

# Contents

Foreword	1
Introduction	3
Section 1	
<b>Improv Comedy Schools</b>	5
Chapter 1 — Why Study Improv Comedy?	6
Chapter 2 — Comedy Schools	7
<i>The Curriculum</i>	7
<i>The Teachers</i>	8
<i>The Classes</i>	9
Chapter 3 — Auditioning and Placement	10
<i>Audition Exercises</i>	11
<i>Placement</i>	12
Chapter 4 — What Have I Gotten Myself Into?	14
<i>The Three-Minute Medium</i>	14
<i>Failing Forward</i>	14
<i>“I’m a Standup. I’ll Do Just Fine.”</i>	14
<i>Receiving Notes</i>	15
<i>Evaluation Criteria</i>	15
<i>Performance Reviews</i>	16
<i>The Odds of Making It</i>	17
<i>Where’s the “Ensemble” Feeling?</i>	18
<i>Feedback from Fellow Players</i>	18
<i>Gestation Time</i>	19
<i>Improv as a Profession</i>	19
<i>Be a Jack-of-All-Trades</i>	19
<i>Fuzzy Syllabus</i>	19
<i>Warm-Up</i>	20
<i>Summary</i>	20
Section 2	
<b>Improv Comedy Basics</b>	21
Chapter 5 — The Enlightenment	22
<i>Your First Lousy Improv – Help!</i>	22
Chapter 6 — The Comedy Commandments	23
<i>Don’ts</i>	24
<i>Dos</i>	25
<i>What Good Are These “Comedy Commandments”?</i>	26
<i>Summary</i>	26
Chapter 7 — Four Falling Anvils of Improv	27
Chapter 8 — Falling Anvil #1: Collaboration	28
<i>Group Mind</i>	28
<i>Rolodexing</i>	29

	<i>Helpful Hints</i> . . . . .	30
	<i>Summary</i> . . . . .	32
Chapter 9 —	Falling Anvil #2: Agreement . . . . .	33
	<i>Just Say “Yes”</i> . . . . .	33
	<i>Don’t Argue</i> . . . . .	36
	<i>Positive Start</i> . . . . .	37
	<i>An Offer You Just Can’t Deny</i> . . . . .	40
	<i>Nothing Pre-Planned</i> . . . . .	41
	<i>Summary</i> . . . . .	42
Chapter 10 —	Falling Anvil #3: Foundation (Who, What, and Where) . . . . .	43
	<i>Object Work</i> . . . . .	43
	<i>Setting Up the Foundation</i> . . . . .	45
	<i>Helpful Hints</i> . . . . .	48
	<i>Summary</i> . . . . .	52
Chapter 11 —	Falling Anvil #4: Exploring, Heightening, and Finding a Game . . . . .	53
	<i>Exploring</i> . . . . .	53
	<i>Heightening the Game</i> . . . . .	56
	<i>Summary</i> . . . . .	58
Chapter 12 —	Basics Wrap-Up . . . . .	59
	<i>List of Improv Side-Coaching Phrases</i> . . . . .	59
	<i>Summary</i> . . . . .	60

### Section 3

	<b>Developing Comic Characters</b> . . . . .	61
Chapter 13 —	Overview . . . . .	62
	<i>Get Personal</i> . . . . .	63
	<i>Who Are My Models?</i> . . . . .	63
	<i>The Class</i> . . . . .	63
	<i>The Requirements</i> . . . . .	64
	<i>Preparing for Character Exercises</i> . . . . .	65
Chapter 14 —	Developing Character Essences . . . . .	68
	<i>The Format for Most Solo Character Exercises</i> . . . . .	68
	<i>Taking the Plunge</i> . . . . .	69
	<i>Exercises</i> . . . . .	71
	<i>Maximize Your Solo Exercises</i> . . . . .	74
	<i>Summary</i> . . . . .	75
Chapter 15 —	The Character Toolbox . . . . .	76
	<i>Building Character History</i> . . . . .	76
	<i>Building Character Game</i> . . . . .	77
	<i>The Longevity Test</i> . . . . .	78
	<i>Character Psychology 101</i> . . . . .	79
	<i>Labeling Your Partner</i> . . . . .	82
	<i>Helpful Hints</i> . . . . .	84
	<i>Summary</i> . . . . .	85

Chapter 16 — Character Workout	86
<i>Developing Your Character's Lingo</i>	87
<i>Classic Character Exercises</i>	89
<i>Bringing Your Prepared Characters</i> <i>to a Two-Person Improv</i>	93
<i>Summary</i>	95
<i>Celebrity Impersonations</i>	95
Chapter 17 — Character Wrap-Up	97
<i>Summary</i>	97
<b>Section 4</b>	
<b>Long Form Improv</b>	99
Chapter 18 — Introduction to Long Form Improv	100
<i>Harold</i>	100
<i>Other Long Form Styles</i>	101
<i>Another Long Form Example</i>	102
<i>Structure vs. Freestyle</i>	103
Chapter 19 — Long Form Skill #1: Building a Logical Absurdity inside One Scene	104
<i>Summary</i>	105
Chapter 20 — Long Form Skill #2: “Circling Up” (Replicating the Problem inside One Scene)	106
<i>Summary</i>	108
Chapter 21 — Long Form Skill #3: Extending the Game across Multiple Scenes	109
<i>Types of Scenes</i>	110
<i>Building Accord, Not Accuracy</i>	110
<i>Summary</i>	113
Chapter 22 — Long Form Skill #4: Editing Scenes	114
<i>Summary</i>	115
Chapter 23 — Long Form Extras	116
<i>Exercises</i>	116
<i>Long Form - Don't Plan Ahead</i>	116
<i>Cheating</i>	117
<i>Bartender, Don't Cut Me Off</i>	117
<i>Create Your Own Long Form Structures</i>	118
<i>Themes</i>	118
<i>Long Form's Influence on Sketch Comedy</i>	119
<i>Summary</i>	120
Chapter 24 — Long Form Wrap-Up	121
<i>Summary</i>	121
<b>Section 5</b>	
<b>Writing Sketch Comedy</b>	123
Chapter 25 — Sketches: Getting Started	124
<i>The Classes</i>	125
Chapter 26 — Finding and Shaping Sketch Material	127

	<i>Turning Life into Sketch Comedy</i> . . . . .	127
	<i>Exercises</i> . . . . .	132
	<i>Guidelines</i> . . . . .	133
	<i>Summary</i> . . . . .	134
Chapter 27 —	<b>The Sketch Writing Toolbox</b> . . . . .	135
	<i>Revising – Sketch Comedy Shorthand</i> . . . . .	135
	<i>The Understructure of Sketch Writing</i> . . . . .	137
	<i>Summary</i> . . . . .	152
Chapter 28 —	<b>Getting Your Sketch on Its Feet</b> . . . . .	153
	<i>Tricks of the Trade</i> . . . . .	153
	<i>Writing and Working with Others</i> . . . . .	154
	<i>Preparing for Performance</i> . . . . .	157
	<i>Summary</i> . . . . .	158
Chapter 29 —	<b>Sketch Writing Wrap-Up</b> . . . . .	159
	<i>The Writer’s Voice</i> . . . . .	159
	<i>Summary</i> . . . . .	159
<b>Appendix —</b>	<b>Exercises</b> . . . . .	160
	<i>Sample Audition Exercises</i> . . . . .	161
	<i>Warm-up Exercises</i> . . . . .	162
	<i>Exercises for Group Mind and Rolodexing</i> . . . . .	163
	<i>Building a Story</i> . . . . .	166
	<i>Practice Object Work</i> . . . . .	167
	<i>Practice Adding the Foundation</i> . . . . .	167
	<i>Beginning Improv Scenes</i> . . . . .	170
	<i>“Taking the Plunge” into Character Essences</i> . . . . .	172
	<i>Characters from a Random</i>	
	<i>Suggestion ... Like a Blender</i> . . . . .	173
	<i>Building Characters from an Exaggerated Trait</i> . . . . .	174
	<i>Solo Exercise – Characters from People You Know</i> . . . . .	176
	<i>Building Characters from Labels</i> . . . . .	176
	<i>Using Characters in Improvised Scenes</i> . . . . .	176
	<i>Long Form Preparation Exercises</i> . . . . .	178
	<i>Long Form Structures</i> . . . . .	180
	<i>Great Character Improvs for Use in Sketch Shows</i> . . . . .	182
	<i>Exercises for Writing Character Monologues</i> . . . . .	182
	<i>Exercises for Sketch Writing</i> . . . . .	184
<b>Index</b> . . . . .		187
<b>About the Author</b> . . . . .		191

# Foreword

Some students today are result-oriented. They go for the result without doing the work. It's almost like an Olympic runner who hitchhikes: "Can you give me a ride to the finish line here? I gotta be faster than everybody else." You cannot trade off. You have to do the work step by step yourself.

And the place to start is *inside*.

At first, I didn't think I could teach improvisation. One particular time, a Groundling teacher had to cancel right before my class. I started to panic. The teacher said, "You teach it." I answered, "I don't know what to do!" I was shaking in my boots. I was frightened to death. But I had to teach improv, so I taught improv.

Later, I developed a character in *The Groundlings*, a character named Brendan O'Phlegm, a pompous Irish improv instructor:

*Improvisation is makin' it up as ya go along! Doin' what ya damn well please! (To the audience) How are ya? (The audience answers "Fine.") You see? Ya made that answer up! Did ya write it down before ya came here? No! That's improvisation, Ladies and Gentlemen!*

Audiences loved that character because he was so set in his ways. I lost my inhibitions completely in that character.

You have to be honest with yourself. Things like emptiness and places you want to avoid are actually the places that give you permission to expand. The things we've avoided all our lives are actually the things we need to be drawn to, like a moth to a flame. Those are the places that are unknown, where all your demons come from. You start taming those demons when you *use* them.

But you need to *technically* understand your experiences, and this book is created in order to explain them, describing not the experience itself, but the logistics behind it. You can't just rely on

spontaneity — you need the technical in order to explain the spontaneous.

Also, if you place unrealistic demands on yourself, you'll create nothing but discomfort. However, if you take the view that nothing is a mistake, that nothing would happen unless you needed to learn that particular lesson, then eventually you realize that you are actually moving on a specific path — your own individual path (one that you are, quite literally, making up as you go along).

You are realizing your uniqueness as an artist and how to manifest it in your everyday life. It has nothing to do with the competition and all that stuff. When you feel separate, make a connection. Connecting is the goal. Denying the truth never works. You come away feeling like something has been stolen from you. It's really when you lose yourself that you seem to find yourself. So, embrace what's coming at you.

Your path is an unknown path to you. It is made by you, and you alone. *Nobody has ever done "you" before you.* It's important to know that nobody ever, ever did what you're doing right now, the way you're doing it. That cuts out the competition.

So, trust and believe in yourself. Because if you understand yourself, you understand all of humanity. There's no difference — a drop of water, or an ocean.

— Kip King

**Kip King** is one of the original members of The Groundlings comedy troupe. Kip has appeared in numerous TV shows and films, from *Batman* and *Breakfast at Tiffany's* to *Babylon 5* and *Hollywood Homicide*. He has performed in hundreds of commercials and was the national spokesperson for V8 Juice and Continental Yogurt. He has performed voiceovers for Hanna Barbera, including starring roles in *Smurfs* and *The Biskitts*. He is the father of *Saturday Night Live's* Chris Kattan and is a renowned acting and improv coach in Los Angeles.

# Introduction

Four years ago, I moved to Los Angeles to jump-start my acting career. I attended a variety of improv comedy schools in order to get industry exposure — “stage time,” we call it in the acting biz. I showed up thinking that my comedic instincts were all I needed — “I’ll just get up there and be funny.” I was a company member of a Chicago theater ensemble, I had a degree in theater, some commercial credits, and a few roles in independent short films. I thought it would be easy to become a member of a comedy theater ensemble.

And then I was struck on the head by the proverbial falling anvil.

I realized that as a comedic actor, I was solely responsible for developing my own material. Surprise! It’s not just *acting*. It’s *writing*. It’s developing your own premises, not just for the stage but for film and TV, too. You are the actor, the writer, *and* the producer.

Few of the comedy classes I took had a syllabus, or even a list of class exercises. (Sure, there are books detailing popular improv games, but not a clear documentation of the use of improv to create characters and write sketch comedy.) After I finished the course, I vowed to make it easier for future students. I assembled some exercises common to most schools and developed this road map as a way for students to prepare for what’s ahead.

You don’t have to be in an improv comedy class to learn from this book. This book is for actors, writers, and comedians — anyone who wants to share their comedic observations.

This book is a student’s guide, from a student’s perspective. In it you’ll find a sample of the basic theories, approaches, exercises, and tips taught in comedy schools around the country, with an eye toward the personal struggle that performers encounter as they delve into comedy for the first time. The sections follow the standard progression of comedy school classes. The first section covers improv schools, the second covers improv basics, the third covers creating characters, the fourth covers long form improv, and

the fifth covers sketch writing.

Selected exercise descriptions appear in the text. Additional exercises appear in the appendix. The intent here is to capture the *essence* of the types of exercises you'll encounter in class, not replicate the coursework.

So, use the book as a reference tool to augment your own discovery as you take the classes. It's best if you read only a section or chapter at a time, as you need it. Then come back and review it again later. Comedy is a discipline you'll likely work on for years. It's a layered learning process where you'll discover new applications for old tenets, again and again.

By the time you finish these classes, you'll have a respect for the power of improv, a firm grasp of comedic structure, and the ability to turn your comedic instincts into fully realized *written* premises. You will have laid the groundwork to expand beyond the three-minute medium.