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## Chapter 37

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# Improv, Stand-Up, and Comedy

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# IMPROV, STAND-UP, AND COMEDY

*Clément Canonne*

## 1 Introduction

In a recent blog post on improvised theater, improviser and director Michael Such criticized what he sees as the lack of aesthetic diversity in London’s so-called “improv scene.” According to him,

improv is frequently billed as comedy. [...] But, personally, given one attraction of improv is ‘anything can happen,’ I wish there were more improv shows which left me feeling sad, horrified or even bored. I wish there were more improv shows which looked and sounded radically different.<sup>1</sup>

According to Such, then, improvisers could (and should) explore a much wider variety of dramatic genres, over and beyond comedy. But why is this so rarely the case? How do we explain the fact that improvised theater, as an autonomous art form – and not just as a tool for actor development or as an ingredient parsimoniously sprinkled over mostly scripted material – has often been associated with comedy, from the 16th-century *Commedia dell’Arte* to the performances of the Chicago-based theater troupe *Second City*?<sup>2</sup> Is there some privileged connection between improvisation and comedy?

There are probably many reasons that could explain why improvisation is often associated with comedy, from socioeconomic reasons (e.g., comedy shows tend to attract bigger audiences; improv classes are often used as a springboard for a career as a writer or performer in TV comedy shows)<sup>3</sup> to cultural-historical ones (e.g., the lingering idea that improvisation, being intrinsically linked to an oral tradition, could only suit “low” theatrical genres, such as comedy).<sup>4</sup> In this chapter, I would like to suggest a series of specifically aesthetic arguments that could explain why improvisation tends, more often than not, to be funny. Of course, improvised theatrical performances are not necessarily funny (Halpern et al. 1994:8), if only because they sometimes simply fail to be so. However, I will argue here that the specific features of the creative process in improvisation have the intrinsic potential to elicit comic amusement, even though elements inherent to the improvisation process that are conducive to humor can be overcome, with some additional effort, to effectively create responses other than laughter. While this idea may come across as provocative, echoes of it can in fact be found in the writings of many improvisers. For instance, in TJ & Dave’s *Improvisation at the Speed of Life*, the improvisers share how

when asked how to be funny in improvisation, we answer, ‘Be honest.’ To us, improvisation does not mean being funny. It means being human – or better yet, just being [...]. *Comedy is a mere byproduct of our approach to improvisation*, and a byproduct is not pursuable  
(Jagodowski et al. 2015: 64 f., my emphasis)

Similarly, the authors of *Truth in Comedy* – a well-known improvisation manual – state that, while

one of the biggest mistakes an improviser can make is attempting to be funny [...], still, [the audience] laugh. It is a side effect of attempting something more beautiful, honest, and truthful, something that has far more to do with the theatre – which puts your attention on what is important about being a human in a community.

(Halpern et al. 1994: 13 f.)

How can we explain, then, that the overall result of an improvised show tends to be funny *just by having the performers truly and sincerely improvise?*

To further explore the connection between improvisation and comedy, I will first show in which way collective theatrical improvisation relates to the different mechanisms that are at play in humorous situations. I will then argue that the very constraints of improvisation make it easier for improvised performances to aim for comedic results. Finally, by focusing specifically on improvised aspects of stand-up comedy, I will examine the extent to which such connections between improvisation and comedy depend on the specifics of theatrical art forms.

## **2 Improvisation and the Traditional Theories of Humor**

In this section, I will examine the connection between improvisation and comedy by focusing on the specific case of improv. Improv is not a genre per se; it is rather an umbrella term to refer to the trend of largely unscripted group performances (albeit generally based on a simple audience suggestion as a starting point) that emerged throughout the 20th century, from the early experiments of Viola Spolin with theater games in the 1940s (Spolin 1999) and the influential work of The Compass or Second City in Chicago in the 1950s (Coleman 1990) all the way to the international dissemination of improv through Keith Johnstone’s Theatersports (Johnstone 1999) and Del Close’s Harold – a loose structure for long-form improvisation that is now used all over the world (Fotis 2014).<sup>5</sup> My aim in this first section is to show how such collective and unscripted theatrical practice – which has been associated with comedy from its early days – relates to the main available theories of humor, beyond the obvious aesthetic diversity to be expected in such a wide and international scene.

It is standard to distinguish four main theories of humor (see Carroll 2014) – namely the “superiority” theory, the “incongruity” theory, the “release” theory, and the “play” theory. My goal here is not to defend one over the other or to argue which one can better explain the widest range of humorous situations. Following Lintott (2016), who argues for a non-essentialist reading of the “standard” theories of humor, I will instead take those theories as presenting different (combinable) mechanisms that can all play a more or less important role in finding something funny<sup>6</sup> (or as different paths that can elicit, in the appropriate context, comic amusement) and show how the mechanisms that underlie these four theories are a constitutive part of the creative process of collective improvisation itself. Along the way, I will provide examples taken from a series of shows that took place in Washington D.C. during FIST 2017 – a competition of improvised theater that occurs every year at the Washington Improv Theater – which I attended in the context of an ethnographic research project on improv.<sup>7</sup>

Let us begin with the “superiority” theory. Different formulations of this theory have been offered but the general idea is that we tend to find situations that reinforce our own sense of superiority funny (e.g., seeing someone behaving in an awkward fashion or offering a dumb answer to a given question). A first reason why theatrical improvisation might be funny, then, would be its potential to trigger a feeling of superiority in its audience members. Many burlesque scenes in improvised theater seem to rely on the kind of comical resources suggested by the “superiority” theory, for example by having the improvisers perform exaggerated or ridiculous gestures and pantomimes. Yet, there is nothing specific to improvisation in such scenes, as they could very well be found in fully scripted contexts. However, contrary to what happens with scripted and well-rehearsed performances – where all the performers know at every moment what is happening on stage – audience members of improvised performances are often placed in a position of *epistemic superiority*. They tend to have access to more information than each individual performer – which, in turn, can elicit a humorous experience at the expense of some of the performers. Indeed, because of the polyphonic and multimodal nature of collective theatrical improvisation (which combines both speech and gestures), multiple things can happen at the same time in different parts of the stage. As such, it is not unusual for audience members to be the only ones with access to the whole picture. In a scene observed during FIST 2017, three performers had a conversation on the side about the hallucinations one of them had when playing to a certain game as a kid – he kept seeing a butterfly, which was like an imaginary lover for him. At one point, the fourth performer, who was not a part of this scene and had lagged behind, started to mime the motions of butterfly wings and slowly approached the other three performers. The audience laughed precisely at that moment because they knew that the scene was going to change direction *before* the other three performers. In other words, the audience relishes knowing that the improvisers did not know what was about to happen. Still, one could argue that it is not unusual for theater audience of scripted performances to be in a state of epistemic superiority vis-à-vis the *characters* that are portrayed by the actors on stage. But here, in an improvisatory setting, this state of epistemic superiority extends to the *performers* themselves, which, arguably makes things even more enjoyable.

We now need to examine improvised theater through the lens of the “incongruity” theory. According to this theory, “[W]hat is key to comic amusement is a deviation from some presupposed norm – that is to say, an anomaly, or an incongruity relative to some framework governing the ways in which we think the world is or should be” (Carroll 2014: 17). Such incongruities are generally considered to be a key comical resource in improvised theater, and the idea of collective improvisation as a situation that favors the emergence of “unusual things” can be found in many improvisation manuals. The *Upright Citizens Brigade Comedy Improvisation Manual*, for example, states that:

Once the base reality is established, both improvisers should be listening for anything that would be unusual, interesting, or out of the ordinary given this context. The first unusual thing should always stand out in contrast to the base reality. Don’t put pressure on yourself to be funny in the very first line of an Organic Scene. In other words, don’t force the first unusual thing.

(Besser et al. 2013: 71)

Because they do not play from a script, and because they cannot predict what the next move is going to be, improvisers often unwillingly create incongruities or inconsistencies, for example, when speaking at the same time and offering statements that are perhaps not in accordance with one another.<sup>8</sup> More generally, the high flexibility and high fluidity of improv – in which a given performer can spontaneously decide to portray a different character or to start a new scene in a new location – are a constant source of emergent incongruities, because it is not necessarily

immediately clear for everyone on stage who the new character is supposed to be or what the new setting is supposed to be. For example, in a scene observed during FIST 2017, one of the performers was on his knees, because he was acting out a scene where he was in confession with a priest, but when the “priest” performer was replaced by a new performer – thus signaling the beginning of a new scene – the “confessed” performer suddenly ended up being on his knees in front of the father of the woman he was supposed to marry. The two performers immediately took advantage of this unintended incongruity (why would someone kneel in front of his future father-in-law?) to improvise a funny scene in which they further explored what the reasons could be for these two characters to be in this situation.

Thirdly, what are the connections between improvisation and the “release” theory of humor? According to some formulations of this theory, humor is a matter of releasing built up expectations:

when we are told a joke, it might be said, naturally enough, that expectation builds as we await the punchline. We are curious about how this comic discourse will end. When the punchline arrives, the pressure of those expectations is released and laughter ensues.

*(Carroll 2014: 39)*

Obviously, collective theatrical improvisation is a very challenging process, as performers have to create individual scenes on the spot, all the while aiming to maintain a certain degree of overall coherence. Because they have to start from scratch (or nearly) each time they go on stage, it can take some time and a fair amount of struggle before they can figure out what their scene will be about. As such, part of the pleasure and enjoyment taken in improvised theater stems from the relief and excitement the audience members can have when they see the improvisers finally managing to “find the game of their scene.” One example may help illustrate the temporal dynamics at play in many improvised scenes: At the beginning of a scene performed during FIST 2017, one of the improvisers was miming the gesture of grabbing a fruit from a tree, while a second performer, it seemed, pretended to be in a car. The performers, thus, appeared to be in two different spaces – a difficult situation to start with. However, after a few lines of dialogue between the two improvisers, the “driving” performer found a solution to this problematic situation by making it clear to everyone that she was not driving a car, but a slowly moving tractor, thereby giving a certain consistency to the scene – an ingenious solution that immediately made the audience laugh.

It should also be noted that the “release” mechanism is typically combined with the “superiority” mechanism in some performance strategies made possible by the improvised setting. For example, a very common strategy is to allow for some degree of (friendly) antagonism in the improvisers’ relationship on stage. Many improvisation manuals start with the idea that performers should “yes, and...” each other, which means that performers should build on each other’s suggestions to improvise their scene and, more generally, that they should always collaborate in the greater interest of making the scene work. However, seasoned improvisers often go beyond this ground rule to favor what could be called a “yes, but...” approach to improvisation. A standard move within this approach is to deliberately put a fellow improviser in a difficult position, knowing that she will probably find a way to deal with it. For example, in a scene observed during FIST 2017, one performer explained that he changed his name bit by bit over the course of his life from “Breburt” to “Blaze Thunder,” and his co-improviser asked him straight away: “and in between, it was...?,” thus forcing his scene partner to come up with a plausible interpolation process between the two names. Such situations typically involve both the “superiority” and the “release” mechanism: we first laugh *at* the performer who is trapped in an awkward situation; and we laugh a second time *with* her when she takes up the gauntlet and finally pulls the fat out of the fire with a clever move.

Finally, I would like to reflect on the connection between improv and what Carroll calls the “play” theory, which highlights the playful and often ludic nature of humor. Not all ludic activities are necessarily funny. Nguyen (2019), for example, discusses the case of the game *Sign*, in which players have to communicate through made-up signs to convey the “inner truth” they have been assigned. According to Nguyen, “the experience of the game is remarkable; it is intense, absorbed, frustrating, and surprisingly emotional.” There clearly is nothing funny here – quite the contrary, in fact. However, there is probably a deeper connection between certain *kinds* of games – or certain aspects of ludic activities – and humor. For instance, children’s pretend play is generally an occasion for humorous interactions and laughter, something that has already been noted by the influential psychologist of child development Jean Piaget (see Schultz 1976). If pretend play is funny, it is mainly because of how it plays with very loose representational constraints, allowing the ludic exploration of both misnaming processes (calling a cat a dog) and representational discrepancies. In that perspective, it could be argued that improv, with its invisible props, imaginary settings and fictional identities, is related to such forms of pretend play.

According to David Saltz (2017), theatrical art forms as a whole rely on this kind of a *ludic* mode of representation: in principle, every action on stage can represent any other. Most of the time, the audience is able to make sense of what is happening on stage, because, first, they have some prior (minimal) knowledge of the fictional narrative enacted by the actors on stage, and, second, material elements of the scenography (costumes, accessories, theater decor, etc.), or physical attributes of the cast distribution guide the audience in decoding the meaning of the visual events happening on stage. However, such resources are not standardly available in improv. Indeed, all these elements could be seen as *material scripts*, which would constrain the range of possible situations or orient the improvisers in a given direction, prior to any action performed on stage. Moreover, the flexibility required by improvisation – for example, the fact that new characters might be needed as the scene develops – makes it impossible to have a rigid cast distribution. As such, improv can be seen as relying on representational processes that are both ludic (anything can represent anything and, more importantly, anyone can represent anyone) and performative (everything exists on stage just by saying it does): a *super-ludic* mode of representation, so to speak. In that perspective, improvised theater is indeed very much like children’s pretend play, which also relies heavily on performative utterances. It could be objected that the kind of theatrical minimalism that allows this super-ludic mode of representation is not specific to improv. Nonetheless, such minimalism is probably at its highest and most flexible in improv. It can be actively used as a resource by performers to produce comical effects, by exaggerating, for example, the discrepancies between what the audience sees and what is supposed to be represented on stage (average-looking men will act as beautiful women, young people will transform alternatively into seniors or children, etc.) or by introducing incongruous elements into the “base reality” that has been created (e.g., by suddenly transporting a character to Mars). More importantly, the combination of theatrical minimalism (performers are not strongly identified with a unique, well-defined character in this fictional reality) and improvisation (the audience knows that the performers themselves are responsible for everything happening on stage) strongly reinforces the fuzziness of the performer/character distinction. This allows the improvisers to further play with this ambiguity, for example by performing actions or saying lines that can be understood to be both directed to their co-improvisers and/or to the characters they portray.<sup>9</sup>

Because of its polyphonic, unpredictable, processual, and super-ludic nature, collective improvisation provides the performers with a certain number of comical resources that emerge more or less spontaneously from the situation itself. Individually, each of these mechanisms is probably not sufficient in itself to explain why improv tends to be funny. But, first, all four main mechanisms that are responsible for humorous reactions are simultaneously present in improv, thus allowing for a synergy between them. And, second, all these mechanisms seem to appear in a somewhat

“heightened” version in situations of collective improvisation. Combined, these two observations certainly provide a stronger ground for the idea of a privileged connection between improv and comedy. Whether improvisers are just taking advantage of the comical effects produced by the unfolding of the improvisatory process or whether they are more actively seeking to provoke such effects, the resulting funny situations are created by using the resources of improvisation itself. In other words, the fact that improvisation, by its very nature, can easily provide the improvisers with many comical resources – resources that can then be more or less actively exploited to create funny situations – certainly plays an important role in explaining why the practice of improvised theater is so massively linked to comedy.

### **3 Improvisation is More Amenable to Comedy**

In this section, I would like to pursue another argumentative strategy, and show that it is *easier* to achieve comedy through improvisation than, say, tragedy or romance, or, in other words, that improvisation is better suited for comedy. Hence, it would only be natural that, due to selection mechanisms and cultural optimization processes, improvised theater had evolved as an (almost exclusively) comedic art form.

First, as previously seen, an improvised performance is likely to give rise to numerous inconsistencies, “mistakes,” or hesitations. The smooth integration of these into a performance would be much more difficult to achieve if the performers were aiming at something sad, scary, or epic because they would create emotional disengagement and prevent the audience from becoming absorbed within the fictional world enacted on stage. On the contrary, in a comedy-oriented context, these very same inconsistencies, mistakes, and hesitations become resources for the improvisers to make the audience laugh, by potentially triggering one of the main mechanisms that underlie humorous reactions (i.e., superiority, incongruity, or release).

Second, because of both the unpredictability and flexibility of improvised dynamics, there is (almost) no prior limit in the range of situations that can potentially arise in an improvised performance. In principle, then, there should be an equal distribution between “funny” situations and more “serious” situations in any given improvised performance. However, even if those two types of situations were equally likely to emerge in improv, there is still an asymmetry at play here. Any situation, even the most terrible and non-humorous, can be transformed into a comedy – just think of Roberto Benigni’s *La vita è bella* or to the whole genre of “dark humor” or “black comedy” – while it is not clear that the same can be said of tragedy, epics, or romance. There is something fundamentally parasitic in comedy. It can thrive from almost anything, as attested to by the fact that many comedic devices are actually *transformational* processes (irony, caricature, deadpan, etc.). In other words, comedy is less about certain situations, characters, or topics than it is about a manner of presenting, enacting, and exploring such situations, characters, and topics, thereby triggering in the audience the “momentary anaesthesia of the heart” (Bergson 2005: 2 f.) that is so crucial for successfully achieving darker forms of humor.

Of course, pace Aristotle, tragedy itself is probably not limited to the representation of actions that have “some greatness about [them]” (*Poetics*, 1449b21–29), and many dramaturges have also explored the “tragedy of the banal.” Note, however, how such theater plays are often best described as tragicomedies (Beckett’s own English translation of *Waiting for Godot* is subtitled “a tragicomedy in two acts”), as if the banality of the situation inevitably introduces some irreducibly humorous elements. In that perspective, the fact that almost any situation can arise from improvisation is not a problem for comedic approaches of improvisation, but it might be a problem for genres of improvised theater that are aiming to give rise to other kinds of reactions in their audiences. In fact, such approaches generally resort to a much higher degree of pre-determination. Characters could be decided upon in advance, as could be the kinds of situations in which they are

to evolve: for example, the whole premise of the improv show *Clowns are not Funny* – referred to by Michael Such in the blog post quoted at the beginning of this chapter – is that performers act as clowns in a Ionesco-inspired setting. Similarly, scripting the overall framework of a scene while letting the performers improvise the dialogue could be used here, as in the method adopted by Mike Leigh in some of his films, such as *Life is Sweet*. Most “serious” improvised shows, thus, rely on a combination of improvised performance and scripted materials (synopsis, shared repertoire of characters and situations, cards filled out by members of the audience that serve as a basis for an improvised play after a very short time of collective discussion and preparation, etc.). As such, they are much closer to “structured” or “partial” improvisation than to full-fledged improvisation. The crucial point here is that there seems to be a trade-off between how unscripted the improvisers want their performances to be and the variety of emotions and responses that can be elicited. If the performers want to do a “serious” improvised show while refusing to script in advance the situations or characters that are going to fuel their performances, then they have to take the risk – rooted in the sheer unpredictability of the interactions – of getting “locked” into situations that do not suit their more “serious” purpose. Even companies such as Chicago’s Theater Momentum<sup>10</sup> that strive to achieve “dramatic improv” acknowledge that their shows fold “elements of comedy and drama into the story in equal measure” and that the audience should not expect “something with literally no humorous moments.” In short, while it is clear that improv is not bound to shallow comedy or cheap laughs and that it can also be deep and complex, it also seems quite difficult to eliminate laughing altogether from a successful improvised performance.

Third, improvisation is, most of the time, a performance art, something that is done on stage for the benefits of an audience. In other words, improvisers typically follow a twofold regulative ideal: to “(a) present [a performance] intended to be worth [watching], by (b) determining a significant number of its features as [they] play” (Brown 2000: 119). While there are theoretically many ways for the performers to entertain their audience while fully improvising, I would argue that comedy is perhaps the easiest way to satisfy such a twofold regulative ideal. This only holds when performers are actually aiming at having things both unscripted *and* intrinsically worth watching. Indeed, some strains of improvisation may follow different regulative ideals: for example, in Augusto Boal’s *Theater of the oppressed*, improvisation is not seen as an end in itself but as a tool for finding solutions to both social and individual problems. In this kind of setting, performers are more inclined to take the risk of eliciting indifference, boredom, or even anger from their audience while exploring situations that are notoriously difficult to develop in improvisation, since their main goal is not to entertain the audience, but to create and promote social change (Leep 2008). It should also be noted that the performances following the principles of the *Theater of the oppressed* are often highly interactive, the “joker” (often an actor or the director) being in charge of coordinating the spontaneous interventions of the audience on stage with the improvised reactions of the performers. However, in more conventional settings, where a sharper distinction between performers and audience exists, the performers have to keep an eye on the actual *result* of their improvisation, and not focus only on the improvising process itself, which can be very rewarding for the performers but not necessarily for the audience.

With this in mind, many improv manuals plainly advise their readers to avoid doing certain things because they are too difficult to do well in improvisation. A series of contrasts are usually made between what can be done when improvising a performance and what can be done when scripting a theater play:

- 1 Improvisers should show rather than tell (Halpern et al. 1994: 53) – because enacting something takes advantage of both the gestural and verbal resources of the theatrical medium and, thus, gives improvisers more material to work with and more opportunities to find something interesting to develop.



- 2 Improvisers should explore a situation or a relationship rather than explore a plot – because “there is not pattern to ease the burden of creativity” when it comes to plot elaboration (Besser et al. 2013: 203).
- 3 Improvisers should favor the unusual over the routine (Besser et al. 2013: 84) – because it is easier for them to be interesting if they are working with a material or a situation that is itself remarkable.
- 4 Improvisers should favor scene development over scene exposition (Napier 2015: 107) – because it is difficult to adequately prepare for something that is not already planned.
- 5 Improvisers should favor agreement with each other over disagreement – because while disagreement can reveal interesting aspects of the characters, such nuanced exploration is typically difficult to manage and performers spending too much time on disagreeing only risk “to prevent something more interesting from happening” (Besser et al. 2013: 46.)

All these contrasts construe improvised theater as a hyper-dramatic artform. In other words, improvised theater seems to be at its most efficient – i.e., reaches an optimal equilibrium between the constraint of real-time creation and the constraint of audience entertainment – when performers focus almost exclusively on the dramatic (or action-related) aspects of the theatrical art form at the expense of its narrative (or story-related) aspects. Such focus inevitably constrains the range of results that improvisers might achieve. There cannot be tragedy without plot development but there can be comedy; there cannot be tragedy without conflict, but there can be comedy; there cannot be tragedy without the sense of a broader context than what is happening on stage but there can be comedy; etc.

Conversely, it seems much easier to map this hyper-dramatic improvisational process with some of the core features of comedy. In his paper on the comic vision of life, John Morreall (2014) suggests a characterization of comedy via an extended series of contrasts with tragedy. According to him, “comedy is based on the enjoyment of incongruity and so welcomes surprises,” while “tragic heroes prefer the normal and routine” (130); “comic protagonists and audiences are comfortable amid disorder [...], they do not require a unified plot or plot resolution,” while “tragic heroes and audience crave order” (130); “comedy revels in multiple meanings: many interchanges between comic characters are based on their interpreting the same words in different ways,” while “tragedy seeks linguistic and conceptual clarity: everything should have one interpretation, and so ambiguity is shunned” (130); “in comedy, events and courses of action can be interrupted, aborted, or started afresh,” while “once a process begins in tragedy, it is carried to completion – there is no turning back or changing course” (132); or, to give a last example, one that Morreall borrows from Susan K. Langer, “the spirit of comedy is essentially contingent and episodic,” while “the spirit of tragedy is closed [and] final” (133). It should be quite clear by now that such features are precisely a given of any improvised performance – even if those features in themselves are not enough to guarantee the emergence of a satisfying comedic performance. Improvisation, by its very nature, is bound to produce surprises, disorder, ambiguities, and interruptions – features that are all at the heart of comedy as a theatrical genre and, thus, play a central role in the expectations of comedy-attending audiences.

In short, to aim for a tragic result would be going against the grain of the improvisational process and, as such, would be a much more effortful and perilous endeavor. Again, it is not that narrative elaboration, description of past events, or psychological explorations are impossible to pursue in improvisation; it is simply that they are much more difficult to achieve than comedy through purely improvised means. If there is something such as a selection mechanism in the evolution of cultural and artistic practices, it is not surprising that improvised theater has ended up being associated almost exclusively with comedy, since it is arguably within the comedic ecosystem that improvisation can maximize its competitive advantage.

#### 4 Humor and the Phenomenology of Improvisation

One important objection could be raised at this point. All the arguments discussed so far, in favor of a specific connection between improvisation and comedy, depend on the *collective* and *dramatic* nature of improv as an art form. It is the specific mix of, on the one hand, the flexibility and unpredictability of improvised interactions, and, on the other hand, the fictional consistency constraints and ludic modes of representation of theatrical art forms, that creates improv's comedic potential. In other words, improvisation *in itself* seems to be insufficient to guarantee the comedic potential of improv. Still, is there something intrinsically funny about improvisation, independent of the specifics of improv? Is there for example something intrinsically funny in an improvised solo performance that does not aim to represent (even minimally) some fictional world, but rather tells stories or speaks to an audience? Stand-up performances could here provide a case in point in order to answer these questions. While stand-up is sometimes mistaken for improv – and it certainly does not help that one of the most famous chain of comedy clubs in the US is simply called “The Improv” – it is in fact a fundamentally distinct art form. Improv is (mostly) a collective practice while stand-up is (mostly) a solo artistic practice; improv is (mostly) about enacting while stand-up is (mostly) about telling; and, last but not least, improv is (mostly) unscripted while stand-up is (mostly) scripted. The differences between improv and standup are often pointed out by improv practitioners, who typically insist on the importance of character work and listening skills in improv, whereas standup is more seen as “delivering blows” and building up the performer's persona.<sup>11</sup> Now, if stand-up is mostly a scripted art form – stand-up performers often refine their bits over the course of a long process of trial and error in which they progressively improve both the material itself and the way it is delivered in front of an audience – this does not necessarily mean that it is totally alien to improvisation.

First, some parts of a stand-up act, such as crowd work, are generally improvised, even if they may also rely heavily on previously elaborated stock material. In crowd work, the audience serves as a (more or less responsive) scene partner. Such moments are often crucial when the performer tries to connect with her audience. It is of high importance when it comes to reinforcing the feeling of a live and unique show, with the audience and the performer both contributing to making the performance *that* very performance.

Second, most stand-up acts generally allow for some (controlled) degree of interactivity. Members of the audience will, thus, sometimes interject unexpected comments or reactions that force the performer to deviate from her routine and to adapt her set to this spontaneous “offer.” This aspect is clearest when performers have to deal with so-called hecklers, audience members that strongly disrupt the act by being loud or making inappropriate comments. Some performers are particularly well-known for their mastery in handling hecklers, to the point that the audience seems to especially relish these antagonistic moments between the stand-up artist and the hecklers. For example, stand-up artist Steve Hofstetter's videos of improvised interactions with hecklers have attracted millions of views on YouTube, far more than any of his more traditional stand-up excerpts.

Third, and more recently, fully improvised stand-up has emerged as a distinct art form, a kind of hybrid between improv and stand-up performance. An act of improvised stand-up can consist entirely of unscripted crowd work or improvised jokes, stories, or sketches based on audience suggestions or on topics that are revealed one by one to the performer and which are, thus, discovered at the same time both by the audience and the performer. While improvised stand-up is still an emerging art form, comedians such as Andrew Schulz have become well known for performing fully unscripted sets, and some shows, such as *Set List: Stand-up without a Net*, are all about convincing well-established comedians to take the challenge of improvised stand-up.

Now, dealing with hecklers or doing crowd work means engaging in a dialogical process with the audience that can be quite unpredictable. In some cases, forcing improvisation on the performer can even make her engage in a pseudo-dialogical process with herself, for example,

by enacting a scene where she alternatively plays the parts of two characters (Robin Williams' improvised performance for *Set List* is a case in point, here). These moments afford many opportunities for the comedian to use much of the same dialogical and representational resources as the ones available in improv to elicit comic amusement – a typical combination of the mechanisms of superiority (laughing at the expense of someone in the audience), incongruity (building on an out-of-context reaction), and release (defusing the tension caused by aggressive hecklers). However, it should be noted that such interactions raise distinct ethical questions, because the power dynamics at play are fundamentally different than those which can be observed in an (ideally) egalitarian ensemble of improv performers.<sup>12</sup> On the contrary, in stand-up, the relationship between the performer and the audience members is fundamentally asymmetrical (the performer has a microphone, while the audience members do not; the performer is on stage, audience members are not; the performer is accustomed to public speaking, audience members are often not; etc.) and it is likely that this asymmetry interacts in a complex way with the comical resources afforded by the improvisational process.

Still, many funny moments of improvisation in stand-up (especially in improvised stand-up) do not rely on such (pseudo-)dialogical interactions, and instead simply follow stand-up's more conventional setting of telling stories in front of an audience and sharing thoughts with them. And yet, the audience seems to laugh even harder in these moments, just by knowing (or believing) that the performance is improvised. How could we explain this phenomenon? I suggest that the answer lies with the audience's phenomenological experience during improvised performances, rather than with the specifics of the improvisation creative process itself.

According to Brown (1996), improvised musical performances are characterized by their *presence*. To appreciate an improvisation is to apprehend the performance as being spontaneously created while it is being heard:

The sense that a unique, unscripted, event is taking place as I listen gives an improvisatory performance a sense of moment. I have to be there at the right time to hear a specific improvisation: yet, I cannot plan to hear *that* one. Being there at the right time, I have a special sense of that music's birth, as I listen [...]. The excitement the experience engenders is [thus] *enhanced*.

(365, *my emphasis*)

Because of the unique and evanescent character of the performance, and because the audience and the performer share the same *inner time* during that performance, there is a specific excitement at play when we attend to improvisations, which acts as an *enhancer* of the performance's aesthetic properties. This means that something funny appears even funnier if we know that it is improvised, even though that is not enough to magically transform something unfunny into something funny – at best, it can make us more charitable towards the performer.

There is, however, one last argument that can be made in favor of a connection between improvisation and comic amusement. To attend an improvisatory event is also to apprehend a real-time thinking process. This has already been noted many times for the case of musical improvisation:

From a listener's point of view, part of the attraction, I believe, is the sense that we are actually witnessing the shaping activity of the improviser. It is as if we in the audience gain privileged access to the performer's mind at the moment of creation.

(Alperson 2010: 274)

This means that when we are attending an improvised performance, there is a twofold process at play. On the one hand, we are witnessing the product of the improviser's actions (be they sounds,

words, or gestures). But on the other hand, we are also attending the improvisation process itself, and, particularly when the improvisation is successful, enjoying the cleverness, imagination, and overall wit such a process requires. As Edgard Landgraf notes, “[T]he identification of wit with improvisation was common in Goethe’s time” (Landraf 2011: 54). At its core, wit is a matter of discovering similarities between distinct things, and generating associations between concepts or ideas. As such, wit is closely related to humor, both because most humor relies precisely on such kind of ability<sup>13</sup> but also because there is something intrinsically uplifting, or even joyful, in seeing people displaying the swiftness and plasticity of their mind – just think of how we cannot help but smile when someone comes up with a clever argument in the context of an otherwise serious discussion (even though the light feeling of amusement provoked by such a display of cleverness can easily be trumped by other contextual factors). The kind of pleasure taken in following the performer’s train of thought might interfere with the exploration of certain feelings, such as pity or fear, which require a high degree of absorption in the resulting performance itself. But, on the contrary, the detachment produced by such a twofold appreciation of improvised performances is an essential ingredient in seeing the humor in someone’s speech and actions.

## 5 Conclusion

I have argued here in favor of a privileged connection between improvisation and comedy. In the first two sections, I showed how some of the core properties of improvisational creative processes provide performers with many comical resources that can then be more or less actively exploited to create funny situations, thus explaining why comedy is often easier to achieve through improvisational means than, say, tragedy; and in the third section, I showed how the phenomenological shift created among audience members who attend to an improvised performance is also an important factor in explaining the close relation that exists between improvisation and humor.

But an important question remains: can we establish a similar connection between improvisation and humor in other art forms, for example musical improvisation? The picture is probably less clear, here. Many performances of freely and collectively improvised music are certainly very funny, from John Zorn’s relentless stylistic *collages* to the always-surprising endings of Mostly Other People Do The Killing’s performances (listening to how the group bursts into laughter after the performance of “Baden” in their *Shamonkin!!!* album is a case in point). Many of the arguments given above for improv are also relevant for musical free improvisation: the cleverness of an improvised musical move will surely trigger a smile among the audience; and the unpredictability of the interactional dynamics will certainly afford the performers with many opportunities for surprising and humorous behaviors. But if there really is such a connection between musical improvisation and humor, it is definitely much weaker. The incongruity-related mechanisms that play such an important part in explaining the connection between verbal and representational cases of improvisation and comedy are indeed likely to be less powerful when it comes to non-verbal *and* non-representational cases. When listening to music, our very concepts of consistency and regularity are much less clearly defined and finely tuned than when we are attending to performances of improvised theater or improvised storytelling, which are supposed to have some sort of (even convoluted) connection with the external world, and which rely on natural languages that are sensitive to logical contradictions. But this does not necessarily mean that musical improvisation does not have some privileged connection with other domains of human expression or with specific sets of aesthetic properties. For example, Jerrold Levinson argued in favor of an expressive specificity of mainstream jazz improvisation in direction of “high-energy positive emotions” (Levinson 2015; but see Bertinetto 2019 for some concerns about this view); and more generally, many improvisers seem to think that musical improvisation – especially in its freer forms – is particularly apt at producing certain kinds of results (e.g., performances that

display organic-like transformation processes or complex and shifting timbral relationships; see the testimonies collected in Denzler and Guionnet 2020).

Describing improvisational artistic practices as “anything is possible” simply denies the specificity of their creative processes. In saying this, I do not mean to revive discourses that consider improvisation to be systematically inferior to its composed or scripted counterparts. On the contrary, I think we should endorse a pluralistic view on these matters, acknowledging that certain modes of production are more fit for achieving certain specific results. In that sense, while improvisation is perhaps not the easiest means to create a tragedy, it is probably the optimal way to achieve comedy: even more, as Keith Johnstone once wrote, “comedy is often *better* when improvised” (Johnstone 1999: 264, my emphasis). Improvisation is not a neutral creative process. It does things to the things it makes – not only because it can produce a phenomenological shift in the way the audience apprehends the performance, but, more importantly, because the specific constraints of the improvisational creative process *orient* the result in certain privileged directions.

## Notes

1 Such 2017.

2 For a general overview of the role of improvisation in theatrical practices, see Frost and Yarrow 2016.

3 On the influence of long-form improv on TV comedy shows, see Fotis 2014: chapter 6.

4 On this topic, see Landgraf 2011: 42:

[In the mid-18th century], as oral traditions are increasingly replaced by conventions and codes that rely on the practice of writing, improvisation, despite its long and venerable history in music, poetry, and theater, falls victim of the distinction between ‘high’ and ‘low’ art.

On the traditionally low assessment of comedy, see also Morreall 2014.

5 A clear sign of the ever-growing popularity of improv is the fact that Netflix decided to produce and broadcast in April 2020 three hour-long, long-form improv specials by the duo Middleditch & Schwartz. This is probably one of the first attempts to introduce long-form improv to such a massive audience, over and beyond more traditional, TV-friendly, sketch-based improv.

6 Lintott further argues for a conjoined account of humor, based on a combination of the three traditional theories of humor:

All of the traditional theories humor – superiority, relief, and incongruity – are somewhat accurate and very interesting in their own right; some comic amusement is enjoying a certain kind of perceived incongruity that gives one a feeling of superiority reducing psychic and/or bodily energy via expression in laughter. Such a conjoined account explains a great deal about a great deal of comic amusement.

(Lintott 2016: 356)

7 For an extensive ethnography of Chicago improv theater, see Sawyer 2003. In this book, Keith Sawyer also provides a valuable theoretical framework for the analysis of collaborative creativity and improvised verbal interactions.

8 In a scene observed during FIST 2017, two performers simultaneously offered a different name for their characters’ dead dog; one of the performers explained that she “was still traumatized” as a way to account for this minor dissonance.

9 In a scene observed during FIST 2017, the performers were twenty-five minutes into the improvisation, and one had just made her first appearance, which is unusually late. When she was greeted with a, “You’re, like, never around!,” the audience laughed precisely because it was not clear whether her scene partner was talking to the character portrayed by the performer or to the performer herself.

10 See <https://theatremomentum.com> (accessed 10 April 2020).

11 “Silencing one’s inner critic and shelving one’s ego also sharply differentiates ensemble-based improv from stand-up comedy, where often the comic’s ego and persona are the foundation for his or her act” (Fotis 2014: 8);

Too often, improvisation is seen as something other than acting. The best improvisers are not stand-up comedians (which is not improvisation in the definition used by this study but a series of finely polished monologues performed with the audience serving as the scene partner), but actors

who understand the importance of character work. Developing strong characters is the basis of good improvisation. What you *do* with those characters when you do not have a script is where the scene work comes into play.

(Leep 2008: 167).

- 12 That does not mean either that performers have *de facto* an equal status when they are doing improv together. This tension between the egalitarian ideal of improv microcosms and the power dynamics at play in the rest of society is studied in great details by Amy E. Seham (2001: xviii):

Chicago improv-comedy is dominated – both in numbers and in the control of content and style – by young, white, heterosexual men. Women and minorities are often marginalized by the mode of play on stage, through the manipulation of rules and structures, and by the rigid control of what improvisers acknowledge as *funny*.

- 13 This idea can be found in many writings on the aesthetics of humor from the late 18th and early 19th centuries. See for example William Hazlitt, *Lectures on the Comic Writers of Great Britain*, “On Wit and Humour” (1819) or Jean Paul, *Vorschule der Aesthetik*, §42 (1804). For an overview of the aesthetics of wit in England and France in the early 18th century, see Bicanová 2013. Note also that most improv classes or manuals routinely ask students to exercise their wit through free association games, and learning to go “from A to C,” i.e., avoiding obvious connections but favoring ideas that are only indirectly connected to an audience’s suggestion or a partner’s offer, through an intermediate term or concept that should remain implicit.

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## *Improv, Stand-Up, and Comedy*

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