implies the need to physically go to an improv theatre, similar appreciation may be found in recordings, even if the experience can never be fully captured in audiovisual form.

As with other art forms, the structure, style, and techniques of improv have evolved over time, and while there are unifying principles, each theatre also has its own culture and history. Even at a single theatre, an improv show performed today might be very different from one performed there years ago. Without documentation, details of this evolution can be easily lost or forgotten to time. There is no substitute for experiencing a live show in a theatre, but there is a precedent for recording live theatrical performances. One example is the Theatre on Film and Tape (TOFT) Archive at the New York Public Library, which maintains recordings of Broadway, Off-Broadway, and regional theatre productions. This archive was created with the

understanding that live theatre cannot truly be captured. Rather, the goal for the archive is to maintain “study prints” of live performances, which can provide a record of those particular moments in time.¹ There is also precedent for recording and distributing live comedic performances. Popular forms like stand-up and sketch are often filmed in theatres for wider release, and these forms have also been adapted specifically for television and film, but improv has rarely been given the same treatment.

In theory, improv as an art form may seem diametrically opposed to recording, to repeat viewings, and even to the preservation of related works, but that doesn’t necessarily mean that audiovisual records do not exist. There are only a few institutions dedicated to preserving and collecting works related to comedy in general; this includes the Emerson Comedy Archives in Boston, Massachusetts, the National Comedy Center in Jamestown, New York, and the British Stand Up Comedy Archive in Kent, United Kingdom. Recordings of improv shows are not found in these institutions, or in any other academic or archival institutions for that matter, but they can be seen on video-sharing websites like *YouTube* and *Vimeo*. Although it can be difficult to determine the source of the material uploaded to these websites, it seems that recordings of improv shows, when they exist, are most likely held in private collections.

From my own experiences as an audience member at The Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre, an improv theatre in New York City, I occasionally saw a camera set up to record a show I was attending. As a result, I wondered if other improv theatres record some of their performances and had perhaps amassed collections of material. With Internet research, I found little concrete evidence to confirm or deny these suspicions. I decided that the best way to find answers would be to contact improv theatres directly, and the results of those contacts led to the

¹ Royston, Peter. “Living History: The Theatre on Film and Tape Archive.” *Actors’ Equity*

formulation of this thesis. What follows is a brief history of improv comedy, an explanation of its complicated relationship with film and television, case studies of three historic improv theatres, and finally, a collection assessment conducted for the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre.

Chapter 1 A History of Improv Comedy

Before delving into the history of the form, it is necessary to define terms and explain how improv as a comedic genre is understood today. There are many types of comedy, but the two most often associated with improv are sketch and stand-up, which are also performed in live theatrical settings. Most improv theatres also offer sketch and stand-up shows, but the three are distinctive forms that should not be confused. Sketch comedy refers to short scripted scenes performed by a group of people, and may utilize sets, props, and costumes. Stand-up is performed by one person on stage addressing an audience with jokes and stories, which is usually prewritten material. Improvisational theatre, notably Atellan Farce and Commedia Dell'Arte, is the precursor to modern improvisation. These forms used spontaneous dialogue while relying on preconceived plots and stock characters. Improvisation is the contemporary form developed in the 20th century, and it is completely made up on stage. Not all improvisation is comedic, though it tends to be, and the term may be shortened to “improv comedy,” or even more simply, “improv.” The term “alternative comedy” is often associated with improv, but it generally refers to any type of comedy that diverges from the mainstream at a given time.

This history provides a generalized timeline leading up to contemporary improv comedy and discusses some of the major players, but it is not a complete history. It is worth noting that this history provides a mostly American perspective, and one that designates a distinct timeline leading up to the founding of the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre.

The origins of improv can be traced to earlier forms of Western theatre, dating as far back as Ancient Rome in the 3rd Century BCE. The Atellan Farce was a form of improvised comedy often performed after tragic plays. In this farce, also referred to as the Oscan Games, actors played stock characters in comedic situations about politics, domestic squabbles, and

mythological figures, relying heavily on broad comedy and slapstick humor. Some of the most popular performances were developed into scripted plays.² However, it is said that the Emperor Tiberius banned farces in the 1st Century because they mocked the government and incited violent riots.³

A similar form of theatre emerged again in Italy in the 1500s, known as Commedia Dell'Arte. Troupes of six to ten performers used familiar plots and stock characters, with actors usually playing the same type of character throughout their careers. These traveling troupes performed throughout Italy and into other countries in Western Europe. Typically, a basic plot outline was posted backstage before the show, and the actors then improvised the dialogue, often referencing current events and employing suggestive humor.⁴ Scenarios usually revolved around humorous misunderstandings, love triangles, and con games, relying on tropes that audiences would know well. While the plots were repetitive, each show was unique because of the spontaneous dialogue, varied length of scenes, topical humor, and audience reception. Commedia Dell'Arte had a direct impact on scripted comedic theatre of the time, and the form remained popular for the duration of the Renaissance period.⁵

By the 18th century, Commedia Dell'Arte and improvisational theatre fell out of fashion in favor of professional scripted theatre.⁶ Comedic theatre arose in America in the 19th century with minstrelsy and vaudeville, but while there were occasional unrehearsed moments, improvisational theatre was rare. One early example of improvisation in American scripted

² Matt Fotis. *Long Form Improvisation and American Comedy: The Harold*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, 23-24.

³ John Charles Tarver. *Tiberius the Tyrant*. New York: E.P. Dutton and Co., 1902, 360-361.

⁴ Fotis. *Long Form Improvisation*. 24-26.

⁵ Jeffrey Sweet. *Something Wonderful Right Away: An Oral History of Second City and the Compass Players*. 5th ed. New York: Limelight Editions, 2003.

⁶ David Alfred Charles. "The Novelty of Improvisation: Towards a Genre of Embodied Spontaneity." PhD diss. Louisiana State University, 2003, 29-30.

theatre is the 1888 play *Miss Julie*. Playwright August Strindberg did not write dialogue for the monologues, believing that his actors would have a better sense of the character's emotions in the moment and could sense how long their scenes should last.⁷

The resurgence of improvisational theatre in the 20th century is generally attributed one woman, Viola Spolin, a social worker turned theatre coach. In the 1920s, Spolin was working at Hull House in Chicago helping immigrants adapt to American life. She trained under the direction of sociologist Neva L. Boyd, a sociologist and settlement worker who was exploring the idea of using theatre and play to improve life skills. In Spolin's words, Boyd provided "an extraordinary training in the use of games, story-telling, folk dance and dramatics as tools for stimulating creative expression in both children and adults, through self discovery and personal experiencing."⁸ Under the guidance of Boyd, Spolin learned these tools in her time as a social worker, but she had also always had an affinity for theatre. In her book, she recalls her aunts and uncles putting on plays at family gatherings, singing about the trials of moving to America and making jokes at each other's expense; and when she grew older, how she and friends "[tore] the house apart from kitchen to living room as pot covers became breastplates for Cleopatra and her handmaidens and drapes from the window became a cloak for Satan."⁹ With this as her foundation, it seems Spolin was exactly the right person to build upon Boyd's work.

During the Great Depression, Viola Spolin became an acting coach at a settlement-house theatre, and began developing the improvisational games she learned with Neva Boyd, this time to help students act more naturally on stage. Spolin assembled a small troupe of young improvisers to perform at schools in the Chicago area, and it was during this time that they began

⁷ Fotis. *Long Form Improvisation*. 28.

⁸ Viola Spolin. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques*. 3rd ed. Evanston, IL: Northwestern Univ Press, 1986. Preface.

⁹ Ibid.

asking the audience for suggestions to inspire scenes. This is now a mainstay of improv comedy, and many credit Spolin with the idea. Upon moving to Los Angeles, she established the Young Actors Company and continued to experiment with improv games, but her intention was still to use them as an aid for acting in the legitimate theatre.¹⁰

Spolin's son, Paul Sills, grew up with the games she developed and eventually became the one to carry on her ideas, despite his initial interests in traditional theatre. While attending the University of Chicago, Sills met David Shepherd and Eugene Troobnick. The three established the Playwrights Theatre Club in 1953, and ambitiously produced one new play each month.¹¹ The theatre closed in 1955 for a variety reasons, but one of the biggest issues was Shepherd's desire to produce plays at an unsustainable rate. In addition, Sills and Shepherd often clashed over their differing goals. Sills was most interested in the artistic aspects of theatre, but Shepherd wanted something new and groundbreaking. Shepherd took his work very seriously and had long been interested in using theatre as a tool for social change. Shepherd attempted to produce plays so quickly because he wanted them to address current issues. Looking for a solution, he began experimenting with "scenario" plays, for which only outlines were written. After putting on two successful scenario plays, Shepherd convinced Sills to work with him again, and the two established a theatre called The Compass Players.¹²

Unlike The Playwrights Theatre Club, The Compass was designed to bring something new to the theatre world, drawing inspiration from Commedia Dell'Arte, Brechtian cabaret, and Viola Spolin's Theater Games. In fact, once the two had organized a troupe of actors, they flew Spolin to Chicago to conduct a month of workshops, which Sills continued to lead after she left.

¹⁰ Spolin. *Improvisation for the Theater*, Preface.

¹¹ Sweet. *Something Wonderful Right Away*. xx.

¹² Fotis. *Long Form Improvisation* 29-34.

The Compass Players opened in a modest 90-seat theatre in 1955 and enjoyed success with the university crowds almost immediately. In the beginning, they produced one scenario play a week, but they soon added more to the lineup in order to lengthen the show and sell more drinks. During this additional half-hour, the actors solicited suggestions from the audience, briefly discussed ideas backstage, and then returned to improvise scenes. Shows in this era were described as fast-paced, witty, and occasionally uncomfortable. Sometimes scenes went on too long and lacked focus, but they could also be very entertaining. Despite its unpredictable nature, the Compass became so popular that they were forced to move into larger theatres twice. Unfortunately, upon settling into a 250-seat theatre, they realized that they lost intimacy with the audience, something that improv still benefits from today. The move to a new neighborhood also attracted a more affluent crowd, who didn't seem as receptive to their type of humor.¹³

The Compass began to falter in 1957 and gave its final bow that same year. Meanwhile, Shepherd had been testing out the brand in other cities, including New York City, Columbus, Ohio, and St. Louis. New York and Columbus were relative failures, but he found brief success in St. Louis. However, the actors of the St. Louis Compass deviated significantly from Shepherd's vision. The troupe, which included Elaine May, Ted Flicker, and Del Close, was the first to establish guiding rules for improv, which are still used today. The rules they devised were:

1. Agree to the reality that is developed on stage
2. Make active choices over passive ones
3. Because there are no lines or given actions to set a character in motion, you are your character.¹⁴

¹³ Fotis. *Long Form Improvisation* 34-37.

¹⁴ *Ibid*, 39.

These rules emphasize the need for players to support each other on stage, make interesting and unexpected choices, and improvise about things that they know. These principles have persisted even as improv comedy has evolved, and The Compass Players provided a solid foundation for that evolution. Flicker especially promoted improv as an art form, and he worked to make scenes that were tighter and more comedic than those at the Chicago counterpart. Del Close is lauded for his contributions to long form improvisation, which he developed later. Elaine May became famous for her sketch comedy in the duo Nichols and May, with Mike Nichols.¹⁵ Other actors who were associated with The Compass Theatres include Alan Alda, Shelley Berman, Valerie Harper, and Ed Asner.¹⁶ The St. Louis Compass closed in 1958, and although Shepherd continued to revive it in various cities over the next few years, none achieved long-term success.

Despite its short life, The Compass was the first theatre in contemporary times to use experiment with improvisational theatre. It is considered a foundation for the many improv theatres that eventually followed, but none more directly than The Second City. Now regarded as a training ground for comedic talent, Paul Sills, Bernard Sahlins, and Howard Alk founded The Second City in Chicago in 1959. The three intended to build upon what The Compass had achieved, but instead of continuing with scenario plays, The Second City developed a blend of short form improv and sketch comedy shows. One of their most popular and long running formats is the revue, a two-act compilation of scripted sketch scenes, improv games, and music. These revues are comedic and topical, and they helped establish the theatre's reputation for producing quality satire and parodies. The Second City enjoyed immediate success, which led to stints in Toronto and London, followed by their first national tour in 1965. In addition to

¹⁵ Fotis. Long Form Improvisation 38-42.

¹⁶ Sweet. *Something Wonderful Right Away*, np.

receiving large, enthusiastic crowds, they soon discovered that many of their fans were also aspiring comedians. As a result, The Second City started offering improv workshops in 1960. The first official school of improv in the area, The Players Workshop, was founded in 1971, and it was closely associated though not officially affiliated with the theatre. It was eventually overshadowed by The Second City Training Center, which opened in 1985. Second City maintains theatres and training programs in Toronto and Los Angeles. Additional locations appeared in Detroit and Las Vegas but have since closed their doors.¹⁷

The Second City has had a lasting impact on American comedy, and a seemingly endless list of comedians have trained and performed there, including people like Joan Rivers, Bill Murray, Gilda Radner, Steve Carell, Stephen Colbert, and Tina Fey.¹⁸ The Second City is an institution in the improv world, yet it has always heavily featured scripted comedy. There, improv is typically used as a tool to write new sketches and shows, with brainstorming sessions that involve improvising, writing down the most interesting scenes, and re-improvising them. One of the theatre's founders, Bernie Sahlins, denied the potential of improv as anything more than a means to an end; that is, only useful for writing scripted works.¹⁹

The root of Sahlins' skepticism was in his belief that improv usually failed as a coherent theatre piece. Del Close disagreed vehemently, and the conflict between their two opinions ultimately fueled the development of long form improvisation. Del Close is heralded as the father of this form, which he honed slowly over several decades. Following his time with Second City, Close moved to San Francisco in to join The Committee, a sketch theatre founded in 1963 by Second City alums Alan and Jessica Myerson. The Committee's brand of theatre was fiercely

¹⁷ "History." *Second City*. Last modified 2017.

¹⁸ "Meet the People." *Second City*. Last modified 2017.

¹⁹ Fotis. *Long Form Improvisation*. 49.

political, a perfect addition to San Francisco in the 1960s. The Committee had already been attempting longer improvised scenes, but their efforts to produce a legitimate form multiplied with Close's arrival in 1965. What resulted from these experiments was a collection of 20 to 30 improvised scenes called The Harold. This form was unique in that it encouraged the entire ensemble of players to appear in scenes, but most importantly, scenes were meant to relate to one another enough to produce a complete, cohesive performance. The Committee disbanded in 1972, but many of its members found success in TV and film.²⁰ One member, Gary Austin, went on to found the Groundlings in Los Angeles, which became an extremely successful improv and sketch theatre and has contributed a long list of talent to mainstream television and film over the years.

Although the idea for The Harold can be attributed to multiple Committee members, Del Close took the concept back to Second City in 1970, where he hoped to refine it. Close saw long form improv as an art form in which a group of people spontaneously discovers some kind of truth, and that in many cases nothing is funnier than the truth.²¹ He repeatedly tried to incorporate long form improvisation at Second City, but Bernie Sahlins was still not receptive to the idea. At this point, The Harold was unreliable, and despite occasional strokes of genius, it often resulted in shows that were simply not good. Not only that, Close was battling his own demons, and though he was brilliant, he could also be notoriously difficult to work with. Close continued to struggle with The Harold format over the next decade until parting ways with Second City in the early 1980s.

²⁰ Fotis. *Long Form Improvisation*. 49-52.

²¹ Diana DePasquale and Linda M. Lewis. "Yes... And, Here We Are Twenty Years Later: Del Close and the Influence of Long Form Improvisation On Contemporary American Comedy." *Studies in American Humor*. No. 25 (2012), 60.

Meanwhile, David Shepherd, of The Compass Players, developed a form of improv in 1981 called the Improvisational Olympiad. This was a competition in which two improv teams performed ten improv games, and the audience voted for the winner. It was performed at the Players Workshop in Chicago until Shepherd's assistant, Charna Halpern, took over production of the show. Around the same time, Halpern met Del Close. Even though Close wasn't sold on the idea of competitive improv, the two forged a creative and professional partnership and took over the ImprovOlympic Theater in 1983.²² With Charna Halpern, Close found the structure he needed to make the Harold a successful form. This form is known as the 3x3 structure, three beats comprised of three scenes each.

The Harold:

Suggestion

Opening

Beat 1: Scene 1A, 2A, 3A

Group Game

Beat 2: Scene 1B, 2B, 3B

Group Game

Beat 3: Scene 1C, 2C, 3C

To begin, a team of six to nine improvisers (though this number may vary) requests a suggestion from the audience, which may be a word or phrase. With that inspiration, two improvisers step out and begin a scene. Two more scenes follow, and these three scenes make up the first beat. Then there is a group game, in which several or all players step out to perform. The rest of the Harold continues in the same way, with another beat, another group game, and a final beat. Throughout the show, there may be callbacks to earlier moments, and scenes may begin to

²² "Chicago: About." *iO Improv*. Last modified 2016.

relate to each other, but some shows may ultimately be more cohesive than others. The structure was designed to allow for endless creativity and experimentation.²³

The first official rule of the Harold is that there are no rules, but improv depends on guidelines to work, and the Harold structure made the anything-goes attitude truly possible.²⁴ The rules devised by The Compass Players in the 1950s continued to influence improv even as long form improvisation was developed, and somewhere down the line, the major rule of improv became “Yes, And...” The phrase brings together the idea of agreeing with the reality put forth on stage and introducing new and interesting ideas.²⁵ It is probably the most well known improv concept, even amongst those unfamiliar with improv. However, no one has determined exactly when this phrase was introduced, or whom it can be attributed to. Close and Halpern also introduced several guidelines for what not to do in improv. They insisted that improvisers shouldn’t try to be funny, and that instead humor should develop naturally in a scene.²⁶

With a finalized structure and some simple rules to live by, at long last, long form improvisation was truly born, and it was given a home at ImprovOlympic. Soon, The Harold was being used within the ImprovOlympic’s competitive format, and the theatre started offering training in long form improvisation. Close and Halpern began establishing multiple Harold teams, which gave many students the chance actually perform on stage in the theatre. The Second City was very selective and only put on a few shows at one time, but Harold teams at ImprovOlympic were always changing, and the abundance of opportunities to perform contributed to the success of their training program. Close established a reputation as the improv

²³ Charna Halpern, Del Close, and Kim Johnson. *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation*. Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether Pub, 133-147.

²⁴ DePasquale. “Yes...And.” 59.

²⁵ Halpern et al. *Truth in Comedy*, 46-47.

²⁶ Fotis. *Long Form Improvisation*. 59.

“guru” at the theatre, and most aspiring improvisers wanted to learn from him despite his harsh and intimidating personality. Many great Harold teams in this time assisted in the success of the form, but the work that Del Close and Charna Halpern did to develop a legitimate style of long form improvisation cannot be overstated. Today, Halpern still runs the theatre, which has locations in Chicago and Los Angeles. Following a long legal battle with the U.S. Olympic Committee over the theatre’s name, it is now known simply as iO.²⁷

Along with The Second City, iO has helped solidify Chicago as the home of improv comedy, and while improv had been brought to other cities, one city remained particularly elusive. In the 1990s, the comedy scene in New York City was devoted to stand-up comedy, and there was virtually no improv there until the Upright Citizens Brigade arrived in 1996.

The Upright Citizens Brigade began as a troupe of improvisers who had trained at both Second City and iO. The lineup shifted in the early years and included people like Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, Matt Walsh, Adam McKay, Amy Poehler, Horatio Sanz, Armando Diaz, Ali Farahnakian, and Adam McKay.²⁸ They were loyal to their mentor Del Close and to the Harold form, but they also enjoyed creating a particularly wild type of improv. The early recurring show *Kilgore* was “so bloody that they often just wrapped the theatre in plastic wrap.”²⁹ Another, called *Virtual Reality*, often went beyond the confines of the theatre. Sometimes, they would take a member from the audience on a car ride around Chicago, film it, then return to the theatre to show the footage.³⁰ On one particularly night, they decided to stage a fake protest by bringing the entire audience out of the theatre and onto the street. Brandishing tiki torches and prop guns, they

²⁷ Fotis. *Long Form Improvisation*. 62.

²⁸ Brian Raferty. “And...Scene.” *New York Magazine*. September 26, 2011.

²⁹ Fotis. *Long Form Improvisation*. 127.

³⁰ *Ibid*, 128.

stopped traffic and created a scene of feigned anarchy. Horatio Sanz claims that he had been determined to get arrested right until the moment the cops showed up, recalling:

I was like, this is cool, awesome! And then I felt the blue of the police cars. So I had to make up my mind really quickly whether or not I wanted to give up the bit... but I decided I was going to get arrested for the show, and I figured these guys could do the rest of the show without me. So I yelled, "Fight the power! Fight the power!" and was thrown into the back of a police car and taken away.³¹

By 1996, the Upright Citizens Brigade was composed of Matt Besser, Amy Poehler, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh, often referred to as the UCB Four. Determined to get on television, the four decided to move to New York City, and they started putting on small improv and sketch shows at spots like KGB Bar and Solo Arts.³² In these early days, UCB developed a long form show called *Asssscat 3000*, a name that comes simply from a really bad show they did once.³³ The format uses a guest monologist to tell stories that inspire the scenes, and early monologists included comedians like Janeane Garofalo, Conan O'Brien, and Tina Fey.³⁴ Today, *Asssscat* is still performed for free every Sunday at the theatre, and it is considered their flagship show.

The UCB took some time to find an audience in New York, but many aspiring comedians were interested in their particular brand of comedy. Before they even had a theatre of their own, the UCB members were teaching classes and putting together teams to perform under their umbrella. Their motto became "Don't Think," which "started as a directive from Del, transformed into a comment on corporate doublespeak, and now serves as the guiding principle for [the] school and theater."³⁵ It is meant to drive home the idea of not trying too hard on stage

³¹ *The UCB Show*. "All We Ever Do Is Fight to the Death." Season 2, Episode 2. *Seeso*. 2017.

³² Raferty. "And...Scene."

³³ Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh. *The Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual*. New York: Comedy Council of Nicea, LLC, 2014.

³⁴ Raferty. "And...Scene."

³⁵ Amy Poehler. *Yes Please*. New York: Dey Street Books, 2014, 196.

to be funny, or to think about what to say or do next. This guideline can be traced back to Viola Spolin's advice to "Get out of the head and into the space."³⁶

After only two years in New York, the UCB struck a deal with Comedy Central, and their sketch show, *The Upright Citizens Brigade*, ran for three seasons from 1998 to 2000.³⁷ The UCB have said that the sketches used on their show were developed from early improv shows, which they taped with the intention of watching for sketch inspiration.³⁸ The show itself was low-rated but achieved cult status. While making the series, the group also established their first theatre space in 1999 in what was formerly a strip club.³⁹ In 2003, they moved to their current space, a basement below a supermarket in Chelsea. Throughout this time, the UCB continued to teach and develop their own curriculum, which was inspired by their time learning from Del Close, but with the intention of grounding it further, according to Matt Besser:

Del was all about experimentation, and let's just run everything up the flagpole. Let's use this beautiful chaos and anarchy and creativity, and use all these different forms. And that's what made that era so great. What our theatre brought was, take all this stuff and codify it, and have it make more sense so it's easier to understand.⁴⁰

The Upright Citizens Brigade now maintains four theatres, including one in New York's East Village and two locations in Los Angeles. The UCB Training Center distinguishes itself as the only accredited improv and sketch school in the country.⁴¹ Following the death of Del Close in 1999, UCB held a 24-hour improv marathon in his honor, called The Del Close Marathon. They have continued to hold the marathon every year since, though now it lasts 56 hours and

³⁶ Charles. "The Novelty of Improvisation." 26.

³⁷ Carleton Atwater. "Looking Back at *The Upright Citizens Brigade*." *Splitsider*. March 24, 2011.

³⁸ Nathan Rabin. "Amy Poehler." *The AV Club*. March 31, 2008. Some of these tapes still exist in the collection. Please refer to "Content" in Chapter 4 of this thesis.

³⁹ Raferty. "And...Scene."

⁴⁰ Chloe Schildhause. "An Oral History On The Evolution Of The Upright Citizens Brigade And Its Influence On Improv." *Uproxx*. February 17, 2015.

⁴¹ "Mission." *Upright Citizens Brigade Training Center*. Last modified 2017.

takes place across multiple theatres in New York City.⁴² In a relatively short period of time, The Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre has joined the ranks of few most successful improv theatres in the United States, and has begun churning out talented comedians and writers on par with The Second City, iO, and The Groundlings.

UCB serves as the focal point for this thesis. However, there are many other great figures and theatres in American improv. In addition to the UCB Four, other former students of Second City and iO have gone on to start their own theatres, including ImprovBoston, The People's Improv Theatre (PIT) and Magnet Theater, both in New York City.^{43 44} On the other hand, The Annoyance Theatre, which has locations in Chicago and Brooklyn, was born out of opposition to iO and the Harold form.⁴⁵ Other major American cities like Washington D.C., San Francisco, Seattle, and Austin, have rising improv comedy scenes. There are theatres that focus on short form improv, those that focus on long form, and some that offer a mix of both. Ten people can improvise together, or just two. One person can improvise alone. In Canada, Keith Johnstone is revered for founding a style of improv called Theatresports, which can be seen at its home theatre in Calgary, The Loose Moose, and at other theatres in both Canada and The United States.⁴⁶ There is also a growing interest in improv comedy outside of North America. UCB's Del Close Marathon has welcomed improv teams from further-reaching places like Iceland, Sweden, and Spain. Australians interested in Chicago-style improv can learn from the Laugh-Masters Academy in Sydney and Melbourne.⁴⁷ Improv comedy is on the rise all over, but

⁴² DePasquale. "Yes...And." 59.

⁴³ "Home." *Improv Boston*. Last modified 2017.

⁴⁴ Fotis. *Long Form Improvisation*. 134.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

⁴⁶ "About." *The Loose Moose Theatre Company*.

⁴⁷ "Home." *Laugh-Masters Academy*. Last modified 2017.

truthfully, improvisational theatre has long existed in many different forms all over the world throughout history.

Chapter 2 Improv in Film and Television

My motivations for this thesis include not only a love of improv comedy, but also my inability to locate archival collections related to it, and in the realization that there is a relative dearth of improv content available anywhere else. Improv is rarely adapted for film and television compared to other forms of comedy, and there is ongoing debate about whether or not the form could be successful in these mediums. In this chapter, I will discuss the limited improv-related content that can be found commercially or online, and why the nature of improv makes it harder to capture on camera than other forms like sketch and stand-up.

It is very uncommon to see improv on film and television, but there are seemingly endless examples of other comedy forms on these platforms. Stand-up comedy is regularly featured in television series, late night talk shows, and one-off specials. Hosts of late night series usually open with comedic monologues, and beginning with the Johnny Carson era of *The Tonight Show*, late night shows also feature guest comics. Late night appearances launched the careers of many famous comedians, like Joan Rivers, George Carlin, and Jerry Seinfeld, and many stand-up comedians developed their own sitcoms, like *Seinfeld*, which includes stand-up vignettes. There are series devoted entirely to stand-up, like *Live at Gotham*, *Def Comedy Jam*, *The Meltdown with Jonah and Kumail*, *Comedy Central Presents*, and *HBO Comedy Half Hour*. Stand-up television specials became popular in the 1970s with comedians like Richard Pryor, George Carlin, and Steve Martin.⁴⁸ These sets are recorded in front of a live audience, and while they are occasionally produced for theatrical release, stand-up specials are now ubiquitous in

⁴⁸ Wayne Federman. "From Sullivan to CK: a History of Modern American Standup Comedy in 10 Steps." *Splitsider*. September 30, 2015.

television comedy. Stand-up has also been featured in narrative films, such as *Man on the Moon* (1999), *Sleepwalk with Me* (2012), and *Obvious Child* (2014).⁴⁹

Sketch comedy has maintained a presence on television since the dawn of the medium with *Your Show of Shows*, which came on the air in 1950. Other popular early sketch shows include *The Carol Burnett Show* and *Rowan & Martin's Laugh-In*. These have since been followed by series like *Saturday Night Live*, *Mad TV*, *Tracy Ullman's Show*, *Key & Peele*, *Portlandia*, and many others.⁵⁰ As with sketch comedy performed on stage, some sketch television shows develop material with improvisation, and many of them build their cast with performers who started out at improv theatres, but these programs never showcase improv itself.

Improv is typically used to inspire sketch writing, but it may also be used in television and film on occasion. Shows like *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and *The League*, and films like *Jeff*, *Who Lives at Home* (2011) and *Your Sister's Sister* (2012) are considered semi-scripted or semi-improvisational.^{51 52} These each have clearly defined plots, while much of the dialogue is improvised for realistic or comedic effect. Many other scripted shows and movies allow actors to improvise a take or two, but these takes rarely make it into the final cut. The many predetermined factors in semi-improvisational works make this kind of improv very different from the theatrical short and long form styles of improv.

Easily the most well known example of improv in television or film is *Whose Line is it Anyway*, "The show where everything's made up and the points don't matter." The series is an

⁴⁹ Wil Barlow. "7 Films That Got Serious About Stand-Up Comedy." *IndieWire*. November 12, 2015.

⁵⁰ Sam Adams et al. "40 Greatest Sketch-Comedy TV Shows of All Time." *Rolling Stone*. March 27, 2015.

⁵¹ Joe Berkowitz. "How To Do Semi-Scripted TV, From A Guy Who Wrote For "Seinfeld" And "Curb" - And Created "The League." *Fast Company*. September 25, 2013.

⁵² Justin Chang, "Review: Your Sister's Sister." *Variety*. September 14, 2011.

import from the British show of the same name. It aired on ABC from 1998 to 2007 and was revived on the CW in 2013.⁵³ It revolves around short form improv games like “Scenes from A Hat,” which asks the performers to act out a very brief scene based on a prompt the host pulls from a hat. Games can also be musical in nature, like “Greatest Hits,” which asks two players to promote a greatest hits compilation album based on a topic suggested by the audience, while another player makes up songs for it.⁵⁴ The rapid fire, joke-heavy style of short form improv makes it suitable for television, like a game show without the stakes.

The success of *Whose Line* proves that improv can work on screen, but a long form improv series has never been achieved. The Upright Citizens Brigade has had success with sketch on television, and they have also tried several times to bring long form improv to the small screen. UCB has made two specials of their show *Asssscat*, one of which aired on Bravo in 2005, while the other came out on DVD in 2008.⁵⁵ Both hour-long specials feature the UCB Four and several other performers improvising in front of a live audience, and the result is very similar to the *Asssscat* shows that can be seen every week at the UCB Theatre. In 2013, UCB partnered with Showtime to air an improv special promoting the Showtime series *House of Lies*. The cast of the series, only some of whom are seasoned improvisers, performed a long form improv show at the UCB Theatre in Los Angeles, and the end result was edited into a half-hour special.⁵⁶

Improv is also rarely seen on film, though a few recent offerings give a sense of the improv world, if not what the experience of an improv show is truly like. The 2016 fiction film *Don't Think Twice* follows a popular improv team in New York, and how the group reacts when

⁵³ Kayla Cobb. “The CW’s Makeover of ‘Whose Line’ Is One of the Smartest Revivals Out There.” *Decider*. June 2, 2016.

⁵⁴ *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* “Show No. 431.” ABC. March 7, 2002.

⁵⁵ *ASSSSCAT: Improv*. Bravo. September 7, 2005. Also see Rabin. “Amy Poehler.”

⁵⁶ Whitney Friedlander. “‘House of Lies’ Improv Show Offers New Year’s Laughs.” *Variety*. December 23, 2013.

one of them gets a big break on a television show. The film has several scenes of improv performances, though they are only excerpts, as it wouldn't make sense to show a complete long form show within a narrative film. However, it does a good job depicting the experience of an improv show, and the film was lauded by critics and improvisers alike for its accurate portrayal of the improv community.⁵⁷

There are a number of documentaries that present improv with varying degrees of success. The UCB's own documentary *Thank You, Del Close* (2016) was filmed at the 15th Annual Del Close Marathon, but it only gives brief glimpse of the shows therein, and as such can't offer viewers a complete understanding of the performances. Most documentaries about long form improv suffer from this problem, and they are much better at conveying the culture of improv and the experience of attending these shows. The 2009 documentary film *Trust Us, This is All Made Up*⁵⁸ follows two Second City improvisers, T.J. Jagodowski and David Pasquesi, at their monthly New York show *T.J. and Dave*. Their long form performance makes up the bulk of the film, along with interviews with the two discussing improv. This is probably the best showcase of long form improv on film, though UCB's one-off television specials get even closer to the real thing by focusing purely on the performance without additional documentary elements.

Other publically available recordings of improv shows can be found on video-sharing websites like *YouTube*. For example, full recordings of some shows at UCB, like *Cage Match* and class showcases, can be found on these sites.⁵⁹ Similar recordings can be found of shows at various improv theatres around the country. Despite the low quality, these are some of the best

⁵⁷ "Don't Think Twice." *Rotten Tomatoes*. Last modified 2017.

⁵⁸ Elise Czajkowski. "Trust Us, This Is All Made Up: Explaining Long-Form Improv to the Masses." *Splitsider*. April 24, 2012.

⁵⁹ "NYComedy." *YouTube*, last modified May 2017.

depictions of improv comedy because they are filmed live at a theatre. The improvisers are performing for an audience, not specifically for the camera, as they might be for a television or film production. Unfortunately, random users are responsible for uploading these files, which makes them poorly organized and also raises questions about piracy, copyright, and ownership. From a preservation perspective, one certainly can't rely on these recordings to be available in the long term, either.⁶⁰

From these limited options, it is clear that there is hesitation to present improv outside of a live theatrical setting, though opinions vary about its potential. Ryan Stiles, one of the main performers on *Whose Line Is It Anyway?*, gave his thoughts in an interview as to why he thinks long form isn't suited to television in the way short form is:

Long form, you usually get one suggestion at the beginning, and you can do an hour on that one suggestion. So the audience really isn't involved as far as suggesting throughout the show... And I think people like it when you switch up the games. Because, you know, they want music in it, they want to see different people in different scenes.⁶¹

It may seem that Stiles is partial to short form improv due to his work on *Whose Line*, and some performers do prefer one form to the other. However, in the same interview, Stiles notes that he owns a theatre in Washington State and enjoys doing long form improv there.⁶² Here he is pointing out the inherent difference between long and short form improv. He makes valid points that short form allows for more variety and audience interaction. Short form is fast-paced and joke-heavy, whereas long form is more of a journey, as the performers are figuring out what the story is as it unfolds. Short form can also be easily edited. If a particular scene doesn't

⁶⁰ On the trouble with relying on websites like YouTube as preservation platforms, see Fraimow, Rebecca. 2014. "Preserving Transformative Video Works." *Transformative Works and Cultures*, no. 17.

⁶¹ Keller, Joel. "Ryan Stiles on Why Long Form Improv Doesn't Work on TV." *Splitsider*. May 5, 2011.

⁶² *Ibid.*

work or isn't particularly funny, it can simply be cut out of the program. Long form, on the other hand, is a cohesive piece. To edit out a portion of it would disrupt the flow of the show and confuse viewers. There is also the undying question of how much liveness matters, and whether long form improv is best seen in person. Amy Poehler, one of the owners of the UCB Theatre, also has shared her thoughts on the subject.

It is such a live feeling. There's nothing like watching a live performance of, frankly, anything. You have to make sure that people believe everything is improvised... We used to videotape a lot in the beginning, to get ideas for sketches for our old sketch show. But we really don't [film many shows], and that's why we wanted to make a special presentation to do ASSSSCAT, just show all the different people who participate in it, and also show how improv can work, and not feel like really game-showy.⁶³

In this interview, Poehler was promoting the Asssscat DVD that was released in 2008. She saw it as an opportunity to show long form improv to the general public, but it is clear that she thinks of these presentations as singular events. Most improvisers and fans agree that improv benefits from liveness and spontaneity, and that long form improv is best experienced in a theatre. On the other hand, UCB Theatre co-owner Matt Besser feels much more strongly about the its potential to succeed on television.

Yes, I definitely think long form translates to TV. When people videotape their improv show and say 'Oh, it doesn't translate to video,' that means their show wasn't very good, to me. If you have a scene that you improvise and it's truly funny from beginning to end, on its own merits, not just because it's being improvised, that scene should be able to be written up. People say 'Improv won't work because you have to be there.' That's only the improv where you're going 'Oh, it's neat to watch them fail.' That's improv that's still not good enough... So, if you are improvising scenes that are good enough to be written up as a sketch, the only differences between that scene and a sketch are costumes, sets and props. I think there is a segment of our society that's willing to suspend disbelief and imagine the sets, the props, and costumes, and just enjoy the sketch, improvised or written.⁶⁴

⁶³ Rabin. "Amy Poehler."

⁶⁴ Vossprov. "What The Greats Have Said About Long-Form on TV: Matt Besser, Improv Interviews, 2006." *Tumblr*. July 17, 2012.

Besser makes a compelling argument, and people who attend improv shows regularly will appreciate his point. If something is funny, then it shouldn't really matter whether it was prewritten or improvised. A lot of long form improv shows aren't very good because improvising takes practice, but well-trained and experienced teams can and do put on reliably entertaining shows on a weekly basis.

Beyond the need to scout proper talent, there is concern for the technical realities of putting long form improv on television. Dick Chudnow, founder of the style of improv called ComedySportz, explained, "A big problem is the actual filming. Where to put the cameras, what angle to put the cameras."⁶⁵ He claims that *Whose Line is It Anyway?* was considered relatively easy to shoot because it was confined to a small space.⁶⁶ Improvisers in long form sometimes test the limits of the space they are performing in. They might climb a wall, hang from the rafters, or run into the audience. There is no certainty of where they will go or what they will do, but that sense of spontaneity could be hampered in a television setting. The presence of cameras might even cause improvisers to act differently, and they would almost certainly have to censor themselves in some way, whether for language or content.

The beauty of an improv show is that no one knows what it will be, but television doesn't work well with that level of uncertainty. Each long form show produces vastly different results. The subject matter could be nearly anything, and inevitably, some shows turn out funnier and more cohesive than others. Perhaps with the right team and producers, a long form television show could succeed one day. Some believe it can work, but the general consensus leans more

⁶⁵ Brainne Edge. "Comedy Improvisation on Television: Does it Work?" *Comedy Studies*. Vol. 1 Issue 1 (2010), 107.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*

towards skepticism. The ephemerality of improv shows is a crucial characteristic to this debate, but in spite of wariness about putting improv on television, the following chapters prove that there is much more openness amongst improvisers about recording improv shows as they occur in the theatre.

Chapter 3 Case Studies: The Groundlings, iO Chicago, and The Second City

Knowing that recordings of improv shows exist online, I was curious to learn if improv theatres also had collections of material documenting their own histories and the larger history of the form. Theatres often keep items from past productions, but since improv doesn't utilize sets, scripts, costumes, or props, improv theatres probably accumulate less ephemera than the average theatre. Through my research, I found that improv theatres do have collections that include audiovisual material, photographs, posters, and programs. They also have differing views about recording improv shows, and their preservation efforts vary significantly. The next sections use a set of interviews I conducted with three of the longest running and most influential improv theatres in America - The Groundlings, iO Chicago, and The Second City – and discuss what I learned about their collections and archival practices.

The Groundlings

The Groundlings was founded in 1974 in Los Angeles and maintains a theatre and school. According to the Managing Director, Heather de Michele, The Groundlings has been working for the past seven years to collect and digitize works in their collection.⁶⁷ In a brief email correspondence, she claimed they “do have a pretty good record of the past 43 years” and provided a few details about the archival efforts they have made so far.

The theater has digitized all of their photographs and slides and stores them on a private Flickr account. They have also digitized some tapes, and currently maintain over 1800 video files of sketch and improv performances on a private Vimeo Pro account. This account is accessible only to staff to and students in the school, who will typically use the files as a learning aid. These

⁶⁷ Heather De Michele. Email message to author. January 11, 2017.

two websites provide video and image hosting, which may be appropriate for access, but they are not preservation-level storage services. Flickr has been accused of increasing compression of stored files, which results in a loss of quality and metadata.⁶⁸ Vimeo Pro, on the other hand, warns that users will lose access to their files if their account expires. In the FAQ, they claim files can be recovered for up to a year if the account's subscription is reestablished.⁶⁹ It is clear that these types of services cannot be relied upon for archival storage, and that if the company wishes to ensure the long-term existence of these materials, The Groundlings should have other storage practices in place.

The Groundlings occasionally provides access to their archive of works when specific requests are made, like for truTV's comedy documentary series *truInside*, which aired an episode in 2015 highlighting The Groundlings and shows brief clips of their stage shows. On websites like *YouTube* and *Vimeo*, one can find footage of Groundlings student performances, which are usually filmed without authorization by someone in the audience. The Groundlings is aware of these videos and does not mind that they are online, but they are much more protective of their main stage shows and prefer to keep them private.

De Michele claims that preservation is a high priority for the theatre, and it seems that The Groundlings is most interested in providing access to recorded works for those associated with the theatre, with occasional exceptions. However, their current efforts do not include considerations of long-term preservation, and this is likely because staff at the theatre simply have little knowledge of what that requires. If these digital files are their priority, then The Groundlings would be wise to establish an inventory to track what they have, maintain copies of their files in a different storage system, and attempt to track file fixity. The good news is that The

⁶⁸ "Help for Flickr." *Yahoo*. Last modified 2017.

⁶⁹ "Help Center: Vimeo Pro." *Vimeo*. Last modified 2016.

Groundlings is interested in preserving the history of their theatre, as well as provide access to their collection in certain cases.

iO Chicago

I spoke over the phone with Rachel Copel, Assistant Manager at iO Chicago.⁷⁰ Copel wears many hats at the theatre, including managing the box office and floor staff, overseeing internships, and serving as a personal assistant to Charna Halpern. The theatre does not employ an archivist, so Copel is responsible for that work as well, though she admits she has little time to devote to it. She describes the theatre as being like a scrapbook, with its history strewn all about. There has never been an inventory, database, or system of organization; rather, they simply have to know where things in the collection are stored. Even so, Copel still occasionally finds a box of items that she has never seen before somewhere in the theatre.

According to Copel, Charna Halpern and Del Close were always interested in keeping a record of their theatre since its founding. From the beginning, they collected photographs, press clippings, and recordings. Close liked to record himself performing improvised monologues, and he also taped shows at the theatre using a Betacam. Copel explains that this imagery of Del with a camera, lingering in the shadows at the back of theatre, is almost legend amongst iO members now.

While earlier shows were recorded on tape, in the past five years iO has partnered with a live streaming service called *Gigity* to record their shows. These shows are live streamed into the theatre's greenroom for performers to watch while offstage, and a digital file can be reviewed on *Gigity*'s website after their show. Copel compared improvisers reviewing shows to sports teams

⁷⁰ Rachel Copel. Phone conversation with author. January 17, 2017.

reviewing their athletic performances. Live streams and past performances are also available to paying customers on *Gigity*'s website. Other improv theatres that use this service include Chicago's Annoyance Theatre and Under the Gun Theater, Second City's Studio Theater Hollywood, and The Hideout Theatre in Austin.⁷¹

When the live streaming concept was first presented at iO, there was some pushback from performers at the theatre. A few were wary of the idea of filming an improv show, which is only meant to be experienced once. Many also believed that performing for a camera and performing for a live audience produce very different results. However, most of the improvisers did not actually mind being filmed, but instead took issue with the fact that people would be paying to watch a live stream. Teams at iO perform free, as they do at most improv theatres, but they do so for a paying audience. Many of them didn't want to perform for even more paying customers while still receiving no compensation. Regardless, these criticisms did not stop iO from continuing with the *Gigity* partnership, and according to Copel, improvisers got used to the idea. She claims that many of them found that being able to watch their performances after the fact made recording shows worthwhile.

Recently, *Gigity*'s future has become uncertain, and the company is soon expected to fold or get bought out by another company. iO already stores their digital files on a local server, so they are not concerned about losing content if *Gigity* shuts down, but Copel is concerned about their future of live streaming and recording shows at iO. She and the theatre's Technical Director, Adam Kurschat, are considering setting up an internal live streaming system, though Copel worries it would be a huge undertaking.

⁷¹ "Venues." *Gigity.TV*. Last modified 2017.

Most of the tapes, photographs, and paper documents in iO's collection have not been digitized, and their physical storage does not meet preservation standards, but like The Groundlings, iO does have preservation on its mind. Still, with archiving and preservation, there is always more work to be done. Copel and her fellow staff may want to become more proactive about preserving their digital content by creating copies and backups, and establishing fixity protocols. It would be wise to create an inventory, decide how best to organize and store the physical items, and consider digitization at some point. There is likely a lot of interesting work waiting to be revealed at this theatre. Copel says that iO is proud of their history and willing to share it, but that they usually don't receive requests from researchers, journalists, or documentarians. Of course, it is hard to know about something that is never publicized, and it is likely that most people are simply unaware of the treasures that might be found in iO's unofficial archive.

The Second City

Of these three theatres, Second City has made the most formal effort to establish an archive and pursue long-term preservation of their works. I discussed these efforts in a phone conversation with Chris Pagnozzi, who is the theatre's first and only A/V Archivist, a position he has held for ten years.⁷² Pagnozzi is not a trained archivist but has a background in performance and production. He first interned as a video editor at Second City in 2001, pulling scenes from tapes and compiling them on new tapes. In 2007, he returned to Second City as the theatre was preparing to celebrate their 50th anniversary, and his job was to go through boxes and find relevant material to edit together. At the time, Second City staff had no idea what they had or how long it would take to go through, but they carved out three weeks for him to work. When

⁷² Chris Pagnozzi. Phone conversation with author. January 13, 2017

staff members realized just how much material there was, they decided they should employ an archivist, and Pagnozzi's three-week job turned into a ten-year career.

The Second City has a large collection of material containing paper documents, news clippings, photographs, film, and videotape, which are products of the theatre's nearly 60-year history. He also handles some of Second City Toronto's works. While he does maintain an inventory, Pagnozzi admits that there is still a backlog of boxes that haven't been addressed yet. He works alone, and the majority of his time is spent managing the archives, handling requests, and editing. The Second City films all of their revues, which consist of two scripted acts and an improvised third act. However, the third act is usually not recorded, and Pagnozzi explains that the theatre has no interest in filming improvised performances. If for some reason an improv set does get recorded, Pagnozzi is not required to archive it. As a result, the bulk of Second City's archival collection focuses on scripted content. Second City still predominately uses improv as a writing tool, and they maintain the idea that improv is only meant to be experienced once. This is a stark contrast to the positions held by The Groundlings and iO, who both find value in recording improv shows for educational purposes, and are also beginning to see their historical value as well.

In terms of storage, Pagnozzi shared that the entire collection is housed in two separate climate-controlled locations. He made this decision several years ago but felt particularly rewarded last year when Second City had a fire. While the historic theatre did suffer some damage, its archival materials were safely stored offsite. The theatre's digital works, which include digitized tape files, scanned photographs, and regularly recorded performances, are stored on a server at Second City. There is also a sub collection of digitized files related to *SCTV* that is stored on the local server, while the original physical items are stored in a vault in Canada.

Digital files are also stored with CatDV, a service that utilizes multiple storage providers such as Amazon S3 and Xendata. Second City performers have access to these files on CatDV. Pagnozzi scans photos himself but uses a vendor for film and tape transfers, and he is in the process of backing up files to LTO tape.

Due to the Second City's long history and reputation as a training ground for successful comedians, Pagnozzi regularly receives requests for access to the archive from reporters, authors and producers. He has provided footage for local news shows, television and film documentaries, and even fictional works. Last year's film *Don't Think Twice* featured clips from Second City's early years, and Pagnozzi shared that he recently provided footage and photographs for an upcoming Showtime documentary. He also maintains an ongoing partnership with the comedy website *Splitsider*, providing clips for their feature "The Second City Archives," which is updated a few times each month. Pagnozzi notes that this partnership exists mostly to promote the theatre, but that he also appreciates sharing bits and pieces of the archive with the public. He explained that Actor's Equity and union rules prevent them from providing digital access on a grander scale.^{73 74}

Although Pagnozzi received no official training in archives and preservation, he has made a strong effort to learn best practices and establish a successful archive for Second City, one that serves to preserve the theatre's works and provide regular access to them. Looking forward, he mostly focuses on keeping up with the ever-changing technology used in the field, though the backlog of material is always on his mind. Second City's archive may be the most fully realized archive for theatres of its kind, and Pagnozzi has done an admirable job of

⁷³ Mitchell McGuire. "The Fine Print: Equity's Rules for Filming or Taping Stage Productions." *Backstage*. January 24, 2008.

⁷⁴ World Intellectual Property Organization. "Performer's Rights - Background Brief."

establishing it. Second City is the oldest surviving improv theatre, and one of the most famous, so it is surprising that it can't be considered a major resource for improv-related archival works.

For the purposes of this thesis, it was impractical to conduct an extensive survey of the entire improv theatre world, but these three brief case studies illuminate some of the challenges of preservation and access for collections held by a few of the oldest theatres. The Groundlings, iO, and Second City have each taken a different approach, but the common thread amongst them is that they do in fact have extensive records of their histories and are attempting preservation at varying levels. Yet, for reasons related to rights, technological hurdles, and performance philosophy, they don't publicize this information. Internet research barely hints at the existence of these archives, let alone the contents within, and the covert nature of these collections suggests that there could be more material tucked away in theatres across the country and beyond. In the next chapter, I provide an in-depth assessment of one such hidden collection, held by The Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre in New York.

Chapter 4 Assessment of UCB Collection

Process and Goals

I have been attending shows at the Upright Citizens Brigade Theatre for several years, and though I was never interested in learning to improvise, I became enamored with improv as a philosophy and form of entertainment. At some point it occurred to me that two of the things I care about most - improv and preservation - might be philosophically polar opposites. I began exploring these thoughts and considering it as a thesis topic. Then in the summer of 2016, I went to The 18th Annual Del Close Marathon, where the UCB Four was promoting a documentary they produced about Del and the marathon itself. As they discussed making the movie, one of them mentioned that they pored over a lot of old tapes looking for footage to use. In that moment, the archivist in me immediately needed to know more - How many tapes are there? What kind of condition are they in? Has UCB ever thought about preservation?

Once I knew that UCB had old tapes, I sent emails to a couple of UCB staff members, hoping simply to get confirmation on the existence of a collection and maybe have a few questions answered. To my surprise, I got a response from someone at the theatre offering to set up a meeting with the Managing Director, Alex Sidtis. When we met, Alex shared that the theatre did have a lot of material, but that they had made no significant efforts towards archiving and preserving it. I had come to the meeting prepared to make a case for the importance of preservation, but Alex needed no convincing. He wasn't proud to tell me that UCB hadn't done any work to that effect, admitting, "Preservation has been on mind for a while, but you know how it is. Who's going to do it?" I understood. For those in charge of making institutional decisions, preservation often begs the question: Who will do it, and how should it be done?

After he shared these concerns, I proposed the idea of doing an assessment, which would be mutually beneficial for us. For me, an assessment would be a vital part of my thesis, and it would mean gaining access to a collection that truly excites me. For Alex, an assessment would help UCB achieve intellectual control over their materials and provide a crucial starting point for additional preservation efforts. He was immediately receptive to the idea, and so the decision was made.

I completed the work for this assessment during January and February 2017 at the UCB office in New York City. I had approval and cooperation from Alex Sidtis and from UCB's Creative Director, Nathan Russell. Alex's Executive Assistant, Meena Sajwani, provided generous help throughout the process. With this assessment, I hope to give a clear understanding of the collection for UCB's purposes, through both high-level and item-level description. An accompanying spreadsheet inventory details the physical audiovisual collection, much of which I labeled with unique identifiers.⁷⁵ In the following sections, I provide an overview of the collection's content and condition, along with information about collections care, intellectual control, and copyright. This assessment will give UCB a greater understanding of their collection and what they should focus on going forward.

Content of the Collection

UCB's collection is housed at the main office in New York City and includes audiovisual content, paper materials, and digital media. Physical items are stored in different areas of the office and can be found in boxes, plastic bins, a suitcase, and a filing cabinet. Many of the items have been labeled with unique identifiers, which are referenced in this section.

⁷⁵ Please note that the spreadsheet inventory is restricted. It was created for UCB's use and is not available to the public.

The audiovisual collection totals exactly 1500 items in a variety of formats, many of which document performances that UCB has produced from the 1990s to the present. The majority of the collection is comprised of DVD, CD, VHS, and Mini-DV tapes, with a few outliers, including Betacam SP, Digibeta, Hi-8, XLII, Zip, and DVCam. Many of these items appear to be partial or complete recordings of shows. While I only viewed a few DVD items from the collection, it was clear that these recordings are quite varied in terms of quality and filming style. Item UCB_495, titled “Real World” and filmed circa 2000, documents the entire hour-long show, but the image is dark and fuzzy, and the performers can be difficult to hear at times. This can be attributed to the low quality of the original VHS copy, a potentially poor DVD transfer, and the fact that it was shot in a dark basement. Shows like these are performed for the live audience, and the camera seems to be an afterthought in many cases. However, there are also more sophisticated recordings in the collection. UCB_509, “Maude - Arbuckle” shows a team performing at *Maude Night*, UCB’s regular sketch showcase. It was shot from two angles and edited together, and has a higher quality overall. It is safe to assume that with this many items in the collection, and with the work spanning two decades, quality will vary. Works that seem to be very poor quality may not be lost causes, however. A high-quality digitization vendor can produce great results, and for digital files that need additional editing, restoration software can be used for specific needs, like smoothing out audio and color-correction.

Most of the audiovisual items have some kind of handwritten label, but some titles are clearer than others, and several don’t have titles at all. Frequently recurring titles include long-running shows like *Asssscat* and *Maude Night*, along with documentation of the annual Del Close Marathon and UCB TourCo performances around the country. Many of these are

significant to the history of the theatre, like the final show at the First Annual Del Close Marathon in 1999. A few titles date back to the days before the UCB Theatre was established, documenting early shows like *Virtual Reality*, *Cerebral Stripes*, and *Punch Your Friend in the Face*. Many of the *Asssscat* recordings feature well-known monologists like Tina Fey, Conan O'Brien, Andy Daly, Louis CK, and Janeane Garofalo. While the majority of the shows in the collection took place in New York, there are also some that were shot at UCB LA, and it is unclear if there is additional audiovisual material hidden away in Los Angeles. CDs in the collection usually contain photos of performances.

The collection also includes commercial content that isn't owned by UCB but is obviously related, like master Digibeta tapes of the entire *Upright Citizens Brigade* television series, to which Comedy Central likely maintains the rights. There are copies of public appearances by UCB members at events, or on shows like *The Today Show*. Some commercially available items that were found, typically music CDs, could be deaccessioned. These CDs were likely played during shows, but there is no need to keep them in the collection since they are commercially available and have no lasting relation to UCB. I made the decision not to inventory such items, and they are not included in the total item count of the collection.

The collection's paper materials include newspaper clippings, photos, posters, magazines, and other various materials that relate to UCB in some way. Many items are connected to Del Close, as it is part of UCB's mission to honor his memory. The paper materials are reasonably well organized in a filing cabinet, and are not included in my item-level inventory or total item count.

Due to time constraints, I did not assess the digital collection, but based on conversations with UCB staff members, it exists across many different hard drives and requires further

attention. The theatre’s production arm, UCB Comedy, produces content on a regular basis, including web series and podcasts, which should also be preserved properly.

The table below offers a brief overview of the entire UCB archival collection, excluding digital media. Most boxes were at least partially inventoried, but further information can be found in the High-Level Overview tab of the accompanying spreadsheet.

Location	Contents
Filing cabinet	Drawers 1 and 2 contain paper materials Drawer 3 contains paper and audiovisual material Examples: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • CDs mostly containing photographs • DVDs of shows, some also contain photographs • A large stack of high quality photographs and a selection of file folders • A photo album from <i>SNL on Strike at UCB</i> show during the Writers’ Guild Strike of 2007/2008
Box 1	VHS recordings of shows c. 1999-2003 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Titles include <i>Asssscat</i>, <i>Respecto</i>, <i>I Will Not Apologize</i>, <i>Real Real World</i>, and <i>Hammerkatz</i>
Box 2	Posters for various shows <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Upright Citizens Brigade</i> Season 1 • <i>Gold</i> starring Del Close • Team Improv Fest 2015 Playbill for <i>Oh Hello! on Broadway</i> Accordion folder labeled “Archival Comics” <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Vanity Fair</i> Dec 2012 • <i>Slingshot</i> Issue 110 • <i>It’s Only a Movie!</i> pamphlets by Chicago’s Psychotronic Film Society. Postmarked 1986, stored in plastic sleeve. • <i>Wasteland</i> comics from May 1988. Del Close wrote and appears in the comic • Copies of <i>The Onion</i> from 2012 • Playbill for <i>The Committee</i> at Henry Miller’s Theatre, Oct 1964

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • One photograph of Del and Charna <p>Accordion folder</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 23 <i>Wasteland</i> comics • 11 <i>Mad</i> comics • 1 <i>Entertainment Weekly</i>
Box 3	<p>Print media</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clippings of interviews and mentions of UCB • Ad for the 500th Asssscat performance • A few handwritten notes • Copies of <i>The New York Times</i>, <i>Variety</i>, <i>Esquire</i>, and <i>Time Out New York</i> • Accordion folder labeled “East Village <p>Posters/Magazines/Records</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • <i>Circus Weekly</i> 1979 featuring SNL • Multiple copies of <i>The Other East Village</i> papers from the 1960s <p>Binder containing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Magazine clippings • <i>New York Times</i> article about opening of UCB East • <i>Entertainment Weekly</i>, <i>Hollywood Reporter</i>, <i>Variety</i> • Clippings related to <i>Parks and Recreation</i> and <i>30 Rock</i> • 3 copies of <i>New York Magazine</i> containing an interview about 15 years of UCB
Box 4	<p>Assorted audiovisual formats - Digibeta, Betacam SP, DVD, CD, VHS, Hi-8, XLII, Zip</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Titles include <i>Magic Box</i>, <i>Unabomber</i>, <i>Real Real World</i> • Commercial CDs and DVDs not inventoried • Stack of DVDs that appear to be blank and should not be inventoried
Box 5	<p>Contains VHS and Mini-DV tapes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Titles include: various DCM performances, <i>Spank</i>, NY and LA <i>Maude</i>, <i>Quick and Funny Musicals</i>, etc. • There are 5 racks of Mini-DV tapes
Box 6	<p>Labeled “Del Close Archive TOP SECRET” but the content is varied</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Formats are VHS, DVD, Mini-DV, Hi-8 • Titles include: NY and LA <i>Maude</i>, <i>Instant Cinema</i>, <i>Death By Roo Roo</i>, <i>Gravid Water</i>, etc.

Box 7	Mini-DV tapes and 1 microcassette (mc-60) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Titles include: <i>Killgore</i>. Some of the titles are unfamiliar and don't seem like typical show names (<i>Spring Awakening Sunbury Motors, W&L Subaru</i>)
Box 8	All optical disc formats - DVD and CD <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Titles include: NY and LA <i>Maude, Nights of Our Lives, Rock Em Sock Em, John Mulaney For the Hour, Night of 1,000 Bad Commercials</i> • There are a lot of blank jewel cases, and several CDs that also appear to be blank
Box 9	Contains Mini-DV, CD, DVD <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Titles include: <i>Stepfathers. Harold Night, Studio 54, Law Firm, Underground Radio, Match Game, etc.</i> • Proprietary installation/setup discs (Fedora, Kubuntu, and Ubuntu downloads. These can be deaccessioned

Physical Appraisal and Collections Care

Even though UCB has not made formal preservation efforts, based on visual inspection, the collection as a whole is in good condition. As I went through the boxes, I labeled individual items with unique identifiers using acid-free artists' tape and input information into a spreadsheet inventory. This will be discussed further in the *Intellectual Control* section. When necessary, I removed or pushed down record-protect tabs on videotapes. Record-protect tabs are a manufacturing feature that prevents the tape from being recorded over with new content. The likelihood of this mistake happening now is slim since tape recorders for many formats are increasingly hard to come by, but it is considered standard archival practice to remove these tabs.

The videotapes in this collection are mostly VHS and Mini-DV, but there are also some Betacam SP, Digibeta (Digital Betacam), XLII, Hi-8, and DVCam tapes. One can assume that these tapes are NTSC standard, since they were recorded in the United States. The cassettes seem to be in good condition. In Box 1 there are a few tapes that have deteriorated rubber bands stuck

to them, and these will need to be cleaned before the tapes can be put in a VCR. Cleaning should be relatively simple, first by gently scraping off the brittle rubber bands, and then using a mild solvent, such as isopropyl alcohol, to remove any remaining residue. Upon inspection of the tape itself, all have varying amounts of dust, but none show signs of mold or hydrolysis, which are two of the main concerns when dealing with magnetic media. Magnetic tape is composed of two layers of material. The top coat, or binder layer, contains magnetic particles within a polymer binder, along with a lubricant to help the tape move smoothly through recording and playback. This layer is supported by the film backing layer, or substrate, which strengthens the tape and minimizes static. Binder hydrolysis, or Sticky-Shed Syndrome, tends to occur with humid storage environments, causing the binder layer to break down and become sticky. This kind of tape degradation will make it difficult to run the tape through a playback device, and may also cause pieces of tape to flake off, which will affect the signal. It is important to note that Mini-DV, Digibeta and DVCam are digital videotape formats, not analog, but have similar risk factors.⁷⁶

For UCB's purposes, no tapes appear to be suffering from Sticky-Shed Syndrome at this time, and proper storage in a cool, dry place will help to minimize that risk in the future. The same can be said for the risk of mold development. If UCB chooses to send tapes to a vendor for digitization, the vendor would likely be able to clean dust off of the tapes before beginning the transfer process. If any of the tapes develop Sticky-Shed in the future, a vendor can bake tapes at a low heat, which briefly reverses hydrolysis and allows the tapes to play. This is possible to a certain point; sometimes the damage will be too severe. Of course, this work would be more

⁷⁶ Wheeler, Jim. "Videotape Preservation Handbook." *Association of Moving Image Archivists*, 2002.

expensive, so it really is best to put forth the effort to keep the tapes in good condition before this need arises.

The rest of the audiovisual collection is comprised of optical disc media, which come with their own set of characteristics and concerns. While some tape formats are considered suitable for archival purposes, optical media like DVDs and CDs are not, and projections for their lifespan vary drastically. DVDs and CDs do not have the same composition, but both have a standard diameter of 12cm, and both contain a reflective metal layer and a polycarbonate substrate layer. Risk of metal layer corrosion is common, and other signs of deterioration include pinholes in the metal layer, thinning, and discoloration. A DVD is actually two discs bonded together, and some worry that this bonding layer can weaken or deteriorate, but tests have yet to confirm that suspicion. All optical discs are fragile and prone to scratching. Superficial scratches are extremely common and may not cause any problems, but deeper scratches can result in lost data. Disc resilience and longevity will also depend on manufacturing quality. As such, estimates for the lifespan of optical discs range from as little as five years to as much as 100.⁷⁷

The condition of the discs in this collection varies based on appearance alone. Some are very scratched, while others simply need to be cleaned of dust. In terms of storage, many items are in typical jewel cases, some are stacked together, and a few are loose in the boxes. It is preferable to label the case of the disc rather than the disc itself, but when labeling loose discs, I simply put the artists' tape directly onto the disc. This is not ideal, but the adhesive used in artists' tape is designed not to leave a residue or damage even paper materials. The alternative was to write directly on the disc with a permanent marker, but since I came to work with this

⁷⁷ Zheng, J. and O.T. Slattery. "NIST/Library of Congress Optical Disc Longevity Study: Final Report." The Library of Congress and the National Institute of Standards and Technology, September 2007, and Iraci, Joe. "The Relative Stabilities of Optical Disc Formats." *Restaurateur* Vol. 26 Issue 2 (2005): 134-150.

collection as a consultant, I preferred only to do work that is reversible. Labels can be removed; ink cannot. It will be necessary to gently remove the label before putting the disc into a drive.

The way in which discs are stored will greatly determine how much physical stress they will undergo. Stacked discs tend to scrape against each other and will likely be scratched. Loose discs can be easily broken. It is difficult to determine exactly how old these items are, but many of them are at least ten years old based on the content they contain. Some may also be newer discs that contain older material, so it is hard to estimate the true age of the discs themselves. Older discs have not only faced years of handling, but there is also the issue of compatibility as computer file systems and operating systems are updated over time. Unfortunately, it is impossible to determine the readability of these discs without putting them into a disc drive; so visual inspection alone does not offer a clear picture of their condition or whether the data they carry is accessible. Many consider migration the best option for disc media, so a digital transfer should be considered. When this is done, typically two types of files are created. A disk image will be generated to serve as the master file, along with a separate access file. A common format for the disk image is .iso, while the access file may be .mov or .mp4, but there are many digital file formats to consider.^{78 79}

The paper materials in the collection are reasonably organized and appear to be in fine condition, with minimal tearing, yellowing, or color fading. Since they are stored in a filing cabinet in the UCB office, they are not regularly exposed to sunlight or extreme temperatures. The main concern with paper materials is that they can become acidic over time, which is

⁷⁸ “Sustainability of Digital Formats: Planning for Library of Congress Collections.” *Library of Congress*. Last modified March 2, 2017.

⁷⁹ Fred R. Byers. “Care and Handling of CDs and DVDs: A Guide for Librarians and Archivists.” Council on Library and Information Resources and National Institute of Standards and Technology, October 2003.

especially common in types of paper that are not designed for longevity, such as newspaper. An acidic paper can also cause damage to the materials around it. The age of these items range from only a few years to decades old. Notably, the oldest items are housed individually in plastic sleeves, though it is unclear if these sleeves are archival quality. For paper and photographs, storage in polyester sleeves and acid-free folders and boxes is preferred.⁸⁰ However, this situation is not dire, and these materials can be considered a low priority at this time.

General Care and Handling

Some specific issues have already been addressed in “Physical Appraisal and Collections Care,” but generally, all collections should be stored in a cool, dry location. Currently, the majority of the audiovisual collection is stored in locked closet in the UCB Training Center. This room is air-conditioned and receives no daylight, both of which are preferable. The collections are stored high off of the floor on shelves, which is also preferred, as items near the floor are always at higher risk of damage in the event of flooding. The items are stored in a variety of containers, including large plastic bins, a Hollinger box, and a suitcase. The paper materials are stored within a variety of folders in a filing cabinet.

Storage at optimal temperature and humidity levels is one of the most crucial factors in ensuring the long-term integrity of any media format, whether it is film, video, paper, or photographs. For audiovisual media that is stored in proper conditions, the issue then turns to the obsolescence of specific media formats. As formats are replaced over time, their associated playback devices become harder to acquire and to maintain in working condition. An institution like UCB would not be in the business of keeping playback devices operable; so transferring

⁸⁰ “Collections Care.” *Library of Congress*. Last modified 2017.

videotapes to a digital format is likely the more desirable option, with the understanding that digital preservation carries its own set of complex challenges.⁸¹

Offsite, climate-controlled storage will provide even better conditions for physical media in the long term. Of course, storing the collection offsite introduces a barrier to regular access of the material. For many, off-site storage becomes a desirable option once digital files have been created, as those can then be treated as access copies. It is important to note that once digital transfer has occurred, it is still important to maintain the physical media.

Digital files pose risks to long-term preservation just as physical media does, and while it may seem that digital files will last forever, this is not the reality. Digital data must be actively monitored with checksums to ensure that data remains unchanged over time. Tapes and discs that are digitally transferred will be considered the original copies of that material, and one may want to return to them in the future in the event of data loss. Professional archival storage locations will also have plans in place in the event of a fire, flood, or other natural disaster, although no location is entirely safe. This is why duplication, geographic separation, and backup of data are such important factors in preservation.

While I did not assess the digital media in the collection, it is possible that UCB will want to digitize many of the items in their collection for access and long-term preservation, and digital storage must be addressed before this can be done. It was also brought to my attention that the majority of UCB's data is stored across hard drives throughout the office. Spinning-disk hard drives have short lifespans on average, and they can spontaneously fail for no apparent reason. It is generally understood that hard drives fail due to factory defects, worn-out moving parts, or simply, random failure. Yet, while the moving parts in the drive make it more susceptible to

⁸¹ "Care, Handling, and Storage of Audio Visual Materials." *Library of Congress*. Last modified 2017.

failure, regular use of a drive may actually keep it functioning compared to one that is stored away and rarely used. The average lifespan of a spinning-disk hard drive is estimated at five to twenty years, though many fail in their first year of use.⁸² This level of unpredictability makes hard drives unsuitable for preservation unless they are in a RAID configuration, which stores data across multiple drives so that, in the event of a single hard drive failure, the data will not be lost. With this in mind, UCB should be aware that, regardless of whether or not they choose to digitize items in the audiovisual collection, digital preservation will need to be addressed regarding the data on these hard drives. An appropriate digital repository should be organized in a way that makes the data known and accessible, have backups in multiple forms and locations, and run regular checksums to ensure data integrity over long periods of time.⁸³

Intellectual Control and Metadata

The first step to gaining intellectual control of a collection is to take stock of what you have. As such, while assessing the collection, I created an inventory for the collection at both the high level and item level. The spreadsheet is incomplete and is intended to be a working document. I inventoried and labeled 709 items individually out of 1500 audiovisual items. The remaining items are all Mini-DV tapes that are organized in racks within multiple boxes. Since they are well organized, they can be easily located and labeled in the future. Regardless, the high-level inventory gives an overview of the entire collection, describing each box (or drawer, in this case) and its contents. The item-level inventory describes items individually, according to the following fields:

⁸² Backblaze. "How Long Do Disk Drives Last?" Last modified November 12, 2013.

⁸³ *Digital Preservation Handbook: Why Digital Preservation Matters*. Digital Preservation Coalition. 2nd ed., last revised 2015.

ID - A unique identifier is crucial for intellectual control. This number corresponds to a single item and to a single work. Some items in the collection have copies, and when that is the case, each individual item also receives its own unique identifier. For this collection, I chose a simple format of UCB_001 for unique items, and those with copies were formatted UCB_001_01. For example, in Box 8 there are eight DVD copies of *Ordering Popcorn*, the first of which is labeled UCB_459_01, and the last of which is UCB_459_08.

Location - This refers to the box or drawer the item is located in. The greater location of the item does not need to be specified since the entire collection is located in the UCB Office and Training Center.

Title - The title on the object often refers to a show or team name. If there was no title, I created one in brackets. Ex: [Title]

Date - Refers to the date of the content, which will not necessarily match the age of the physical carrier. While a few items have clearly been transferred to DVD from VHS, the date for the item references the original date of the content, not the date of reformatting. The format used for writing the date is MM-DD-YYYY, even if the exact date is unknown. For instance, if the only information on the item is that it's from 2005, then the date is written as 01/01/2005.

Content Description - A brief description of the content, often left blank. It is best to describe upon viewing the work itself.

Running Time - This is often unknown, but it is useful information to have before sending items to a vendor. The format is HH:MM:SS.

Format - Refers to the format of the physical carrier, typically VHS, CD, DVD, or Mini-DV.

Copies - Number of copies of the work in the collection.

Rewound Y/N - This is only relevant for tapes, but it is standard archival practice to rewind tapes before storing them.

Copyright Holder - Often an educated guess or left blank. Needs more attention.

Condition - This is based on visual inspection alone. A simple comment of “Good” indicates that the item does not show any physical damage, but this does not guarantee that the item is playable.

Additional Notes on Container - Some items have notes attached or inside the case, and that information can go here.

General Notes - For any other random thoughts or concerns.

Rights Status

Many items in the audiovisual collection seem to be owned by UCB, but many were also produced by other parties, such as Comedy Central, Bravo, and Funny or Die. These works may stay in the collection, but permission would need to be obtained to use or distribute them. In terms of the spreadsheet, notes I made about copyright ownership of specific items are educated guesses, and should not be taken as fact. In many cases these fields are marked “Unknown.”

There are some additional uncertainties that need to be addressed regarding intellectual property and recorded performances. Generally speaking, a typical improvised performance cannot be copyrighted because it does not exist in a fixed form. Improv forms, like Theatresports, can be trademarked, but they can't be copyrighted because they are abstract

concepts. A work needs to exist in a permanent form to be copyrighted, so an improv show can only be copyrighted once it is recorded. However, performer's rights are a huge question here. Performers at UCB are unpaid, and to my knowledge, there are no written agreements between performers and the theatre. I have been unable to find any clear information on how Actor's Equity rules affect improv theatres, but according to the archivist at Second City, these rules have been a roadblock for making their recordings accessible online. However, the archivist was referring only to scripted works, as Second City does not usually record or preserve their improvised performances. It is also important to consider the videographer or photographers responsible for shooting these works. For example, CDs in the collection containing photographs taken by Francine Daveta list her as the copyright holder. However, if this was work for hire, then UCB owns the rights to those photos. Work for hire indicates that there was some kind of compensation, whether financial or not. UCB understands, much more than I do, their relationship with their performers, photographers, and videographers, and thus should be able to provide the information necessary to answer these questions, which will play a major role in how the works in the collection can be preserved and made accessible in the future.⁸⁴

⁸⁴ “107. Limitations On Exclusive Rights: Fair Use.” *Copyright Law of the United States (Title 17)*.

Chapter 5 Recommendations

My recommendations aim to provide short and long-term considerations for how UCB might begin the work of preserving and archiving their material. Some of these recommendations are simple tasks that can be completed at little to no cost, while others would be larger endeavors. It may be appropriate to first take a moment to consider the goals for this collection. How much time and effort could existing staff put into this work? Would it be better to hire an archivist? Are you willing and able to budget for preservation work? What do you envision for this material in the future? Do you want to share clips on the *UCBComedy* website? Would you like to eventually provide access to students, researchers, filmmakers, etc.? Having never pursued preservation before, I understand that UCB is in the beginning stages of preservation. Some of these ideas may never be implemented, and they may evolve over time, but this is intended as a starting point.

Realistically, it will be difficult to implement all of these recommendations without an in-house archivist. It is common for institutions to delegate preservation work to staff members, but these people already juggle many other responsibilities. Long-term preservation projects ultimately require more time, effort, and expertise than existing staff can provide. For institutions that are unable or unwilling to maintain their collections in-house, there is the option of partnering with an archival institution or donating the collections. However, because UCB is a thriving institution that regularly produces new audiovisual content, simply handing off the collection to another institution will not be a solution for preserving their newer works. UCB will need to take this assessment and recommendations and seriously consider how they would like to move forward.

Short-Term

- Deaccession items that do not belong in the collection. The music CDs are the most obvious, though you may want to consider other items that are commercially available elsewhere.
- Move loose audiovisual items from the filing cabinet into archival boxes. Store them with the rest of boxes in the Training Center.
- Purchase new cases for loose optical discs. Archival-quality plastic sleeves or rigid jewel cases are both options.⁸⁵
- Finish labeling and inventorying the audiovisual items. Use the provided spreadsheet to keep track of any changes in the future. In addition to using spreadsheets in programs like Google Sheets or Excel, more robust archival catalogues can be created with tools like ArchivesSpace and CollectiveAccess.
- Improve digital storage infrastructure. This is a major undertaking, but it should be addressed sooner rather than later. UCB needs to organize manage their data currently stored on hard drives and provide a place to store any newly digitized material. Consider what is needed, and work with IT to identify and implement a system that meets those needs. A digital asset management system (DAMS) can take different forms depending on the needs and abilities of the institution, but should support various file formats, cataloguing and description, robust metadata, and file fixity. Be aware, however, that ensuring the long term preservation of digital files is a complicated task requiring ongoing vigilance, some skill, and some outlay of money. Once digital files are created, it is important to create multiple, geologically separated copies and backups of these files.

⁸⁵ “Media Preservation.” Gaylord Archival. Last modified 2017.

(In addition to storing digital data at the UCB NY office, copies of all digital files could be backed up with a cloud service and stored physically at UCB LA, for example. Redundancy is key.) Additionally, files must be monitored on an ongoing basis to ensure their integrity. If UCB chooses to keep its collection in-house, they may wish to hire, at least on a short-term basis, a knowledgeable digital archive consultant who can help them establish a system for backups and file integrity monitoring. This is a simple explanation, and the attached resources provide offer much more detail on this subject.⁸⁶

Mid-Term

- Migrate all pre-existing data to the DAMS. Implement clear file-naming conventions.⁸⁷
Establish a workflow for storing newly created digital content.
- Rehouse paper and photographic items in acid-free, archival quality folders and boxes.
- Rehouse the entire audiovisual collection in acid-free, archival boxes. Tapes should be stored upright.
- Determine the copyright holders for items in the collection, and clarify if performers' rights are a concern for shows filmed at UCB. Many archives hold items that they don't own the rights to, but permission would need to be obtained before those works can be made widely accessible. In some cases, fair use may also be claimed.⁸⁸ A takedown

⁸⁶ For more general knowledge on digital preservation, see Megan Philips, Jefferson Bailey, Andrew Geothals, and Trevor Owens. "The NDSA Levels of Digital Preservation: An Explanation and Uses." *Library of Congress*, 2013, as well as "Preservation Metadata and the OAIS Information Model." OCLC Online Computer Library Center, Inc, June 2002. As previously referenced, the *Digital Preservation Handbook* provides comprehensive information on the subject.

⁸⁷ "File Naming Conventions and Unique Identifiers." IASA. Last modified 2017.

⁸⁸ "107. Limitations On Exclusive Rights: Fair Use."

policy (in which an online work is removed at the copyright holder's request) might be considered for works that are shared online, like on UCBCComedy.⁸⁹

- Prioritize items for digitization. This should be done after deaccessioning irrelevant items. Then, consider if you would like to digitize all items at once, or in batches. Cost will be a factor in this decision, though some vendors may offer a discount for a large digitization project.
- Choose a reputable vendor for digitization. Talk to several and consider cost, whether you prefer the work to be hands-on or automated.⁹⁰ Determine how much storage you will need for the completed product, which according to current archival standards should be in the form of 10-bit uncompressed master files and compressed (such as H.264) access file formats. Once the files are received, be prepared to make geographically separated copies, backups, and monitor the files on an ongoing basis through checksums.

Long-Term

- Transfer physical items (paper, photographs, discs, and tapes) to offsite storage. Once this material has been digitized, those digital files can be used to easily access a work. The physical material should be kept because it is the original, and it will exist as a backup in the event that the digital material is lost and needs to be restored.
- If unhappy with the image or audio quality of digitized tapes and discs, consider investing in restoration software, such as Da Vinci Resolve and Logic. While some of the

⁸⁹ For an example of a standard takedown policy, see “Notice and Takedown Policy.” *NYU Libraries*.

⁹⁰ For a list of reputable vendors, see “AMIA Supplier Directory.” *AMIA*. December 2016.

older videotape footage may seem impossible to use, these tools can be surprisingly effective.

- Consider backing up digital material on LTO tape.

Conclusion

Improv comedy is so deeply tied to the notion of creating a fleeting experience in a live theatrical setting, and that is part of what makes it special. On the other hand, this philosophy has led to uncertainty about how improv should exist beyond the confines of a theatre. There has been very little improv content produced commercially, and it seemed that a representative audiovisual record of improv performance simply might not exist. Yet surprisingly, improv theatres have produced records of their histories and past performances, though these collections are mostly hidden. With the knowledge that unattended collections do exist, the focus then must shift to what should be done with this material.

Preservation is a major undertaking for any institution, and it can be incredibly daunting for those who are untrained in this work. The case studies present how three different theatres have approached this problem and produced varying outcomes. At the Groundlings and iO, existing staff have taken on the task of managing collections in addition to their many other responsibilities. Both theatres prioritized providing access to their students and staff, and on occasion, to outside parties. iO even chose to reach a wider audience by live streaming their shows. It is admirable that the Groundlings and iO appreciate the value of their collections and want them to be seen and utilized.

Unfortunately, access is more than an immediate issue, and at present those two theatres still need to implement necessary measures to protect their works in the long term. Long-term preservation requires substantial, ongoing effort, and it is easy to see why Second City chose to hire an archivist for the job, and why he is still working there today. Second City is likely the outlier amongst most improv theatres, as one that has put into practice sound archival principles with the intention of preserving works well into the future. This is a good model for UCB to

consider, especially with the understanding that Second City did not make this progress overnight. It has been a steady effort over the last ten years, but the results are encouraging. The fact that Second City only preserves scripted works is perhaps even more reason for UCB to begin preserving their improv works. Still, UCB must think about their level of commitment to this work and what outcomes they would like to pursue. I was informed that UCB had at one time discussed transferring their collection to the New York Public Library, but ultimately decided against it. While this is a great option for many collections, the fact is that UCB is a thriving institution that produces new content on a regular basis, and they likely want to maintain full control of and access to their works. Regardless of that choice, it is imperative that UCB improve their digital storage infrastructure to support ongoing digital content creation. If they can put a proper digital repository in place, then they are likely equipped to put additional preservation efforts into motion.

While it is a commitment to take on this work, it is impossible to predict how rewarding it might be in the near future or many years from now. While I was conducting the assessment at the UCB offices, I spoke to a number of students, comedians, and staff members who expressed interest in the collection. Some knew there were old tapes and discs lying around, and they had wondered if anything would ever be done with them. Others were excited to learn that footage of early UCB shows exist at all, and they expressed an interest in seeing this footage made available to students and fans. In the short time I was there, there was a unanimously positive response to the work I was doing, and there is a clear desire to see that these recordings are preserved. The works in the UCB Collection are a mere fraction of the many shows produced at their theatres. As a fan of improv, I understand the unique experience of seeing improv shows in person, and I know that there is no true substitute for it, but as an archivist, I feel it is worthwhile to ensure that

a sampling of these performances is preserved for the historical record. With the many improv theatres that exist, there is likely more work to be uncovered and preserved.

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