



ROLL CALL

Comedy 101: How to make it in Chicago's sketch, improv, lit, and stand-up scenes



It all starts with a man and a mic, right?

Matthew Ginger/Flickr

By Keith Ecker October 27, 2011

Just as there's more than one way to skin a cat, the same could be said about finding a calling in Chicago's diverse comedy scene. Not only is the Windy City the birthplace of modern improv comedy, but it also claims one of the largest sketch festivals in the country, an expansive stand-up community, and a burgeoning performance literary scene. Making it in any one of these tracks requires a unique set of skills. And there are many places in the city where newcomers and veterans alike can sharpen their comedy teeth. To help get anyone started, *The A.V. Club* got Chicago comedy scenesters and veterans to weigh in on how to carve out a path to comedic success.

Stand-up

The rundown: With Chicago natives **Hannibal Buress** and **T.J. Miller** achieving national fame and the success of the Chicago incarnation of the Just For Laughs Festival, Chicago is becoming a respectable incubator for national stand-ups.

About the scene: "It's been growing really fast over the last five years," says Bryan Bowden, a stand-up instructor at the **Second City Training Center**. "Chicago is a laboratory of comedy. Because there's no industry here, comedians are free to try things, change things, and screw up over and over until they get to that magic point of expressing their unique point of view in the clearest and most entertaining way possible. Stand-up comedians from Chicago are some of the hardest-working comedians with some of the most unique voices you'll find today."

How to succeed: "Seeing shows, hitting open mics, and meeting people is a great way to start," says Kelsie Huff, the producer of the all-female comedy show **The Kates** and an instructor of **The Lincoln Lodge's** *Feminine Comique*, a comedy class for female performers. "Also, write and perform. And if no one is booking you, put up a show yourself. Don't just talk about it; do it."

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Company

T.J. Miller

The Kates

Write Club



Where to learn: Check out course offerings through the **Second City Training Center** and **The Lincoln Lodge's Feminine Comique**.

Where to perform: There are open mics throughout the city on nearly any given day. If you're looking to showcase, consider **Chicago Underground Comedy**, **The Lincoln Lodge**, and **Comedians You Should Know**.

Improv

The rundown: Chicago likely has more improvisers than any other city in the world. The proliferation of the art form within the city is due in no small part to improv guru Del Close hailing from Chicago. Today, many of Close's disciples have gone on to become top-tier talents in television and film.

About the scene: "Chicago feels like Mecca, especially as I travel and share what I've learned with people who are so hungry for this work," says Susan Messing, who teaches improv at the Second City Training Center, iO, the **Annoyance Theatre**, and DePaul University. "It is one of the few cities where people can truly enjoy the process and not worry about the product. That said, there's more improv here than probably anywhere else. So for every truly wonderful show, there are six that are painful to watch. But then again, if they didn't exist, no one would have the opportunity to get better."

How to succeed: "Taking classes is a great way to become familiar with improv technique," says Greg Hess, who co-founded improv group the **Cook County Social Club** and performs for Second City, **Improvvised Shakespeare**, and **Baby Wants Candy**. "But after that, I think the most important thing is finding like-minded friends and to start doing shows, even if that means in a bar or a gallery or your godson's birthday party."

Where to learn: There's no shortage of improv classes in Chicago.

Where to perform: More experienced improvisers can audition at theaters like iO, the Annoyance, and **pH Productions**. There are also open improv jams where newbies can play for free at the **Playground Theatre** and **ComedySportz**.

Sketch

The rundown: The enormity of the Chicago Sketchfest exemplifies the city's importance to the sketch community at large. Now preparing for its 11th year, the festival has grown to include more than 120 acts and more than 150 performances. Additionally, many Chicago sketch performers have moved to working for the small screen, including current *Saturday Night Live* talent Michael Patrick O'Brien, Vanessa Bayer, and Paul Brittain.

About the scene: "The sketch scene in Chicago is the best out there," says Alex Myerchin, a founding member of sketch group **4 Days Late**, which is behind such shows as *Jersey Shore: The Musical*, *ObamaNation*, and *Americans In Peril*. "I've seen sketch in L.A. and New York, and nothing compares to the truth and honesty of the Chicago-style sketch. The shows here are bare bones. We aren't trying to impress anyone. We do it because it's funny, it's honest, and it needs to be said."

How to succeed: "In Chicago, three things will differentiate your work in sketch: honing your writing, building your improv chops, and basic acting training," says Andy Eninger, the head of the Second City Training Center's writing program. "You almost have to have the improv training to keep up onstage. Then, if your group is developing material through improv, you will need some writing structure to craft and edit down your sketches. Finally, the city is thick with actors doing sketch; the ones that really stand out have an extra level of training."

Where to learn: The Second City Training Center is known for its comprehensive sketch-writing program. **Chicago Dramatists** offers playwriting classes that can help inform budding sketch writers, and **Act One Studios** can provide that necessary acting backbone.

Where to perform: **The Second City's Donny's Skybox** space accept proposals from past students. Many sketch groups opt to produce their own shows at storefronts, such as **the Gorilla Tango Theatre**. Those looking to test some bits can put up a short set at the Playground Theater's Graffiti showcase.

Lit

The rundown: Chicago is quickly becoming a hub for performance literature, which is an art form that combines humor and storytelling to create a unique theatrical experience. Public radio superstar Ira Glass and memoirist David Sedaris—who both once called Chicago home—prove there is an audience for this brand of cerebral comedy.

About the scene: "Frankly, it's a pretty thrilling time to be doing this kind of work," says Ian Belknap, who is the self-proclaimed overlord of **Write Club**, a competitive philanthropic reading series. "Not to get too 'Beatles in Hamburg' about it, but I think we're at the dawn of what will become a much bigger, even more vibrant and varied scene for 'embodied literature' or 'curated spoken word events' or whatever umbrella you want to put these shows under."

How to succeed: "Get out there to hear as many stories as humanly possible," says Scott Whitehair, who produces reading series *This Much Is True* and *Story Lab Chicago*. "There are countless quality storytelling events going on in the city right now. Not only will you be thoroughly entertained, but you will learn so much from listening. Also, start telling your stories anywhere people will listen. Get on your feet and take chances, work out the kinks, and then do it again."

Where to learn: Because the scene is so undefined, there's no definitive place to get a performance lit education. Still, those looking to enhance their comedic essay skills can enroll in **StoryStudio**, which offers a variety of creative writing workshops. There are also several reading open mics, including **Story Club**.

Where to perform: There are currently more than 50 performance literary events in the city. Some that cater to comedians include Write Club, **Essay Fiesta**, **This Much Is True**, and **The Encyclopedia Show**.