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Physical Comedy: From Stage to Screen

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SENIOR THESIS APPROVAL

This Honors thesis entitled

“Physical Comedy: From Stage to Screen”

written by

Kathleen Suit

and submitted in partial fulfillment of
the requirements for completion of
the Carl Goodson Honors Program
meets the criteria for acceptance
and has been approved by the undersigned readers.

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Physical Comedy

FROM STAGE TO SCREEN

A Senior Honors Thesis by Kathleen Suit



Abstract

People are constantly in motion. We move among the earth, among each other, and within our own body. Movement is one of our greatest means of communicating ideas and emotions with each other. Sometimes, words just aren't enough. We need to see something to comprehend its meaning or to feel the emotion the situation is trying to stir up. Experiencing comedy is no exception. That is where the concept of physical comedy comes in.

Physical comedy has been growing its roots since the beginning of time. It has grown and evolved to effectively captivate audiences in various mediums throughout history. As technology and art has progressed, physical comedy has transformed to include itself into these mediums. From old time vaudeville to modern cinema, artists have been using their bodies and actions to create humor.

In the following chapters, we will delve into the world of physical comedy from its history, why and how it works, the role gender plays, how it has been transforming into modern times, and where it will go from here.

Introduction

Laughter is the tonic, the relief, the surcease for pain.

– Charlie Chaplin

For centuries, we have been proclaiming our amusement with various exclamations of “ha-ha”, “he-he”, and “ho-HO!” We laugh at movies and humorous events. We laugh when we’re happy and when caught in uncomfortable situations. We laugh when we probably shouldn’t, and we even laugh when we don’t realize we are laughing at all. But where do these guttural shimmies come from? What is it that makes our bellies shake and our lungs grasp for air? Those are questions that have been studied by psychologists, comedians, writers, and flirts for ages. But just like there isn’t one proven way to ensure a song will be a hit, or just one way to skin a cat (the proper way being not at all), there isn’t just one way to steal a chuckle.

One of the oldest and most universal forms of comedy would be that of physicality. Physical comedy is the method of producing humor by means of body manipulation, mimicry, and motion. Think of all the videos you have watched of people falling down, hurting themselves, or making a fool of themselves by way of body misplacement. They are unintentionally using one of the oldest tricks in the history of comedy—physical comedy!

I was inspired to research and write about this topic in the fall of 2014 while I was participating in the Disney College Program. For this program I worked as a full time employee of Walt Disney World in Orlando, Florida. I also had the opportunity to take a weekly class entitled "Entertainment Show Production" along with living near the parks and being able to take part in everything that Disney World had to offer, all for free.

I was one lucky girl. I had the best job in the whole world! My role was as an entertainment character performer for the different parks. I was "friends with" (that is the way we talk about the characters we portrayed in order to keep the character's integrity intact) Snow White, Winnie the Pooh, Chip and Dale, Rabbit, King Louie, Mr. Penguin, and Doc the dwarf! Throughout my time spent with these classic Disney characters, I learned just how important it was to be able to tell stories with your body to create an accurate character depiction. For my furry characters (the ones that covered and hid my whole body), the costumes required me to lose or diminish nearly every one of my senses. Seeing was next to impossible while having to look out of a tiny mesh nose and hearing was made more difficult; I couldn't feel the outside world, and talking was completely out of the question. With all of these challenges, it is the performer's job to make everyone forget this is even an issue. They should never be thinking that the character is anyone else besides themselves. And you better believe that no magic was going to be lost on my watch!

The job was all about storytelling. Everyone who meets the characters knows the famous Disney stories that brought them to life. It was up to us to embody exactly what they were used to seeing from these characters on the screen. The problem? Doing all that without your voice. Every day, children would ask the characters questions about

other characters, adventures, things they liked, etc. Yes or no questions are easy! Do you think these delightful kids asked questions in the yes or no format? Of course they didn't. A huge responsibility of the character performer is to be able to think of an accurate answer at a moment's notice, and then answer that question using just your body and all of its movement constraints.

We were discussing topics surrounding that idea during one of my Entertainment Show Production classes when I was inspired to write about this very topic. I realized how important it was to be able to act using your body without relying too much on other elements such as your voice. That is when I ran into the concept of physical theatre. Physical theatre is a broad term that encompasses a variety of movement techniques including but not limited to slapstick, mime, clown, and movement. While it is called physical theatre, this concept has been adapted for use in film since the very beginnings of film. It has been studied, mastered and taught to hopeful performers and comedians for ages.

Performers have spent lifetimes mastering the art of physical comedy and implementing it into their performances. They have put their bodies in danger, their pride on the back shelf, and dove head first (often times literally), committing to these feats of ridiculous physicality. Through their experimentations and trial and error, they were able to pinpoint certain moves, expressions, falls, and situations they could put themselves in to pull out the emotional response of laughter from a crowd. These artists become not just actors, but content creators. The techniques have been perfected and evolved throughout our changing generations as we have progressed from tribal storytelling, to miming, vaudeville, and all the way to modern cinema. How has the use

of this particular form of comedy changed? Is it becoming obsolete? Who uses it and how? All of these questions will be answered as we pratfall into the wonderful world of "Physical Comedy: From Stage to Screen".

Make 'Em Laugh!

The more trouble you get a man into, the more comedy you get out of him.

-Harold Lloyd

Donald O'Connor hit the nail on the head when his character, Cosmo Brown,



gave the key to success in MGM's 1952 classic, *Singin' In the Rain*. "Make 'em laugh! Make 'em laugh. Don't you know everyone wants to laugh?!" Not only did his words ring true, the manner in which O'Connor delivered that message has been celebrated as one of Hollywood's best acts of physical comedy and dance. Creating humor with his body was one of his greatest assets and "Make 'em laugh" was no exception (*Singin'*). On the

toll it took on his body, O'Connor said:

"I was smoking four packs of cigarettes a day then, and getting up those walls was murder. They had to bank one wall so I could make it up and then through another wall. We filmed that whole sequence in one day. We did it on a concrete floor. My body just had to absorb this tremendous shock. Things were building to such a crescendo that I thought I'd have to commit suicide for the ending. I came back on the set three days later. All the grips applauded. Gene [Kelly] applauded, told me what a great number it was. Then Gene said, 'Do you think you could do that number again?' I said, 'Sure, any time.' He said, 'Well, we're going to have to do it again tomorrow.' No one had checked the aperture of the camera and

they fogged out all the film. So the next day I did it again! By the end my feet and ankles were a mass of bruises."

Physical comedy is a skill that requires not only timing, strength, and creativity from its performers, but the incredible ability to pretend not to be in pain. An audience loves to see someone get hurt. There is a fun word we stole from the Germans called *schadenfreude* that means just that: enjoying the misfortune of others. However, it stops being enjoyable or funny when the audience is convinced the performer is *actually* hurt. There is a big difference between the *character* being hurt and the *actor* being hurt. Audiences aren't bothered by the character's pain. In fact, characters getting hurt are incredibly effective for adding humor. However, if the line is crossed and they realize the performer is hurt, it takes the funny out immediately. A crash from a bike is funny. A crash from a bike with the person breaking their leg and bleeding out all over the newly paved road in front of a playground full of on looking children is not. That becomes gore, and turns dark and serious. Viewers want to see someone get hurt, but we don't want you to actually look hurt, especially if said person is a female (Austerlitz). That's when the magic happens. You practice and practice until you can successfully make yourself trip on a banana, fall on your butt, and get up to move on with your life. Or in many cases, get up only to fall back down again within no time. It is the great game of "fake it 'till you make it."

Physical comedians are superheroes. As O'Connor did in the aforementioned famous routine, these performers have mastered the art of scaling up walls, flipping, falling, running face first into walls, and committing to executing acts of physical

prowess while making them look like they happened on accident. And even more than that, making them look like they are easy.

Comedy has a powerful way of captivating an audience. When done successfully, all eyes are on the performer. But comedy is an art. It takes planning, preparation, and years of studying human interaction. What kind of ways can you move your body? How can you take an audience by surprise? The audience is a ruthless creature out for blood. They come bearing their biggest expectations and are always one accidental miss of comedic timing from becoming tomato catapults.

Not only does comedy take timing and creativity, but it requires vulnerability to the core. Have you ever found yourself standing alone in front of a crowd of people with the job of trying to make them laugh? It is a lot easier said than done. I took a clowning 101 class one summer in New York City led by the fabulous clowning instructor, Virginia Scott. During a daily improvisational exercise, she required each of us to do just that. The class of 30 unique individuals from all demographics and locations were told to pull up chairs in the middle of our gymnasium classroom, all facing the pseudo “stage” we had set up. Each of us was to put on our clown nose (the smallest mask in performing), walk behind a partition, come out singing a made up tune, and make everyone laugh. There was no context, no rules, and no planning ahead allowed. The only directions: live in the moment, feel each overwhelming emotion that appears, and **don’t plan ahead.**

I waited desperately as person after person did the courageous walk to the front to perform. Now usually, being the extroverted and attention loving person that I am, I

would have been the first to jump up and volunteer. I would set the precedent high for all the other students to attempt to outshine. I can do drama. I can do realism. And I can definitely take someone else's words and bring them life. But improvisational comedy just being myself—that is a whole different story. This time, fear crippled me to my seat.

What would I do? My mind raced. Think funny, Kathleen, think funny! Do a jig, that's no big deal! You are Tina Fey! You are a modern female Buster Keaton, you got this! I tried to convince myself. Two more people went. The pep talk was not working. *Panic, Panic! What will I do??*

"Who still hasn't gone?" Virginia asked with wide curious eyes at the crowd of students. 5 hands, including my trembling one slowly rose. "Alright, let's go! Come on up, everyone has to go sometime," she said.

Just pull the band aid off, Kathleen! You definitely don't want to be last and suck at it! Just go, woman! I thought to myself.

I took a couple deep breaths, stood up and walked to the back of the partition with the made up ridiculous jingle repeating in my head that I was about to use. My heart was racing and I could feel the blood pulsing through the veins in my neck. It took all of my concentration to keep my elbows from quivering.

The dreaded moment had arrived and out I went! I stepped onstage and began my tune and silly dance. The silence was deafening. You could hear the audience breathing it was so quiet. The gym echoed my fears. I was failing!

"Are you missing something?" Virginia asked with a chuckle.

"Uh... *panic panic panic*... Am I?" I reply.

She gives a knowing smile and points to her nose, "You forgot to put your clown on! Start over."

Crap, I thought and ran back offstage to place the mask that was clearly hanging from its strings around my neck onto my nose. And now, after one miserable attempt, I was about to have to do the whole thing over. This time, I made a new choice. I'm not sure if the response of single lone chuckles was better or worse than the previous silence.

Oh, God, Kathleen, retract, retract! Do something else! More movement! Show more silliness! I thought with haste. Nothing was working. Tough crowd. After attempting to move my body in any which way I could and jumping around the stage like a mad woman making various noises, I came to a stop in front of my audience. I had to make these people laugh or I would be up here struggling for what felt like would be the rest of my life. *I am going to die on this stage. Maybe then they will finally laugh!*

I stared at my audience and began to get angry. "Why don't you people think I am funny!?" I yelled at them. "I am so frustrated that none of you are laughing! I am putting myself in a VERY vulnerable position and you don't even care!" My rant of anger overflowed onto my audience. The people started laughing! I was Mount Vesuvius and my words were the deadly lava. I was embarrassed, then mad, then infuriated, and then as my explosion hit its climax, I began to wail. They laughed some more. This was it! They liked my anger, but they LOVED my sadness. My clown found her personality.

She was tough, ruthless, and forever known as lcky Trashcan Jackie (thanks to the lovely clown naming skills of Virginia that is).

That exercise was the scariest 15 minutes of stage time I have ever had, but it taught me a valuable lesson: if you want the audience to laugh you have to give them what THEY want, not what you plan before and think they should want. When the curtain closes, it is the audience's decision how much applause you get. They are the judge and the jury. Knowing who your audience is and what they want is vital to any successful performance .The audience is always tough. But they're allowed to be, and we have made it easy for them. They are in the dark which gives them the anonymity they need to react truthfully to a performance. We gave them that power, and we put ourselves in the most vulnerable position in front of them. But we need them. After all, what's the point in putting on a show if there is no one to see it?

The biggest problem that I had created for myself was in thinking that I had all the answers. I thought that I knew what would make my audience laugh, but I was gravely mistaken. In the words of Ms. Scott, "Your butt isn't funny." We may think our butt is hilarious and try to shake it and hit it and wiggle it around the space for some laughs, but to the audience, it is just a butt—a butt attached to a clown that wasn't giving them what they wanted.

Comedy becomes funny when the comedian (especially when using their clown) actually takes themselves and their situation seriously. Watching them struggle and experience their problem, no matter how trivial creates humor. To their clown, the issue

at hand is the most important thing. The only thing, in fact, that matters. That is, until something else does!

Finding humor in ourselves and our art is both satisfying and therapeutic. Not only does mastering your clown and learning how to find the inner desires of your characters help you, it also creates a memorable performance for your audience. To quote Hilary Brand from her book *Art and Soul*, "Laughter has always been the best medicine and being able to see the funny side of our great artistic endeavors may save us from the pain of many a pratfall."



The Roots: Where did it all begin?

Life doesn't make any sense, and we all pretend it does. Comedy's job is to point out that it doesn't make sense, and that it doesn't make much difference anyway.

- Eric Idle

One of my favorite things to do is go on road trips. It works out quite nicely that I enjoy this since pursuing an acting career makes me travel all over the country in search of my next opportunity. Nearly every other week I am hitting the open road to attend various auditions, theatre festivals, or scope out new cities where I could find work. But however much I enjoy these trips, taking them alone can at times be quite daunting and repetitive. You can only drive through the flat, dusty, countryside-decorated-with-oil-rigs of Texas so many times before you start to question your own sanity. Thankfully, living in the 21st century gives me the luxury of being able to bring portable entertainment with me on the road (although my car will forever be stuck in the 20th century, I make do with my outdated "car tampon" that hooks my phone up to my Sebring's state-of-the-art, sometimes working, classic cassette player). My go to source of entertainment on the road is stand-up comedy. There are very few things that can keep you awake on the last leg of your 12 hour straight-through drive than hearing Jerry Seinfeld making racehorse impersonations.

After countless trips of doing just this, I realized a very interesting quirk I have. It turns out, every time I listen to a stand-up podcast, I mouth along silently and act out what the comedian is saying as they say it. It has, of course, generally about a 1 ½ second delay seeing as I usually have never heard the material and have to repeat it as I go along. The first time I noticed myself doing this, I was completely confused and caught by surprise. How strange of a thing for someone to do! *I sure am glad I am in this car alone right now*, I thought to myself.

Did I subconsciously do this because I am a performer and I just wanted to pretend I was that comedian for a moment in time? Or was it something deeper than that? After doing research on the topic of physical comedy, I began to think the latter was correct. Some element had been missing from my experience of these stand-up comic routines in my car: My vision. Acting it out was my way of making up for the fact that I couldn't watch it unfold in front of me. I was filling in the missing element myself—without even realizing it was missing.

Half the humor that comic artists use comes from some physical manifestation of their jokes. Whether it is the gestures they make when telling a story, the physicality of them actually reenacting something, or just the facial expressions they wear, *seeing* the physical display they are putting on can really draw the audience into their stories and create memorable humorous moments.

As revolutionary as I found this to be, I was not the first one to figure this out. People have been stealing laughs with physical comedy for centuries. The physical

comedy that is prevalent in our Western culture derives from early clowns and the many stock characters of commedia dell'arte including the rather lively zanies (Brockett).

Over the last few decades, clowns have gotten quite a bad rap thanks to Hollywood. They have turned from the inner beings of respected comic artists, to cheap kids birthday party entertainment and scary sideshow monsters. Many people in the world hate clowns, some even going so far as to have a phobia of them called coulrophobia. There are clown bashing forums, websites, and even Facebook pages dedicated to the hatred of clowns. The true clown has been distorted by our culture and made evil (Aquilina). This wasn't their original intent. Clowns and mimes have a history of their very own.

Do you love the late 90's- early millennium hit of a show, *Whose Line is it Anyway?* Thank a clown. What about *Jackass*, or *The Three Stooges*? Thank a clown. Clowns were pivotal in encouraging performers to break free of all the drama and find what they wanted at the very core. They began a long lineage of performers dying to make people laugh, and using what they had on them to do it—their bodies.

Both clown and mime have had a long history that stretch back to ancient performing arts. Even, as I would argue, back to the first human communications. These performance specialties are fundamental to how we have shaped and viewed shows throughout history.

In the early ancient Roman theatre, clowns were stock characters that were sometimes called the *stupidus* (Latin for mimic fool) or they were court jesters for medieval European royalty. The Egyptian Pharaohs had their own version that they

called Pygmy clowns and China as well with Yu Sze, the clown to the Imperial Court and Ch'in Shih Huang-ti, the ruler who built the Great Wall of China (Bluey).

Fundamentally, clowns are simple and stupid; innocent creatures that know very little beyond what is right in front of their big red noses. They care only about what is happening right in the moment they are living in and exactly in the space they are occupying. They strive to take care of their "inner babies" which is the control center for everyone's needs, wants, and fascinations. Clowns can go from emotional extremes at the drop of a hat. Seriously, if they cared about a hat and all of its wonder, they would most definitely wail and throw a tantrum if someone were to drop it.

In our day, we make it a goal to "find your inner clown". Finding your clown is a lot like buying temporary tattoos from the quarter machine in the front of a restaurant: You don't always get what you want. Your clown is not decided by you, but by your audience; by your friends, family, and peers. Remember Icky Trashcan Jackie? She was definitely not created by me, but by the audience comprised of my fellow clowning students. For me at that time, the angry and emotional cry of my inner baby connected with them and Jackie was born. Every person has a unique humor inside of them, their very own inner baby that is screaming to get out. But don't call Maury just yet, because let me tell you—that baby is not always who you expect. Jacques Lecoq said, "The clown has great importance as part of the search for what is laughable and ridiculous in man. We should put the emphasis on the rediscovery of our own individual clown, the one that has grown-up within us and which society does not allow us to express."

When finding your inner clown, or what makes each individual funny, it usually ends up being the quality about yourself that others laugh at you about behind your back. So when doing self and peer evaluations on yourself, it's never a terrible idea to get opinions from the people closest to you—the ones that can shoot it to you straight and love you in spite of yourself. I am sure that in ancient times, the clown faced many a ridicule if they were not found to be funny and had to use this same trial and error.

Miming has been around since the cavemen acted out the killings of their hunt. But, the mimes really began to flourish during the Greco-Roman era to display a simulation of life circumstances in an incredibly over the top and farcical manner. The word "mime" derives from the ancient Greek *mimos*, meaning to imitate (Brockett). Aristotle wrote about it in "The Poetics" describing it as imitation. "Imitation is natural to man from childhood, and it is also natural for all to delight in works of imitation," stated Aristotle (Aristotle).

The dances of the Greek warriors were portrayed by mime representations of fighting and battles. In Rome, a performer by the name of Livius Andronicus performed mime as stadium entertainment. Imagine having to convey a story as a sole person in a giant stadium. They didn't have microphones or Jumbotrons either. This was ancient Rome. Executing this successfully took masterful physicality and preparation.

During the 12th century, miming continued as a major feature of the mystery and miracle plays developing throughout Europe and England. Mime had a lot of burlesque, tragedy, and myth which combined makes up the term, *hilarotragodai*. It was also extremely common in mime to have a time of free playing or what we would think of in

modern times as improvisation comedy. When this occurred it involved extreme farcical elements in which a person would be beaten in a bag on stage, or punished for spectator's enjoyment (Brockett). Fun, huh?

While female actresses were a rarity during these times, mime was one of the first performance acts to allow and encourage women to participate. This performance art was cruder and involved women being naked on stage and showing acts of real adultery in front of an audience. They would even have executions during their performances by switching an actor out for a convict set to be executed and they would do so during the show. This quickly brought mimes under attack with the Christian church. It seemed they didn't quite approve of people having sex and killing on stage.

Anytime theatre was not flourishing due to an unstable society, mime still managed to linger about. This type of performance and its stock characters began to slip into other forms of performance art, like the rising commedia dell'arte during the Renaissance. The influential mime used in commedia was the clown/fool called *Pierrot* (Brockett). As miming was inspiring commedia dell'arte, commedia was helping birth the clown.

Mime has translated into modern times and is recognized as performers acting without using their words—the audience solely relies on the actor's physical movements and mannerisms for comprehension. But In the days of ancient Greek, Roman, and medieval times, mime was accompanied by dialogue and even sound! This goes against the structure of how miming has evolved over the centuries. If we saw their form of mime now, we might not recognize it for miming at all! The mime that we think of

today first took roots in France with Gaspard Debureau. He brought back the Pierrot from the days of flourishing commedia and made him a hit again. He was the start of what we all think of as the mime with a white face and black and white clothing. With him and the continuance of his craft through his students, this new way of mime grew in popularity in the 20th century. From here, Marcel Marceau would create yet another evolved style of mime in which he focused on the body in its entirety. He would later bring his skills of mime to television by appearing on multiple different shows.

Mimes and clowns have held a strong rôle in the world's performance history and have managed to sprout new disciplines under their umbrellas throughout time. They have influenced people and brought joy, laughter, sadness, and disgust to audiences for centuries. And it was all thanks to some performers who broke the rules to have a good time.

Mime and clown has continued on to this day and inspired the creation of Vaudeville. These were variety shows that became suitable for a family to watch. They had many different types of performers with varying skills. Vaudeville really had something for everything. Acts usually consisted of song or dance and various forms of physical comedy and performers showing off unique and impressive skills. This type of show happened in many different countries including Great Britain where it was called the Music Hall, and in France called Café Concert. A modern equivalent to this type of entertainment would be shows such as *America's Got Talent* or the many different works of recorded media found on the YouTube platform.

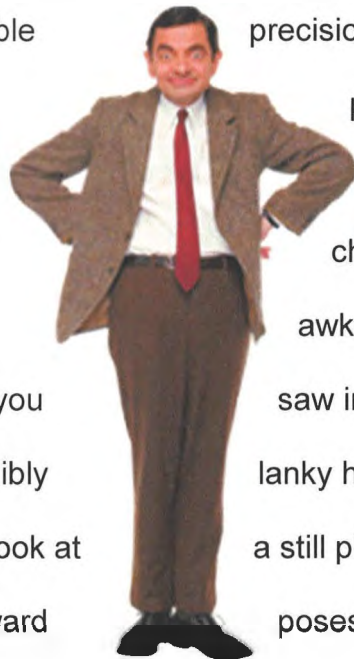
With the Industrial Revolution right behind them and the Technological Revolution beginning to explode with revolutionary new ways of communicating to audiences, vaudeville jumped at the opportunity to find its way onto film (Allah).

During film's birthing stages, Thomas Edison's first recorded motion pictures on his newly designed cinématographe, a portable, hand-cranked film player, were of circus and vaudeville acts, a highly ironic beginning to what would soon become a worldwide phenomenon. At the turn of the 20th Century, silent films were the hot form of entertainment. Without the ability to use dialogue, movies became a breeding ground for physical comedians who specialized in entertaining **without the need for sound**. Charlie Chaplin cranked us off to a fantastic start with his **mischievous** tramp character, followed by the greatness of Harold Lloyd, and **Buster Keaton**. Keaton was made legendary for creating a completely different character **with his physicality**—what we call the straight man. The straight man **takes everything, even the most** ridiculous situations with his head on his shoulders. **Everything is very serious** for the straight man. He delivers his lines with strength and **precision, even when the words** he is saying implies nothing of the sort (Dale). He would be followed in this tradition by the great Leslie Nielson of *The Naked Gun* Franchise.

As the silent era was given the boot **with the new ability** to include audible dialogue, the silent stars were faced with a dilemma: do they keep the characters the way their audiences knew and loved them, or do they give them a voice? While some chose to continue in their silent ways, the speakers continued to enjoy their popularity ("history of the").

Even with the addition of talking in films, some physical comedians chose to let their full impact lay in their gestures, like in the good old days. The Marx Brothers were a great example of a wildly successful group of comedians who each contributed to a different element of comedy. Harpo, being the sly, trickster, and quick-witted clown with unreasonably deep pockets, kept his silence and let his humor spring from his actions. Even though he had the ability to talk, his choice not to added a layer to Harpo that screamed of nostalgia and made you love and root for him all the more (even in his antics). His brother Groucho did most of the talking for the trio, and Chico was the wannabe charmer.

I couldn't talk about physical comedy without mentioning 3 of my favorites, Jerry Lewis, Rowan Atkinson, and Dick Van Dyke. Jerry was a performer from an early age and was incredibly talented at controlling the specificity of his movements. He was another one of the greats that was famous for not saying much. He could do a mean typewriter impersonation and keep you glued to the screen watching him perform such a mundane task with incredible precision of mime (Dale). Atkinson, on the other hand, was another physical comedian who made his own rules. A prime example of a grown man in tune with his "inner baby", his character, Mr. Bean, was simple, needy, and most of all, awkward. His character was not entertaining for the stamina you saw in him as you did with Donald O'Connor, but by how incredibly lanky he was and how funny it was to watch him move. Take one look at a still photograph of his face and one of the many extreme and awkward poses he is standing in and you can't



help but to chuckle. He later created his own television show all about physical comedy entitled: *Laughing Matters: Visual Comedy*. Dick Van Dyke will forever be remembered for his perfectly executed versions of pratfalls entering his house at the beginning of every episode of *The Dick Van Dyke Show*. Sometimes he would trip over the front entrance table, sometimes walk around then proceed to trip over an ottoman in the living room, and sometimes surprise the audience entirely and manage to enter without falling at all. He also used his brilliant dance and physical skills to bring laughs to people of all ages with his penguin dances and chimney sweeps in Disney's *Mary Poppins*.

Our Funny Bones

Techniques of Creating Humor with the Human Body

“Tragedy is when I cut my finger. Comedy is when you fall into an open sewer and die.”
—Mel Brooks

By now, we all have a pretty good idea about where this “physical comedy” comes from, why it is important, and how it could be successful. But in a very practical sense, what the heck is it? If you have ever had an older brother, think about him. Think about every time he farted on you and ran away in hysterics. Remember all the times he ran around flailing his arms and pretending to get knocked out and run into things. That’s what we’re talking about here. Everything from a pie to the face, to Chevy Chase getting himself knocked in the head with the handle of a shovel from stepping on the wrong end while locked in his attic in my all-time favorite Christmas movie, *National Lampoon’s Christmas Vacation* (1989), is physical comedy. It is all about the gross and funny things our bodies can do and all the things that happen to our bodies when we are not being fully aware of our actions and surroundings. This kind of comedy does not take a high IQ, a high school diploma, or even the observation skills of a person over the age of 3 months old. No matter where you come from, you can understand physical humor. It is innate to all of us because we can relate in some way to what is being

shown to us. We can realize that someone made a mistake and is paying for it. In some ways, we secretly love watching it happen to someone other than ourselves.

Physical comedy is considered the lowest form of comedy because it really doesn't take much to grasp it. It is extreme and it shows how we relate and interact with other people and with the objects we are surrounded by. It can demonstrate a never ending amount of relatable circumstances such as revenge (think *Home Alone*), love, carelessness, fits of rage, and the list goes on and on. Physical comedy takes concepts that people understand and shows them, not tells them, those things going wrong. It is basic and we all get it. But how do they do that?

The more exaggerated the physicality is, the funnier it seems. This comedy is all about going to the extremes and busting through them. However, doing that is not quite as easy as it sounds. Successful physical comedy comes at a price—a price of bruises, injuries, hours of practicing, impeccable timing, endurance and the ability to withstand pain. It is also required that you have control over your body and understand how to make it do exactly what you want. One famous athlete-turned-performer-turned-teacher mastered this and created a legacy for himself by creating techniques that were influenced by body movements he learned and witnessed as an athlete. His name was Jacques Lecoq.

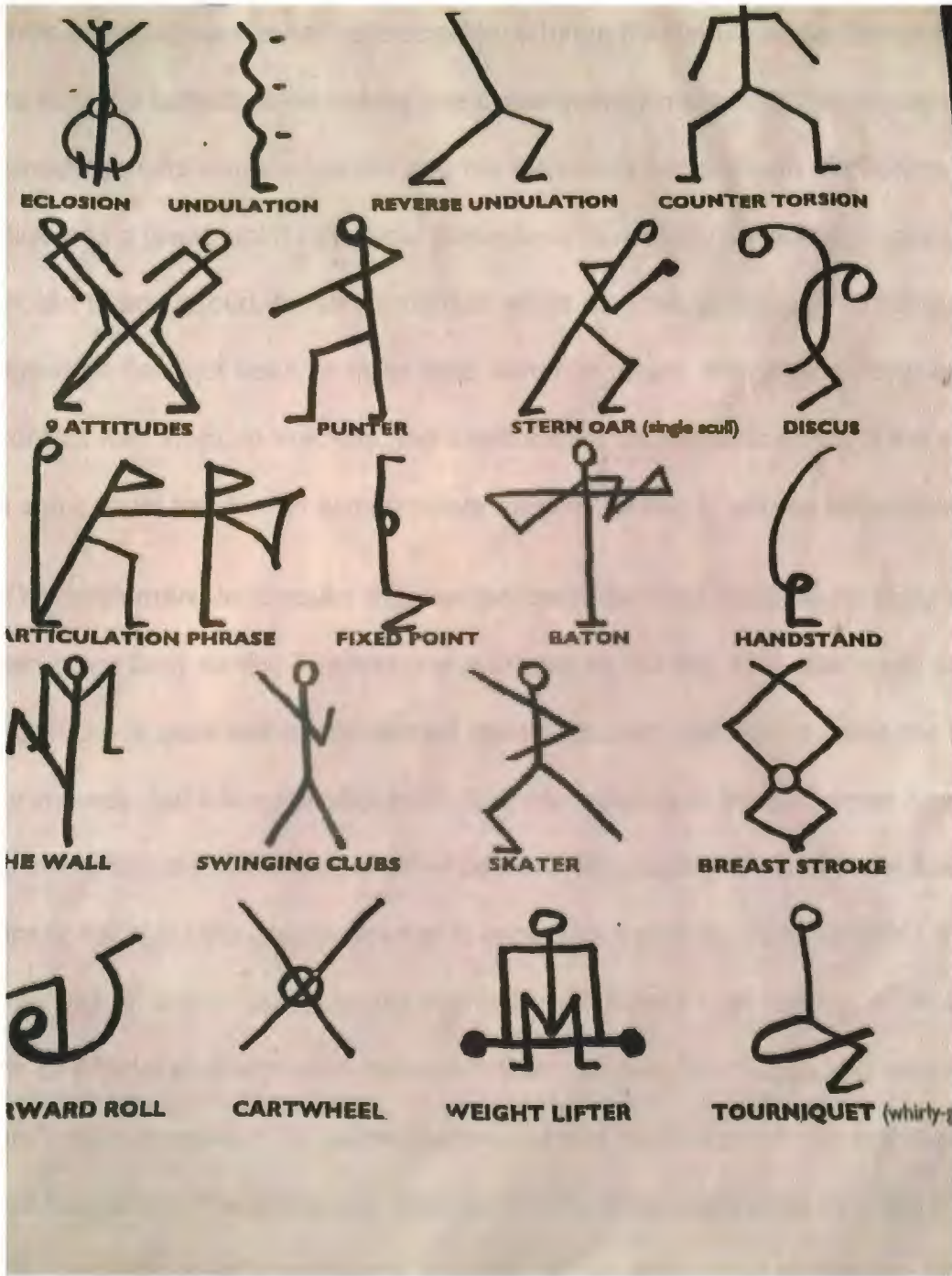
In the pedagogy of Lecoq, he lays out 20 different movements that train a performer to act with specificity in every part of their bodies. It focuses on de-construction (the breaking down of actions from one small movement to the next),

improvisational activity, and playing. At the heart of everything he taught, was the importance of focusing on play.

He believed that it was fundamental for actors to understand and purposefully make justified movements. He started the Theatre of Gesture in which he used gestures that concentrated on various positions of the body and isolated movements. He was credited with saying, "The body knows things about which the mind is ignorant."

Having been very knowledgeable about masks from previous work, Lecoq used them to help draw the actor's focus from their face and towards their bodies. The mask would limit them and force them to express their feelings and communicate using all other elements of their bodies. In his book, *The Moving Body*, he proclaims, "When no words have been spoken, one is in a state of modesty which allows words to be born out of silence." Little did I know, this was the very technique I was embodying during my work at Walt Disney World!

These techniques, once mastered, were to help performers embody characters that were different from themselves. What he left behind were books of his techniques, and these lovely, detailed stick figures that so clearly explain his 20 different movement techniques. After studying these movements with instructors who have studied under him, I learned just how difficult and precise each of these moves, when brought to life, are. During his life, he created a theatre school called The Jacques Lecoq International Theatre School dedicated to teach The Jacques Lecoq Method. After his death in 1999, the school carried on and is still teaching his methods today.



Another term for physical comedy is *slapstick* comedy. Slapstick got its name from the prop that was used in performances to hit someone with. It was made up of two boards on top of each other connected by a hinge that would allow the top board to separate from the bottom when swung and subsequently make a loud slapping noise when it made contact with the person and the top board collided with the bottom. Using a slapstick was a great tool for physical comedians to not only show their typical violence, but to add a loud, harsh sound that would trick the audience into believing the other performer had just been hit quite hard. When in reality, the boards never even made contact with them. In that way, the slapstick added dramatic effect to the situation and the actor could react in an extraordinary manner, **faking it**, and be believable (Dale).

There are many techniques that can be used to create slapstick comedy and can be broken down fairly easily. The first one is known as **the trip**. This, like many of the others to follow, is quite self-explanatory (I never accused slapstick of being the most complex comedy, but it is quite effective!). The trip consists of the performer running into and stumbling over an object or other person. This usually will end in the body dramatically flailing to the ground in what is known as a pratfall. With a pratfall, the performer has an abrupt and large fall that ends with them either landing on their buttocks, or if lucky and with even more skill, they can fake it so much and take a nasty spill, catching themselves right before the ground and brushing it off like nothing abnormal happened. The artists get creative with the where and what they are tripping over and it can lead to very successful comedy. Some of the most impressive pratfalls I have seen have even gone so far as to involve falling down flights of stairs. Ouch! Pratfalls are incredibly popular and effective in slapstick comedy.

The second technique that can be used in slapstick is the slip. Imagine someone slipping on a banana peel, which is surprisingly difficult to do, or slip sliding on a wet floor. The lack of balance that slip brings is enjoyable for an audience. It causes the performer to look out of control and it leaves the viewer hanging briefly with suspense over what will happen to the person.

Another popular technique is the collision. Exactly like you would think, the collision is when a performer runs into something or someone else. Many times the collision is with a wall, the backend of a long board being swung mistakenly towards someone, a guest colliding with a fancy waiter and causing food to fly everywhere, or many of the unlimited ways you can cause two (or more) things to crash. Getting stuck is another unique and exciting technique that involves a person having all or a part of them lodged or being made immovable somewhere that they 1) don't belong, 2) don't fit, or 3) can't get out of on their own.

Finally, one other technique that can be used to achieve maximum laughs when performing slapstick, or physical comedy, is called the Lazzi. Lazzi is an Italian word that literally means joke. This word comes from jokes of situation and dialogue within *commedia dell'arte*, but in slapstick is defined more commonly as "comic accidents". These accidents are any situation that happens by mistake and causes some sort of trouble, thus creating humor.

These categories can encompass infinite possibilities for specific humorous situations. That is one of the beautiful things about slapstick and physical comedy. It is such a broad and relatable art form, that there are always new and unique ways to go

about achieving a successful comedic moment. With the right attention to detail, precision, and control over your body, you can make even the most ridiculous actions and gestures seem completely easy, real, and terrifyingly hilarious.

What about Her?

The Ladies with the Laughs

"No, I won't calm down. Women are allowed to get angrier than men about double standards!"

-Liz Lemon (30 Rock)

It is no surprise that, mirroring the rest of society, women weren't *allowed* to be funny until long after their male counterparts. It was the classic white male that began the journey of cinematic comedy. From Chaplin, Keaton, the Marx brothers and beyond, the movies were celebrating the gang of good ol' boys. A pack of men leading the charge and telling the world what was to be considered comical.

After all, women were not funny, right? Women were the caretakers, the "pretty girls", the moms. And if there is one thing that is NOT funny, it's joking about moms. Through the trial and error of comedies filmmakers learned this lesson and instead of branching out and creating new humorous possibilities for women, they became housewives. The leading lady was the token of the movie; the object of affection and prize to be won. She didn't think on her own unless she was thinking about clothes, jewelry, money, or gossip (Dale). She was vain, superficial, and the end goal for the majority of these classic films' leading men. At the start of cinema, women were in a box

(metaphorically and literally, i.e., television box); a box that would take a series of brave, uncompromisingly talented actresses to burst out of.

When looking at the time period of the early to mid-20th century in which physical comedy in film was increasingly flourishing, many of the reasons for this inequality was due to the roles in which people viewed gender. Chivalry was huge and disrespecting women in a physical sense was frowned upon. With that thought in mind, it would not be as funny for a film to show a man hitting a woman upside the head as it would a man hitting another man upside the head. It could be the exact same context, scene, and words but change the hit-ee from a man to a woman and the humor flies out the window. Not only is it not funny for the audience, it is infuriating. Whether this reaction has been conditioned within us by society or it is an innate guttural reaction caused by the loathing we feel when a stronger creature harms a weaker one, that situation would not be one that would cause laughter from a crowd. However, a double standard occurs that says it is okay for a woman to hit a man ("Slapstick knows"). In that case, he deserved it.

It is assumed by the masses that on average men have more upper body strength than women. Therefore, it would be cruel for them to hit someone of lesser size-- that would make it an unfair fight. But is this always the case? Of course it isn't! There is no doubt that there exists, out in the huge world we live in, a woman who is physically stronger than a man. In that case, would it be acceptable for the man to hit her? If he does challenge her, there is the great possibility that she would win. If she were to in fact win, he would have just been subject to the sexist reality that he had been beat by a woman, thus demasculinizing him and making him appear like lesser of

a man, even though the fight would have been unequally matched and not in his favor. If he does not challenge her, the woman would never get the opportunity to prove that she could be strong enough to beat him. The man would be praised for his chivalry and calm demeanor for not instigating a fight with the “weaker sex”, while the woman would *be made weak* without the opportunity of proving herself otherwise (“Wouldn’t hit”). This and many other tropes of television, film, and the entertainment industry as a whole keep men and women from truly finding balance and equality in their crafts. This subject could take us deep into a conversation of psychology, sociology, and why certain behaviors are suitable for one sex but not the other; a conversation that we shall save for a later date.

One of these brave and talented actresses to leap into the physical comedy world was the infamous Marilyn Monroe. The second you read that name, I can bet one of Marilyn’s famous images came to mind. **Maybe** it was the classic Andy Warhol Marilyn spewed across any souvenir imaginable, or possibly the image of a beautiful teasing blonde who accidentally had her white flowing dress blown up while making the less-than-intelligent decision to stand directly over a subway vent. Whatever image comes to mind, it is most likely one of a young, beautiful, vivacious woman at the peak of her looks and talent. Unfortunately, Marilyn was lost at such a young age that we never knew her as anything other than the pinnacle of the world’s sexual desire. She was always seen as the prize to be won and perhaps the world will always remember her in that way.

Despite this depiction of the character she portrayed, Marilyn Monroe, formerly known as Norma Jean Mortenson, was far more than the bubbly, dumb blonde, sex

kitten she is revered as. This character she had created was what sold her; what made the world fall in love with her. She played the romantic interest in countless romantic comedies, always toying with a string of suitors that were way under her league.

Marilyn tried desperately to break out of the box that was her typecast. She wanted to branch into dramas, express herself as a real, serious artist but unfortunately, was never given a solid opportunity. **The world wanted her to be the Marilyn they worshiped instead of allowing her to be the Marilyn she chose to be herself; the one that grew, matured, and decided she wanted something more substantial out of life than just being known as an object of sexual desire. However, wanted or not, Marilyn was no doubt gifted in the portrayal of her character. She knew just how to walk, talk, move, gesture, and exude the persona of desire, almost to the point of it being laughable. Her characters were comedy gold, though the set ups encouraged the audience to laugh at her, not with her. Her dumb blonde façade was just the humor that the male gene pool desired. But in reality she was "a comedienne impersonating the American idea of the Sex Goddess," as described by Lincoln Kirstein.**

Another game changing female comedian came in the form of the fiery red headed housewife, Lucille Ball. **Not only did Lucille change the television industry with her savvy business skills and unwavering determination not to be stepped upon, but she was also a comic genius of epic proportions. With the star of her career being the famous television series, *I Love Lucy*, in which she is the title character, she showed the world just what a woman could do and just how funny we could be. She was a wife, a mother, and a hot mess of crazy. She spoke like she had no one to offend and acted like she could get away with anything (and often times, she did). Throughout her**

performing career she utilized the elements of physical comedy and slapstick like she was one of the guys, and right at home with them!

In modern cinema there have been some very promising female comedians sticking a pie in the face of the misogynists and clawing their way into the realm of physical comedy. *Saturday Night Live* has been a wonderful diving off point for numerous women to jump head first into a previously male dominated pool. Contemporary comediennes like Kristin Wiig, Amy Poehler, Tina Fey, and Kate McKinnon all gained recognition from their unforgettable performances from the studios at 30 Rockefeller Plaza.

Melissa McCarthy is another notable and laughable lady who has been asking no permission to express her funny the way she pleases. Her many films such as *Bridesmaids* (also starring Kristin Wiig), *Identity Thief*, and *Spy*, are filled from beginning to end with Melissa falling, flying, colliding, and even pooping in a street. She doesn't apologize for breaking the subliminal rule that define what a woman should or shouldn't do. Class may fly out the window, and she may curse until your ears bleed, but that is a woman who knows who she is, what she is, and using it to her advantage, milking everything she has to snatch a laugh.

Curtain Call

Physical Comedy in the Modern World and Beyond

With a history as vast and influential as the practice of physical comedy, why is it so rare to see film after film praised for this technique anymore? The fact of the matter is that the implementation of this type of comedy is not the star of our current entertainment. But why is that? “Physical comedy depends on the proximity and possibility of death, which no longer seems acceptable to viewers who are completely aware of the prevalence of stunt doubles and digital effects, and who are repelled by the idea that a performer would actually face death for what is, after all, only a movie,” explained Richard Brody, a respected film critic and columnist at the *New Yorker*, “In other words, physical comedy—the kind that made silent comedies famous—has been moralized out of existence.”

In many ways, I agree with the speculations of Mr. Brody. An audience only wants to see something they can get behind. If physical comedy is beginning to feel unrealistic for its spectators, it will ultimately lose steam. One of the aspects that make theatre and film so successful and thrilling to partake in is the audience’s ability to suspend their disbelief. No matter how absurd a situation may be or what imaginary

planet it takes place on, the performance should make you believe in it. This information age we live in has caused us to know too much. And to Brody, many of the fundamental elements of physical comedy are no longer relevant to the generation of viewers we have today.

While this explanation does seem rather convincing, I think it is more than just the fact that our knowledge is changing. Societies evolve, technologies evolve, and our interests change with every hot new thing. One of these evolved and popular interests lays in the medium of video games. If you have ever played a modern video game, you know the amazing and realistic situations that the player can get their characters into. Games that allow players to interact with other live players begin to encourage an atmosphere of humor. People will make their characters come to life, interact with other people's characters and create humor using physical comedy within the game. If you type in "pratfall" into your Google search engine, there will be numerous drop down options of "how to pratfall in gta5", and others like that. They actually have controls just for making your character pratfall! Not only is this physical comedy in action, it is people actively searching to create it. Now we are not just viewing this form of humor, we are organically participating in it! Physical comedy in video games could be the new frontier, just as film was for vaudeville in the era of Charlie Chaplin.

Even though the prevalence of physical comedy in our contemporary films may be less than it was at the beginning of the 20th century that definitely doesn't mean it isn't there at all. However, I would agree that it is more likely that our films today display *moments* of physical humor as opposed to it being the backbone of the entire film. There are still working actors who make use of these techniques very frequently and

find huge success with them. These performers include but are not limited to the comedy geniuses of Jim Carrey, Zack Galifianakis, Melissa McCarthy, Kristin Wiig, Will Ferrel, Eddie Murphy and so many others. But as Max Winter said in a related article from IndieWire, "...this isn't really the same as making your body do funny things, an art neglected of late. They and other comedians of their type tend to follow a trajectory that leads them away from their slapstick roots, toward more subdued romantic comedy, even realistic drama."

I watched numerous films highlighting notable physical comedy during the course of my research. One thing that I can be absolutely sure of is that these films kept me in stitches. I knew it was a story, I knew what it took for it to be created, but guess what? I still laughed! This was the same response I witnessed from other viewers watching them with me. I can't buy into the notion that it is our society that no longer thinks this brand of comedy is funny. So why is it not more prevalent? Maybe it's that our movie stars don't want to injure themselves for laughs anymore. That is a theory that could hold some traction. With our beauty and health standards being harder to reach with every passing day, it does stand to reason that our stars would prefer to keep themselves in top of the line condition. Or maybe it is that there are now more strict rules within the film industry of what they can ask the performers to do. Stunt doubles do the brunt of most actors' physical work and it is no doubt that the viewers pick up on that fact. Additionally, the cost of insurance required for these companies has grown since the times of Charlie Chaplin and would now especially need to support their actors in case of injuries. It could be that the studios would just as soon rather avoid it entirely. Or maybe the lack of physical comedy in our contemporary films and theatre is that

people aren't realizing that they are missing it. Filmmakers are off trying to create the most impressive, magical, intergalactic, space-dream-something-or-another, and are overlooking the simplicity that comes with movies driven by physical comedy. Everyone understands them. They are far less extensive than the next Tim Burton psychological case of mistaken identity under the sea, but are being passed up because studios are thinking they are too good or too advanced to take a step back from reinventing the wheel and pull from a technique that has been popular for centuries. Or maybe... the real wait is that you and I just haven't created them yet.

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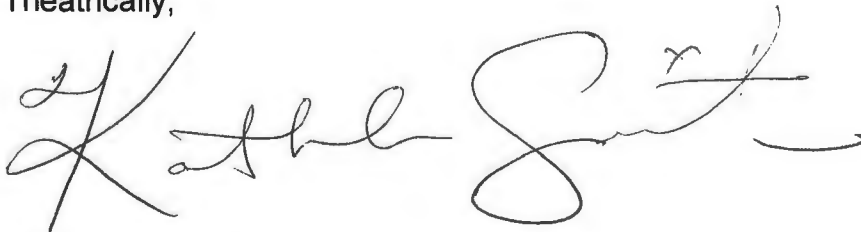
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Theatrically,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Kathleen Suit". The signature is fluid and elegant, with a large initial 'K' and a long, sweeping underline.

Kathleen Suit

4/17/2016

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