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Labor and Wages at the iO Theater

By

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Abstract

Longform improvisers are rarely paid, even at levels of relative prestige. This paper uses the iO Theater in Chicago, one of the oldest and most important longform improv theaters in the world, as a case study to examine the relationship between the structural and material iterations of the theater with the types of students, improvisers, and staff who were there. Given the fairly consistent approach iO held towards paying performers over forty years, I argue that longform improv's social position as a distinctly middle-class artform engenders a classification struggle wherein improvisers work to rigidly delineate 'work' from the 'play' of improv. The longform improv life-style that arises receives attempts to pay improvisers as symbolic attacks on that life-style.

In Chicago, the number of new improv theaters about doubled each decade from the 1980s to the 2010s, reflecting an increased demand among both audiences and potential performers. Improv comedy seemed to become big business; in 2014, the iO Theater (formerly ImprovOlympic, and often referred to as just 'iO') moved into a former warehouse, hosting four stages, three bars, three classrooms, two general-purpose event spaces, a beer garden, and dedicated office space. The lot cost $4.2 million,[1] and renovations on the building were over $3 million.[2] Despite this capital surge, it is the norm for longform improvisers not to be paid. While potentially comparable venues like stand-up comedy clubs and storefront theaters are known for not paying well, they still pay, even at lower levels of prestige and career achievement. What

[1] Nina Metz, "Inside the new iO, where Fey, Poehler got their start," *Chicago Tribune*, August 1, 2014, chicagotribune.com/entertainment/theater/ct-io-theater-new-home-20140801-column.html

[2] Brianna Wellen, "iO makes a big move into founder Charna Halpern's 'dream theater,'" *Chicago Reader*, August 13, 2014, https://chicagoreader.com/arts-culture/io-makes-a-big-move-into-founder-charna-halperns-dream-theater/.

accounts for this disparity historically and socially? This norm exists all over the country, but iO will be used as a case study in order to focus our attention and because iO, as the world's most important longform[3] theater and one of its earliest, was extremely influential in providing the model for how other theaters would be run.

This paper will explore this issue in four parts. First, I will historically situate payment in improv theaters prior to the creation of iO. Second, I will examine the iO Theater to see, over three eras, how it was structured, who was performing what work, and who was getting paid for what work. Third, drawing on the social theory of Pierre Bourdieu, I will detail the producers and consumers of longform improv at iO to allow us a chance for part four, a short argument that the fundamentally middle-class nature of longform improv and its adaption into a life-style brings about a social situation where attempts to pay improvisers function as symbolic attacks on the life-styles of those improvisers.

Original data for this study was collected in two parts. Online sources, such as archived versions of the iO website, interviews on the Improv Resource Center, and tax, loan, and property information from government websites on the iO Theater, constitute the first. I also conducted semi-structured recorded interviews with 17 improvisers in June and July 2022 who

[3] Improv performances are commonly divided into two types, "shortform" and "longform." Shortform improv is made up of a series of games, the rules of which are understood by the performers ahead of time and shared with the audience. Suggestions for scenes are solicited from the audience before each game. The popular television show *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* uses shortform improv. Longform improv performances usually only solicit one audience suggestion at the top of the show, followed by a longer (hence the name) series of scenes that typically have narrative or thematic connections to each other. Any games that occur have their rules spontaneously generated within the scene itself, with no explicit explanation to the audience. The boundaries between shortform and longform can be blurry. Longform improvisers often agree on the general structure – say, a monologue followed by scenes inspired by that monologue – of their performance ahead of time, if not the actual content. For example, a show by the Improvised Shakespeare Company (which presents an improvised two-act play in the style of Shakespeare) combines the single suggestion, narrative length, and complexity of many longform shows with tactics common to shortform, such as costumes and adherence to predefined genre tropes.

had either been on a Harold team[4] at the theater, had served in a formally paid role at the theater, or both. Interviews centered on participants' personal histories at iO, their feelings on other improv theaters, and their attitudes towards money in improv. All participants live in Chicago and interviews were conducted either in-person or over Zoom. After interviews, participants were asked for recommendations for other people to reach out to in an attempt to snowball sample; three interviews were scheduled in this way. The final sample included nine men and eight women, ten white performers and seven performers of color. Two participants began taking classes prior to the Clark Street iO opening in 1995, eleven at Clark, and four at the Kingsbury Street iO. I myself began taking regular classes at the Kingsbury location starting in August 2015 (in the summer of 2013, I was enrolled in the iO's five-week summer intensive program) and was a Harold team performer from March 2018 until iO closed in March 2020. I have performed with all participants except Susan Messing at least once, and three interviewees, Jane Brown, Colette Gregory, and Kayla Pulley, performed on a Harold team with me from March 2018 to May 2019. Former iO Theater owner Charna Halpern was also interviewed via phone and asked a separate set of questions about the history of iO and how she approached it as a place of business.

Improv theaters before the advent of modern longform were relatively rare, but a notable few paid, including the very first in July 1955. Members of The Compass Players were paid $25 per week to perform eight shows a week over five nights, with two on Friday and three on

[4] A Harold team is an improv group that performs a type of longform called the Harold, and it was the signature form of the iO Theater. Modern Harolds generally work as follows: a group opening involving all the performers inspires three two-person scenes, known as the first beat. Then there is a group game, a non-scenic improvisation that again involves all or at least most of the performers. The three scenes from the first beat are revisited (either narratively or thematically) in a second beat, followed by another group game. Finally, in the third beat, ideas and characters from previous scenes are melded together. If all goes well, the various strands of the piece will combine so seamlessly that they will appear as if they were planned ahead of time. See footnote 31 for more detail on the Harold.

Saturday. There was no additional compensation for any writing that went into the show, such as the short curtain raiser pieces that started each set or creating the narrative beats of the otherwise-improvised scenario plays. Performers wore many hats, doing construction on the theater, producing variety shows on Monday nights, or running the Amateur Nights on Tuesday. This ethos extended to others in the Compass orbit. Their business manager Charlie Jacobs also designed and installed the theater's lighting rig, and a lawyer friend of the troupe, Saul Mendlowitz, lent his legal services for free. Mendlowitz secured the cabaret license for the new Compass Theatre and negotiated a summer rental agreement for the small storefront with Fred Wranovics, the owner of the adjoining Hi-Hat Lounge in Chicago's Hyde Park. There was no cover; instead, the Compass earned a percentage of drink sales. Two Compass Players double-dipped in this revenue stream by bartending for the Hi-Hat as well. Audiences began packing the theater, but within six months the Compass had moved out. There was economic pressure on both sides driving this turn of events – Wranovics, who now had a popular bar, was no longer interested in splitting drink sales, and David Shepherd, the co-founder and money man for the Compass, found it hard to sustain the performer salaries with such small maximum capacity audiences.[5] The Compass moved to a larger venue called the Dock just a few blocks west. They lasted less than six months there as well, this time losing upwards of $150 per week. They moved to one final location, the Argo Off-Beat Room in the neighborhood of Edgewater on the far north side.[6] An intimidating room that was difficult to fill, the ensemble began to fall apart. By January 1957, the Compass was done in Chicago.

[5] Janet Coleman, *The Compass: The Improvisational Theatre that Revolutionized American Comedy* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1991), 97-123
[6] Ibid., 165

Out of the ashes came The Second City, a sketch theater that used improv as a writing tool. Compass Player co-founder and director Paul Sills and fellow Compass Player Howard Alk found financial backing from Bernie Sahlins, who had recently sold his stake in a tape recorder factory. Unlike the Compass venues, The Second City did not rent out bar or cabaret spaces. Rather, they converted an old laundromat on Lincoln Avenue and Wells Street and then built their own kitchen and bar.[7] The latter has been called "perhaps the most significant commercial innovation in improvisational history,"[8] although, as this paper will expand on later, improv bars may have served more of a social than fiscal function. Like at the Compass storefront next to Hi-Hat, employees of The Second City played multiple roles. Cast members helped build the stage, waitresses and performers manned the lights, and Sills and Sahlins worked in the kitchen. Performer salaries were higher than at the Compass, starting at $40 per week.[9] But Sahlins was not paying such rates out of charity. The Second City had commercial aspirations from the beginning. Mina Kolb, an early Second City cast member, noted that the contract she had to sign meant she would never see royalties for scenes she created.[10] David Shepard had technically owned the same rights for work improvised at the Compass but never seemed interested in capitalizing on them.[11] Sahlins, on the other hand, would come to oversee a vast archive of scenes that could be mounted for touring companies and Best Of shows, uses that continue to the present. Future casts gained some protection against exploitation when they joined Actors' Equity and AFTRA in the early 1960s, but only after Sahlins temporarily shut down the theater

[7] In 1967, they moved into Piper's Alley by North Avenue and Wells Street, where they remain today.
[8] Sam Wasson, *Improv Nation: How We Made a Great American Art* (New York: First Mariner Books, 2018), 63.
[9] Coleman, *The Compass*, 256.
[10] Ibid., 257.
[11] Ibid., 171-2.

in an attempt to stop unionization.[12] Since then, Second City performers have been able to bargain for various forms of increased compensation, including royalties. For example, the 2022 Canadian Equity contract provides Toronto Mainstage performers (the flagship Second City Toronto show which performs eight times a week) a $1000 lump sum per Process[13] in exchange for a perpetual license to their material. Material written or improvised by touring companies is entitled to a $300 lump sum, but only if at least 50% of their production is new. Performers only receive royalties per use if The Second City leases out their material to an outside entity, in which case they receive a pro rata share of 50% of the proceeds.[14] Second City Chicago performers have it a little better; in 2011, creative compensation for Mainstage Process material was $3000. Actors' Equity also helped Second City casts improve their base wages. The same 2011 contract provided Chicago Mainstage casts a minimum of $749 per week.[15] This is a substantial increase from the $40 per week wages in December 1959, which had the equivalent buying power of only $300.10 in June 2011.[16]

Developed in parallel to the Compass and The Second City, Theatresports evolved from the work of British dramatist Keith Johnstone. Inspired by the emotionally invested and interactive audiences of professional wrestling, Johnstone took his prior improv theories, derived from his time with the Royal Court Theatre, and adapted them to a competitive style of

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[12] Amy Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?: Beyond Second City* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2001), 22.

[13] Unlike many other theaters, The Second City does not generate all its material and then debut it all at once on opening night. Instead, each Second City revue goes through a phase called Process, wherein casts work out potential scenes in front of audiences. These scenes are usually at least partially improvised and only become set once the revue formally opens.

[14] "The Equity Second City Agreement 2022," Canadian Actors' Equity Association, accessed July 7, 2022, https://www.caea.com/Portals/0/Documents/Theatre/ESCA.pdf.

[15] Kevin Pang, "Paid by the laugh," *Chicago Tribune*, June 14, 2011, https://www.chicagotribune.com/entertainment/ct-xpm-2011-06-14-chi-chicago-comedy-careers-20110614-story.html.

[16] "CPI Inflation Calculator," U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, United States Department of Labor, accessed July 7, 2022, https://www.bls.gov/data/inflation_calculator.htm.

performance. Two teams of improvisers alternate scenes, with audience acclamation determining the winner of each round and, ultimately, of the show. A legal requirement that staged performances be pre-approved by the Lord Chamberlain's Office made mounting improv shows in the UK difficult, and Johnstone waited until he was teaching at the University of Calgary to further develop the Theatresports concept.[17] In 1977, Johnstone cofounded the Loose Moose Theatre in Calgary to, among other things, host Theatresports shows. While the Theatresports model became financially successful in other cities, it struggled in Johnstone's home base. Loose Moose had trouble acquiring grants from the Canadian government and so was unable to pay senior performers even with good audience attendance.[18] Unlike Second City, whose Toronto, Hollywood, and Detroit branches all remained under central ownership, Theatresports operates on a licensing model. In September 2021, the Production Rights Agreement to use the Theatresports name was $200 CAD per year plus 3% of gross revenues from the licensed shows. An additional $50 CAD was required as an application fee.[19] There is considerable variation in how Theatresports venues operate. Vancouver TheatreSports has a tiered model in which younger improvisers in the Rookie League are unpaid, but those on the main stage are contracted.[20] By contrast, Los Angeles Theatresports had a membership model in 1990. After paying $75 for a workshop, performers could then pay $40 monthly dues for the ability to attend

[17] Keith Johnstone, "IMPROVISATION: The Origins of THEATRESPORTS," Keith Johnstone Workshops, Inc., last modified June 27, 2007, web.archive.org/web/20070627092251/http://www.keithjohnstone.com/improv.php.
[18] Theresa Robbins Dudeck, *Keith Johnstone: A Critical Biography* (London: Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2013), 141.
[19] "Selection Committee Revised Form September 2021," International Theatresports Institute, Sep 2021, impro.global/images/Production_Rights_Application_Form_September_2021.pdf.
[20] Joel Ballard, "Former Vancouver TheatreSports performers call for leadership change amid allegations of discrimination," *CBC*, Jun 12, 2020, https://www.cbc.ca/news/canada/british-columbia/vancouver-theatresports-1.5610964

weekly classes and play in shows.[21] A sister form to Theatresports called Gorilla Theater, also developed by Keith Johnstone and licensed through the non-profit International Theatresports Institute, 'pays' the winner of each show in bananas.[22]

iO emerged from a confluence of both strands of contemporary improvisation. Like Theatresports, it originally pitted two teams against each other, with the winner determined by audience votes. And like the Compass, it was co-founded by David Shepherd. How much Shepherd was influenced by Keith Johnstone and Theatresports directly is unclear. In Jeffrey Sweet's 1978 oral history *Something Wonderful Right Away*, Sweet introduces Shepherd as "organizing teams of improvisational players in the United States and Canada for the purpose of having them compete in matches," which he hoped would culminate "in an annual International Improvisational Olympics."[23] Given that Sweet's interview with Shepherd took place between February 1974 and July 1977,[24] it seems safe to assume the genesis of the Improvisational Olympics predated the founding of the Loose Moose. It is possible that Shepherd, who was active in Canada, may have been familiar with Johnstone through his work at the University of Calgary starting in 1972. It is also possible that the specific shape his Improvisational Olympics had taken on by the time he came to Chicago in 1981 was informed by the nascent Theatresports. What is more important here is that Charna Halpern, then a student in a Paul Sills class at the Players Workshop, had read *Something Wonderful Right Away* and approached Shepherd about starting such a theater in Chicago. In founding the Compass and what became known as ImprovOlympic, Shepherd was concerned with creating a theater that spoke to the needs and

[21] Richard Stayton, "Theatresports Plays the Comedy Game: These cheering, booing, rowdy fans aren't just any bleacher bums. They are wild and crazy theater patrons," *Los Angeles Times*, July 1, 1990, https://www.latimes.com/archives/la-xpm-1990-07-01-ca-829-story.html.
[22] edward, "TheatreSports: full contact improv comedy," *The Guardian* (University of California, San Diego), Oct 24, 2002, https://ucsdguardian.org/2002/10/24/theatresports-full-contact-improv-comedy/.
[23] Jeffrey Sweet, *Something Wonderful Right Away* (New York: First Limelight Edition, 1987), 1.
[24] Ibid., xii.

showcased the acting of a (potentially revolutionary) working class. Halpern was more concerned with finding places for her and her friends to improvise. "I realized that if I did this we could have a place to play anytime we wanted. This was what I was meant to do."[25] At that point, Second City was the only game in town and had a limited number of stage opportunities. They did not even have a training program until 1985; the Players Workshop, although closely affiliated with Second City, was run independently by Jo Forsberg.

The early ImprovOlympic succeeded in expanding the pool of regularly performing improvisers and consisted of two main classes. One was the group of student improvisers, those at the Players Workshop or, like the team Stone Soup, actors who had taken a workshop with Keith Johnstone. No centralized performance philosophy existed for the theater at this time. The other class was the groups of business professionals that Halpern recruited, such as the team of all lawyers and the team of all psychologists. Other identity focused teams, such as a team of all Rabbis or a team of all elderly people, also performed. Notably absent were the sort of proletarian participants Shepherd had envisioned. Disenchanted by this turn of events and by Halpern and the performers' resistance to his greater social and political project, Shepherd relinquished control of ImprovOlympic to Halpern.[26] Identity groups became less common and the teams of student improvisers began to dominate. The structure of shows and the decentralized control over the style of teams continued through 1983, when Halpern recruited influential improviser and director Del Close to begin teaching classes at her theater.

This is the point at which persistent and identifiable markers of the iO style begin to come into the picture – a coherent thematic and ensemble-focused improv philosophy, the

[25] Quoted in Scott Markwell, "Comedy Mother," *Chicago Reader*, Aug 10, 1995, https://chicagoreader.com/news-politics/comedy-mother/.
[26] Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?,* 45-6.

creation of Harold teams to showcase that philosophy, and the creation of a training program aimed at both teaching that philosophy and providing an avenue for performance opportunities. From 1983 until its closing in 2020, iO focused on all three, even while it underwent three eras distinguished by significantly different structural underpinnings. First, iO existed as an itinerant theater company, renting out various locations across the north side of Chicago to host shows and classes. Second, a permanent and exclusive space was rented out in Wrigleyville in 1995, where iO began operating two stages. Finally, iO moved into a significantly larger building with four stages in a developing commercial district in 2014. If we are to find compelling answers as to why longform improvisers are unpaid, it makes sense to examine the practical realities of these spaces during these eras and how they impacted shows, performers, and audiences. With that in mind, the next section of this paper will attempt to situate these three eras structurally, in the literal sense of both the physical structure of the theaters and the structures and hierarchies of decision makers within the theaters, with an eye towards what changed and what stayed the same between eras.

Before moving into their two stage theater in 1995, iO operated in no fewer than ten locations, most prominently at the bar and cabaret CrossCurrents from 1983 to 1987. iO locations during this time came in two major clusters. To the north, sandwiching the former CrossCurrents location, were Kiku's and the Ivanhoe Theater (side by side in the commercial triangle of Clark Street, Halsted Street, and Wellington Avenue) and Wrigleyside, just south of Addison on Clark Street. Kiku's and Wrigleyside were both bars, and the Ivanhoe was the theater space for the Ivanhoe Restaurant. The second cluster was around The Second City to the south. iO originally performed at what later became the Second City E.T.C. stage. Two other Wells Street locations, on either side of North Avenue, were Exit, a punk club, and Ciao

Restaurante, an Italian restaurant. Slightly further north was Papa Milano, another Italian restaurant, near the corner of Sedgwick Avenue and Lincoln Avenue. Between these two clusters was the club Orphans, northwest from Papa Milano on Lincoln and due south of Kiku's and Ivanhoe. The only location outside of this stretch from Old Town through Wrigleyville was At The Tracks, a restaurant in the Fulton River District. Besides their stint at Second City and an annex space on Belmont and Racine Avenues that ran concurrently with their time at Wrigleyside, iO performed at the same sort of venues the Compass had – bars, restaurants, and clubs. Also like the Compass, iO frequently found itself in a position of precarity, subject not only to their own financial fortunes but the fortunes and whims of the venue owners. Their time at CrossCurrents came to an end when the cabaret foreclosed, delinquent on taxes and having lost its liquor license and its insurance over the course of a few days. CrossCurrents would likely have closed even earlier if not for the ability of some of the more successful tenants to literally keep the lights on by paying the utilities bill in lieu of rent. In the week before it went under, Halpern had given $900 to CrossCurrents for that purpose.[27]

The struggle to retain consistent performance spaces meant that Halpern was often forced to move performances to "weird times," as improviser and teacher Susan Messing remembers. "I remember we used to do Harolds on Wednesday nights for some reason. It wasn't always just like a big Friday or Saturday night slot."[28] At times, the theater would even shut down completely while a new place was procured. Improviser and teacher Armando Diaz pointed out that "[t]here would always be that, we've been here nine months to a year, and 'Uh-oh, we got

[27] Michael Miner, "The Troubles: John Conroy's Adventures in Publishing; CrossCurrents Going Under," *Chicago Reader*, Nov 5, 1987, https://chicagoreader.com/news-politics/the-troubles-john-conroys-adventures-in-publishing-crosscurrents-going-under/.

[28] Susan Messing (Improviser and teacher) in discussion with the author, July 2022. Roles in brackets are specific to iO.

kicked out. ImprovOlympic doesn't exist for three or four months until they find another place."[29] iO even briefly returned to CrossCurrents, now a blues bar under new management called Cotton Chicago, to perform on Tuesday nights. The desire for better show times may help explain why iO, otherwise confined in a relatively narrow strip of the urban landscape, took up residence at a venue as far away as At The Tracks, which hosted them on weekends.[30] By 1985, iO was performing on Tuesdays and Saturdays at CrossCurrents, still using a version of the competitive Theatresports model but with tighter central control. Instead of the theater games of Spolin or Johnstone, teams always performed the Harold, an early form of longform improvisation that allowed longer and more play-like sets than those comprised solely of theater games.[31] Shows were now headlined by a single ImprovOlympic house team who had the privilege of performing every night (and later, as more total shows ran, on the more desired weekend slots). Competing teams were either other iO-trained students or performers at other improv theaters like the Improv Institute and The Second City. Shows combined Harolds (which Del Close himself explained to the audience before performances) and easier-to-understand shortform games like Freeze Tag or Musical Option which, unlike the Harolds, were played by everyone together and were not competitively voted on by audiences.[32] Within a few years, the competitive aspect of the show would be dropped completely and the Harold would no longer be

[29] Armando Diaz, interview by Fultron, *Improv Interviews*, Improv Resource Center Forums, Feb 26, 2006.
[30] Kim "Howard" Johnson, *The Funniest One in the Room: The Lives and Legends of Del Close* (Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2008), 316.
[31] An early version of the Harold was developed by the Committee, a San Francisco and Los Angeles based improv troupe in which Del Close performed and directed. Harolds prioritized thematic resonance and connection over narrative, political satire, or comedy, although the latter three might frequently arise. But these early and often meandering iterations put the "long" in "longform improv," sometimes clocking in at over two hours. Close spent the next twenty years attempting off and on to craft the Harold into a more consistent theatrical product. It is generally considered that he succeeded at ImprovOlympic by merging the artistic focus on theme with a semi-rigid structure inspired by more audience-friendly theater games. An average Harold at early ImprovOlympic would be around half an hour. (The name "Harold" itself was coined by Bill Mathieu, the Committee's musical director, possibly as a joking reference to a gag from *A Hard Day's Night* where a reporter, asking George Harrison what his haircut is called, is told "Arthur." – Johnson, *The Funniest One in the Room*, 135).
[32] Johnson, *The Funniest One in the Room*, 271.

thoroughly explained ahead of time, but the structure of the shows was essentially the same. House teams would also be replaced, either as members left for other opportunities, the quality of their shows degraded, or both. Non-ImprovOlympic trained teams also became uncommon.

ImprovOlympic was able to exert this tighter control by linking performances to classes offered by Close. There was no formal training center at this time, but Close offered one-off workshops and eight-week classes, with the latter in particular being an experimental space where Close could test out his theories on improv and try to tinker with the Harold. Classes turned into teams when Close felt comfortable with the quality of their work. Charna Halpern began teaching an introductory class, and an assortment of veteran improvisers began teaching a second class, but students took Close's class indefinitely. In this way, the early iO resembled the membership model of a place like Los Angeles Theatresports. "You had class with Del for perpetuity, and to remain on a team, you had to continue to pay for classes," recalled Messing, who began taking classes in 1986.[33] More veteran performers continued to attend Close's classes at least through the end of this itinerant period. Peter Gwinn, who briefly learned and performed at ImprovOlympic in 1990 before returning in 1993 when the theater was at the Wrigleyside, explained that "sometimes, you'd be in class, at the time, with Susan Messing as a student. And then you'd go watch her in the house team be brilliant."[34] Even though the theater surely welcomed the money, there were at least some attempts to lessen the financial burden of this model. Classes were priced purposefully lower than Second City, around $150 for an eight week course in the late 1980s, $190 by 1995. Promising workshop attendees might be offered a scholarship or discounted classes, as happened with Joel Murray and Dave Pasquesi, eventual

[33] Messing, July 2022.
[34] Peter Gwinn (Improviser and teacher) in discussion with the author, July 2022.

members of the very first house team Baron's Barracudas.[35] And at some point between Baron's Barracudas and the time Messing was on the house team Blue Velveeta in 1990, it became normal for house team improvisers to attend Close's class for free. Messing, in fact, could not "remember [Blue Velveeta] ever paying for classes."[36] As it became more common for improvisers to jump off the carousel of Close's instruction, other strategies for monitoring and maintaining the quality of teams arose. To Messing's recollection, Blue Velveeta became the first iO team to have a coach, Mick Napier, who would lead rehearsals and offer feedback after shows. That stayed the same through the time Halpern sold iO, as did the method for paying the coach; each improviser on the team paid $5 per rehearsal. Still, the norm of attending classes was so strong that Gwinn noted improvisers often had to be told that it was ok to stop going.

ImprovOlympic left money on the table in other ways, as well. In the last few years before finding an exclusive space for the theater, classes were taught in an annex space closer to Close and Halpern's apartments. But Halpern hated renting out the space and limited the number of total classes offered there. She was not dissuaded by Gwinn's argument that the revenue from holding classes well outweighed the cost of renting the annex.[37] Halpern, who seemingly had few reservations with promotion in the early days of ImprovOlympic, became increasingly reluctant to market the theater. Advertisements were mostly taken out in the alt-weekly Chicago Reader, with maybe an ad or two a year placed in the Chicago Tribune. It is possible that this seeming discrepancy is really just a difference in preference between earned and paid media. Halpern is generous with interviews, touts her ability to get headlines in newspapers, and has released works of improv theory-cum-branding exercises like *Truth in Comedy* and *Art by Committee*, all

[35] Johnson, *The Funniest One in the Room*, 267-8.
[36] Messing, July 2022.
[37] Gwinn, July 2022.

of which are free ways of attracting attention to the theater. But when she had to pay for ad spots in the Reader, she "complained bitterly" to Gwinn because "it was so expensive."[38] Halpern estimated that the rate for a quarter-page was $300 in the Reader and $600-700 in the Tribune.[39]

As a consequence, the total amount of students remained small, students almost always were put on Harold teams (of which there were eight or so by 1993), and the community became extremely intimate. Between classes and shows, most improvisers would perform with each other at some point. It was common for the teams not performing on any given night to attend Harold shows, although audiences were still often small. Armando Diaz explained that at a place like At The Tracks, there might be "only eight people in the audience. And they're mostly friends or commuters who didn't have anything to do."[40] But at Wrigleyside, where ImprovOlympic was able to stay long enough to build up some consistency and momentum, even a modest growth in students and audiences meant that the logistics of running a theater became harder for Halpern to handle alone. Harold team schedules, for example, were released chronically late, and Halpern would have to resort to calling teams shortly before show nights to tell them if they were playing. Gwinn, who was acting "mainly out of self-interest, because I wanted that schedule to come out," began assisting Halpern.[41] That role evolved into additional responsibilities and, later on, these kinds of unpaid and pseudoformal roles (some of which, eventually, would become paid) became increasingly common as the managerial needs of iO expanded in 1995.

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[38] Ibid.
[39] Charna Halpern (iO co-founder and Artistic Director) in discussion with the author, July 2022.
[40] Diaz, *Improv Interviews*
[41] Gwinn, July 2022.

The move to 3541 North Clark Street was unexpected; while Halpern had already begun renting the 50-seat Annex space on Belmont and Racine (which she recalled was "instantly too small"), she was not actively looking for a permanent location. Instead, it was her cousin who approached her about partnering up for "the cute little two-floor space" that Halpern had passed by so many times before on the way to the Wrigleyside, which was only a few doors down the street. "If you want it, I'll buy it," the cousin told Halpern, who would then be on the hook for the mortgage and utilities, about $3000 per month (by the time the Clark Street location closed, the cost had increased to $26,000 per month). She quickly accepted, only to be struck with dread at the thought of earning that much, which she never had at any of the earlier locations.[42] Still, the move was very much a coming out party for ImprovOlympic. One year before, Halpern, Close, and Baron's Barracuda member Kim "Howard" Johnson released *Truth in Comedy*, a book that introduced the Harold to a national audience and served as a written testament to iO's improv philosophy.[43] The Clark Street opening was covered in the Chicago Tribune[44] and generated a long profile of Halpern in the Chicago Reader.[45] The Reader piece in particular, "Comedy Mother" by Scott Markwell, is a fascinating look into the personal and professional challenges required in committing to such an ambitious venue, a two stage theater that seated about 100 people upstairs and 60 people downstairs, each with its own bar:

> She works 80-plus hours a week, delegating little. "I'm always trying to get her to hire an assistant," Adam McKay says. But perhaps Halpern fears losing control. Every dime is sunk into the theater, loans need to be paid off, and many actors are counting on her to be their "Comedy Mother."

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[42] Halpern, July 2022.
[43] Halpern, Charna, Del Close, and Kim "Howard" Johnson, *Truth in Comedy: The Manual of Improvisation* (Colorado Springs, CO: Meriwether Publishing Ltd., 1994).
[44] Sid Smith, "Funny Business," *Chicago Tribune*, April 9, 1995, https://www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1995-04-09-9504090118-story.html.
[45] Markwell, "Comedy Mother."

> Aside from Close, Halpern's emotional support system is constantly changing. "My friends are my colleagues," she says, but most of these theater folk are looking to get ahead, and that usually means leaving. Many are counting on Halpern to help them. When she doesn't live up to their expectations, petty attacks materialize.[46]

Renovation costs ended up three times more expensive than their initial estimate, finishing at $90,000, and Halpern ended up in further debt and bureaucratic hell. Markwell shares a vivid vignette of Halpern only securing her liquor license the day of the opening. Being able to sell alcohol in the new theater was especially important to Halpern. She told Markwell that she wanted to be able to offer paid opportunities. "'Now, when you become a director you get a percentage of the show. When you teach or coach a newer team, you also get paid. […] Second City can [pay] because they have a bar.'"[47] Notably absent from that list are performers. Halpern paid teachers but did not pay coaches, who were, as described earlier, paid directly by performers.

The economic value of the bar at The Second City, at least by the 1990s, was almost certainly overstated by Halpern. The Second City could rely on larger, pricier, and more popular shows than ImprovOlympic, as well as a more popular and more expensive training program, among other sources of revenue. But the bar was of central importance to Halpern and to the fiscal health of her theater since the box office was its least substantial source of revenue and classes purposely underpriced those of The Second City. The struggle for Halpern was figuring out how to get people to stay and drink at the bar after a show. Customers frequently went to nearby, more traditional bars to hang out for longer; Halpern remembered that the Wrigleyside, their old haunt, even advertised 'iO Specials.' "We'd give two-for-one for certain shows so we

[46] Ibid.
[47] Ibid.

could get audiences, so we could get people in there and get them drinking," she told me.[48] Given how much was riding on the success of the bars, it is surprising how informally they were run. Improviser and bartender Mike Geraghty was hired to work the bar in 2012 and thought that "the bar didn't make very much money." Geraghty had been a bartender in Reno before moving to Chicago and experienced culture shock at the way iO operated. As a paid employee, he was the exception; most of the other workers in the building were students working for free in exchange for classes. "The help there was not very good for the most part. You'd get a couple interns per shift that really were great and the rest that never had a job before […]. If a barback was bringing me half a bucket of ice instead of a full bucket? In a real bar, that wouldn't fly, but that was every night at iO." In Reno, being a bartender meant maximizing revenues from customers over the course of your shift. Eventually, Geraghty realized that "this is not a real bar. This is a theater. And then it became much easier, much more fun."[49] Evidence of this kind of dynamic dates to the beginning of the iO bars. In exchange for agreeing to serve as bar manager, Miles Stroth requested that members of his house team The Family only be charged $1 per drink. Over time, the list of privileged imbibers grew to include teachers and other members of popular shows like the Armando Diaz Theatrical Experience & Hootenanny (also known as the Armando). Predictably, this deal was quite popular. Peter Gwinn, a member of that inner circle, laughed when recounting that "we hung out [at the iO bars] a lot," and said Halpern complained that "'you people are drinking me dry,'" but the $1 deal only ended when new hire Mike Click took over operation of the bar in 2001.[50] For a time, only people performing that night got a discount, and then the discount was lowered, but by the time iO moved to Kingsbury Street, performer discounts were mostly gone. Halpern "tried to be fair" about maintaining these perks

[48] Halpern, July 2022.
[49] Mike Geraghty (Improviser and bartender) in discussion with the author, June 2022.
[50] Gwinn, July 2022.

but "it was costing us a fortune[…]. We were losing money."[51] Vestigial remnants of these sorts of deals remained; up until the time iO closed in March 2020, I was able to get one free drink whenever I performed with the Armando. But even after Click ended the $1 deal, as Geraghty attests, iO's bars did not turn into efficient money-making machines.

The two Clark Street theater bars were the most common touchpoint for people I interviewed about what iO was like during that time and why things changed later on. Each bar was located in the same room as the stage. Improvisers who wanted to drink at the bar had no choice but to watch the show happening at that time. Desired behavior – that improvisers support each other by watching each other's shows – was systemically reinforced even as the student and performer pool swelled. This led to several interrelated forms of community bonding. Performers were able to recognize each other through repeated casual encounters, either at the bar or by watching shows. Younger improvisers had more incentive to watch and learn from older improvisers, and older improvisers were kept abreast of the ever-changing flow of talent entering the building. The mutual experience of watching shows gave concrete conversational topics to improvisers, either between two watching improvisers or between a watcher and a performer. This encouraged further discussion and dedication to the craft and art of improv, the social glue that connected improvisers together. Recognizing that their audiences were not just the general public but also many of their peers, improvisers shaped their play styles to the standards of the intra-artist community and began experimenting with forms designed to impress other performers. Farrell Walsh, an improviser, teacher, and bartender at iO, put it this way: "the performance culture was [that] there was what Charna thought was good and then there was what the folks doing comedy thought was good" (Halpern had stopped performing in iO shows some

[51] Halpern, July 2022.

time before the move to Clark Street).[52] Sometimes, this glue could be too effective, and students would spend all their free time drinking at iO. This presented both a narrowly focused challenge to diversity in scenework – a common piece of improv advice was that students needed to make sure they did other activities to ensure they had well-rounded enough perspectives to play engagingly on stage – and a broader challenge to health and sobriety for improvisers.[53] In an essay for improv zine collection *The Complete Hambook*, Jimmy Pennington cautions that while "[t]he performances are where people are really utilizing and perfecting the craft of performance within an ensemble[,] the bar is where guys fucking ruin it."[54] Improv, as an ensemble-based art form, relies on trust and respect among performers, and bars could act as sites of mistrust and disrespect by playing host to "those who would exploit or assault people."[55] Paige Maney eventually became a teacher at iO, but was initially turned off by the theater's focus on bar culture. Allergic to alcohol, Maney recognized that she was excluded from what, for many people, was "what was fun about [iO]." "It was intimidating," she said. "I never clicked with that or understood it."[56]

But, as important as the bars were, ImprovOlympic on Clark Street was first and foremost two stages that needed to be filled. Previously, almost all ImprovOlympic shows were Harolds; only the Annex space regularly hosted other kinds of longform improv. This remained the case on Thursdays, Fridays, and Saturdays – the most lucrative nights – but Halpern was able to start presenting different kinds of programming on other nights. Monday nights, the designated off-

[52] Farrell Walsh (Improviser, teacher, and bartender) in discussion with the author, June 2022.
[53] Henry Golden-Starr, "Sobriety in Improv," in *The Complete Hambook*, ed. Lee Benzaquin, et al (Chicago: Self-Published, 2019), 151-6.
[54] Jimmy Pennington, "To My Fellow Improvisers," in *The Complete Hambook*, 163.
[55] Ibid.
[56] Paige Maney (Improviser and teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2022.

night for Equity shows like those at The Second City, were host to the Armando[57] and attracted Second City Mainstage actors (many of whom had been iO performers) looking for a break from sketch and a chance to perform longform improv. The Armando stayed put on Mondays, but over time successful non-Harold shows began to dominate Friday and Saturday nights. On Wednesdays, iO hosted a free Harold show at 8 p.m. as a way to attract new people to the theater and watch a style of comedy they had likely never seen before. But audiences were not saving much money by doing so; much like how Halpern worked to keep classes cheaper than competitors, she also oversaw low ticket prices. Many shows were only $5, including extremely popular ones like TJ & Dave. A show calendar for the 100 seat Del Close Theater from April 20 to May 17 2008, a four week span, lists 65 shows, 37 of which were $5, 10 of which were between $8 and $12, and 12 of which (all on either Friday or Saturday) were $14. Two shows, a student jam called The Grasshopper Show, were free.[58] At $18 was the musical sketch show Cupid Has a Heart On, the most expensive ticket in the entire building, but one which commonly sold out.[59] At these prices, the most that iO could make from Del Close Theater ticket sales during this period would be $52,900. Of course, the actual return between real ticket sales and payments to directors/producers of independent shows meant iO netted significantly less. A class during that same period cost $260,[60] meaning just two students enrolling would make more

[57] In the Armando, a guest monologist (also called the Armando, and named after the first monologist Armando Diaz) tells a story that inspires improvised scenes by a large ensemble cast. The monologist will then tell another story, inspiring more scenes, and the process repeats about six or seven times total, with an intermission in the middle. The relative simplicity of the form compared to something like the Harold made it easier for people to play without having to rehearse, ideal for Second City Mainstage actors whose eight-shows-a-week schedules otherwise precluded them from being able to participate in other iO shows.

[58] "Del Close Theater Schedule," *iO*, April 22, 2008, web.archive.org/web/20080422194634/http://chicago.ioimprov.com/schedule/1.

[59] Geraghty, June 2022.

[60] "New Student Registration Information," *iO*, April 22, 2008, web.archive.org/web/20080422223038/http://chicago.ioimprov.com/training/registration.

money for the theater than a sold out show by The Reckoning, arguably the most popular Harold team at that time.

By this point, with Close having been dead for nine years, there was no longer a norm of Harold team performers taking classes indefinitely. Halpern was also no longer teaching the introductory class but had been until at least as late as 2004.[61] What came to replace that earlier training model was an increasingly elaborate sprawl with predefined goals and curriculums for various levels. In April 2008, iO had 19 different teachers operating 30 classes simultaneously, not including electives and workshops: eight Level 1 classes, seven Level 2 classes, five Level 3 classes, four Level 4 classes, three Level 5 classes, and three Level 5B (Performance) classes. All improv levels cost the same for an eight-week course. Unlike during the itinerant era, when it was common for new students to be put on Harold teams early – Peter Gwinn was placed on a team in his fourth week of Level 1,[62] and Armando Diaz said getting put on a team in Close's class was "comparatively late"[63] – completion of the training program became a prerequisite for Harold team performers. Given the prices of tickets and the likely underwhelming returns at the bar, it is clear that class tuition became an even more important source of revenue for iO. So it may be surprising that Halpern's methods for choosing teachers were fairly lax. Of the teachers I spoke with, only Susan Messing had a difficult time getting hired.[64] A loose pipeline formed in which respected improvisers became coaches and then teachers, but Halpern might also pick teachers based on chance encounters. Paige Maney had been on Harold teams for less than three years before Halpern, after arguing with Maney in a meeting about who would be placed on

[61] Walsh, June 2022.
[62] Gwinn, July 2022.
[63] Diaz, *Improv Interviews.*
[64] Messing, July 2022.

Harold teams, offered her the job.[65] At iO West, iO's branch in Los Angeles, Halpern became notorious for her hiring and firing methods at a theater she rarely visited. A 2018 Paste Magazine article on iO West's closing reported that

> Many of those fortunate enough to win Halpern's favor eventually, unwittingly lost it. "She'd watch a show, she'd be outraged that some person she thought was really great wasn't teaching, they'd start that person teaching, and then perhaps a year would go by and she'd forget who that person was, and say, 'who's this person who's teaching? I don't want them teaching at my theater.' And then they'd get fired," Friedman says. She recalls one teacher in particular who regularly sold out classes until Halpern inexplicably instructed a manager to let him go. "My hunch is that she just forgot who he was."[66]

Teachers were usually paid a flat rate, although that amount varied. In the short time she taught before the pandemic, Maney received about $1000 per eight week session.[67] Some teachers were able to negotiate splits, but that was difficult. Messing, who knew that 5b (Performance) Level teacher Noah Gregoropoulos and writing instructor Michael McCarthy were earning 60/40 tuition splits for their classes, quit teaching her popular Level 2 class for nine months until Halpern agreed to match that rate.[68]

The expansion of the teaching class at the Clark Street iO was indicative of the creation of what might be referred to as the iO bureaucracy. The daily needs of operating a theater led to a network of student interns who performed odd jobs in exchange for free or reduced class tuition, such as working the box office, barbacking, hosting, and janitorial work.[69] Then there was a level of paid positions, like bartenders, servers, lighting techs, piano players, and house managers, whose hiring methods varied. On the unusually stringent side was Mike Geraghty, who described

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[65] Maney, June 2022.
[66] Seth Simons, "The Death of an Improv Theater: Mismanagement and Neglect at iO West," *Paste*, March 29, 2018, https://www.pastemagazine.com/comedy/io-west-theatre/the-death-of-an-improv-theater-mismanagement-and-n/.
[67] Maney, June 2022.
[68] Messing, July 2022. Messing had also created the Level 2 curriculum a decade or so prior.
[69] At some point during iO's time at Kingsbury, interns began to receive wages on top of class tuition.

his hiring as "the most rigorous interview process I've done for any bar in my entire career" for a job in which he "could pay attention only fifty percent of the time and still be the best bartender they've ever seen there."[70] There was also a level of organizational positions that performed more artistic or creative functions. With the growing numbers of students and performers came the creation of a commission dedicated to managing the selection and cutting of Harold teams and team members, cleverly referred to as the Harold Commission. Most duties of Harold Commission members went uncompensated financially, but creating the Harold team schedule was a rare exception, paying around $50 per month.[71] A salaried Creative Director position also arose during this time. The Creative Director (Halpern retained the role of Artistic Director) dealt with all non-Harold shows in the building, working to schedule and recruit acts as needed. iO also began ramping up its business and industrial services, informally known as BizCo, working with companies to lead workshops, perform private shows, or act in projects. Per Peter Gwinn, Halpern had "always been doing it really loosely, but it stepped up a bit in the mid '90s."[72] Coming on the corporate client's dime, these were the rare performance gigs that paid, and Halpern continued to have a hand in them even as performers like Gwinn began helping organize them. She would often choose improvisers for these functions herself. Gretchen Eng, an improviser and teacher at iO, remembered that "those opportunities went to people that [Halpern] thought would represent the theater. Well, and who were front of her mind on any given month. She would dole those opportunities out at the beginning of the month, and if she had just talked to you, she might give you one, and if she'd kind of forgotten you'd existed, you better go put yourself in front of her at some point and remind her that you existed. Otherwise you wouldn't

[70] Geraghty, June 2022.
[71] Mike Johnson (Improviser and teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2022.
[72] Gwinn, July 2022.

get that kind of work."[73] Such opportunities could be extremely lucrative, like when Eng received $2000 for a weekend workshop in India. In addition to class tuition, BizCo was also a source of significant income for the theater, and Halpern's more direct (if sometimes seemingly arbitrary or capricious) involvement in both areas may be a consequence of that, the "fear of losing control" that Scott Markwell talked about in his Chicago Reader profile.

After almost twenty years on Clark Street, iO moved into a much larger building, a former bakery and furniture warehouse at 1501 North Kingsbury Street in 2014. The number of stages doubled from two to four, with two larger theaters on the first floor and two smaller ones on the second, and the number of seats more than doubled since the bottom two theaters sat well over 350 combined. The building allowed for a full service kitchen and Halpern had also purchased a smaller lot next door to use as a beer garden. iO now had three bars, although none of them were in a theater; there was a large oval bar on the first floor, a smaller bar on the second floor, and a back bar on the first floor for use in servicing the larger stages. Halpern's decision to move from Clark Street was not her choice – the lot was sold as part of a larger Wrigleyville development project – but she approached the new location boldly anyway. The new iO Theater rested on land bought by Halpern. The Cook County Assessor's office put the Total Assessed Value of the main lot at $923, 615[74] and the patio lot between $78,542 and $132,085 in 2019.[75] The Clark Street lot, about one fifth of the square footage of the two Kingsbury lots, was assessed at $814,389 that same year.[76] Based on a Paycheck Protection Loan that "Halperns' Yes & Productions, Inc." received in April of 2020 for $516,700, the new iO had 140 waged jobs

[73] Gretchen Eng (Improviser and teacher) in discussion with the author, July 2022.
[74] "Property Details," *Cook County Assessor's Office*, accessed July 8, 2022, cookcountyassessor.com/pin/17052130090000.
[75] "Property Details," *Cook County Assessor's Office*, accessed July 8, 2022, cookcountyassessor.com/pin/17052130080000.
[76] "Property Details," *Cook County Assessor's Office*, accessed July 8, 2022, cookcountyassessor.com/pin/1420403070000.

with an estimated payroll of $2.48 million in 2019.[77] Between all that, a mortgage, the $3 million renovation, and property taxes (which rose from $30,000 to $190,000 within a couple years)[78], iO needed significant capital flows to stay afloat.[79]

Things got off to a good start; in a 2016 interview, Halpern said "the business has tripled in the last three years, and we're profitable."[80] Bartender Mike Geraghty remembered the first six months or so as being well attended, but that audience numbers faded quickly.[81] There are a couple likely reasons for this. The first is the location in the Clybourn Corridor. Although the area had experienced notable commercial investment, it had almost no foot traffic. Nearby businesses like Whole Foods had large parking lots that accommodated customers. No such dedicated parking existed for iO. At the Clark Street location, sandwiched on one side by Wrigley Field and on the other by a long string of bars, shows regularly had curious audience members who came in off the street. Anyone attending a Kingsbury show must have planned so ahead of time. iO's previous marketing strategy, one which privileged attention from those already interested in and knowledgeable about improv, made attracting new audiences more difficult. In an essay in *The Complete Hambook*, improviser and box office employee Glo Chitwood argued that the obtuse show and team names common in longform improv, as well as the sometimes complex and confusing structures in those shows, risked alienating neophytes who were familiar with the iO name but not much else. The essay's suggestive first line reads,

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[77] "PPP Loan Data – Halperns' Yes & Productions, Inc," *FederalPay.org*, accessed July 8, 2022, federalpay.org/paycheck-protection-program/halperns-yes-productions-inc-chicago-il.
[78] Zoë Henry, "This Unsung Comic Guru Turned Her Passion For Improv Into a Profitable Business," *Inc.*, August 2, 2016, inc.com/zoe-henry/how-io-co-founder-charna-halpern-built-a-profitable-comedy-business.html.
[79] Upkeep became more and more difficult. The Jason Chin Harold Cabaret upstairs, for example, had a leaky roof that dripped water onto the front of the stage. Halpern was finally able to get a crew to do repairs only for the roof to spring another leak.
[80] Henry, "This Unsung Comic Guru."
[81] Geraghty, June 2022.

"Hello, I am calling to ask who Harold is. I am seeing his show tonight."[82] This problem was compounded by what many that I interviewed saw as a dip in show quality. Having to fill twice as many stages, it became much easier for greener performers to not only secure stage time, but to secure weekend slots. Before I had made a Harold team, I performed in a weekly Saturday midnight show made up entirely of other performers who had been at iO for less than two years. Such a situation would have been unthinkable at Clark Street; at Kingsbury, we were able to keep that slot for two years despite attracting almost no paying customers.

But Harold teams also suffered this dip, the cause of which solicited many different opinions among interviewees who had been around since Clark Street or earlier. One explanation was that iO suffered an expansion draft problem, increasing the number of Harold teams and thereby diluting the talent of each one. But the total number of teams does not seem to have changed much at all. In December 2013, the Harold Team list on the iO website contained 34 teams.[83] In December 2015, in the Kingsbury space, the number had increased to 39,[84] more than 34 but certainly nowhere near the sort of increase we might expect given the number of new show slots available in the four-stage venue. By October 2017, the number of Harold teams had fallen to 35.[85] At the end of the Kingsbury iO, there were actually fewer teams, 32, then there had been at the end of the Clark iO.[86] More than one improviser exaggerated the number of

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[82] Glo Chitwood, "Improvisation for the Laymen," in *The Complete Hambook*, Lee Benzaquin, et al, eds, (Chicago: Self-Published, 2019), 329-334.
[83] "Teams," *iO*, December 17, 2013, https://web.archive.org/web/20131219184440/http://ioimprov.com/chicago/io/teams. Despite the heading "Teams" instead of "Harold Teams," the page is accessed by navigating from the Teams>Harold Teams drop-down, and a review of the specific teams listed confirms that outside teams are not being included.
[84] "Harold Teams," *iO*, December 10, 2015, https://web.archive.org/web/20151210012159/http://ioimprov.com/chicago/harold-teams.
[85] "Harold Teams," *iO*, October 17, 2017, https://web.archive.org/web/20171017070444/http://www.ioimprov.com/all-shows/harold/.
[86] "Harold Teams," *iO*, May 14, 2020, https://web.archive.org/web/20200514095642/https://www.ioimprov.com/all-shows/harold/.

Harold teams in either direction. Mike Geraghty, who only began regularly attending iO in 2012, guessed there were 15 Harold teams at Clark and "45 or 50" at Kingsbury.[87] Susan Messing, when asked how many Harold teams were operating simultaneously when she started out in the 1980s, was more self-reflective. "Probably when I started, and I might be wrong here, [there were] about five or six at most. But then sometimes I'll see old programs of Harold teams for competitions, and it looks like there might be more."[88] It is possible that increased familiarity at Clark and earlier made the improv community seem smaller, and decreased familiarity made it seem larger since there were suddenly so many strangers around.

While just a conjecture, that theory aligns well with another common response about why Harold team shows became worse: the intracommunity bonds between improvisers had become eroded. Around the time iO moved to Kingsbury, smaller venues all around Chicago's north side began popping up. Like iO in macrocosm, the proliferation of new stages meant that more improvisers than ever, and especially students, could perform on any given night. The obverse of this dynamic was that students were watching fewer shows they were not in. Older performers weren't watching as many shows either, and, at least at iO, the new bars were commonly blamed. If the location of the Clark Street bars in theaters incentivized improvisers to stay in the theaters and watch each other's sets, the Kingsbury bars made it attractive to not watch shows at all. Students after classes and performers before and after shows began hanging out around the giant downstairs bar or, during nice weather, the outdoor patio. "I was really excited when I got the new place on Kingsbury, because I had a whole bar [and] people didn't have to leave,"[89] Halpern said, reflecting on how Clark Street customers would go to competing bars like the Wrigleyside.

[87] Geraghty, June 2022.
[88] Messing, July 2022.
[89] Halpern, July 2022.

There was also a full-service kitchen.[90] This helped improve the profits of the bar but at the cost of traditional methods of connection among iO performers. Farrell Walsh pointed out that at Clark, the space was such that if you were a student or performer, "it was impossible that we hadn't crossed paths," whereas at Kingsbury, it became increasingly common not to know that someone next to you was a fellow performer. This also affected the sorts of conversations improvisers had at the bar. Performers would ask how your shows were, but, having not seen them, could not talk about the shows themselves. "There was a lot less talk about improv," said Walsh, "and a lot more talk about whatever else."[91] It is possible that performers were impacted more by the new bars than students; Zoe Agapinan, an improviser and host at iO, said she saw students come to shows all the time, easily identifiable by their student IDs that let them get into most non-sold out shows for free.[92] A similar number of total students may have been seeing shows, but split between four larger, emptier houses. At least some popular shows at Kingsbury, like 3Peat, regularly had long standby lines of students. By contrast, shows I performed at iO were almost never attended by more veteran performers who were not also playing in the same show. While obviously anecdotal, enough older improvisers mentioned that kind of intergenerational give-and-take (we watch their shows, they watch our shows) that its absence in my own experience is striking.

A notable development in the Kingsbury iO, especially for the purpose of this study, was an increased effort by sequential Creative Directors to present payment options for independently

[90] Halpern found that the kitchen opened doors not only to direct revenue from food sales, but also allowed iO to position itself as a more attractive event space for corporate clients and conferences. Mostly empty during the day, the theaters and two dedicated event spaces could be rented out to businesses or professional groups and provide them with meals, workshops, and shows to supplement their meetings. Reflecting on one deep-pocketed client who paid $80,000 for a full day, Halpern noted that usually "that was money that a hotel would've made." Halpern, July 2022.

[91] Walsh, June 2022.

[92] Zoe Agapinan (Improviser and host) in discussion with the author, June 2022.

produced shows. Shelby Plummer, Creative Director from 2017 to 2018, helped create a door split contract that was "functionally like a rental agreement."[93] After a certain amount in ticket sales "to cover the cost of the theater," iO and the show's producer would split some percentage of sales above that. Despite Plummer's efforts, many performers did not know that such a deal was possible. Geraghty sounded conspiratorial discussing it with me:

> Geraghty: I do know that [the door split]'s available for every performer at iO, but they wouldn't tell people that. So you'd have to find that out on your own.
>
> Me: Why's that?
>
> Geraghty: I don't know why, but from an outsider…. You know Gina DeLuca would do the essay shows. And she did a whole run of shows at iO and then later found out that there was a box office split that she could've asked for. I think that that's probably – one would assume that's because they don't want to be sharing the money. But if you asked, they would set it up.

Confusion about what teams were and weren't paid, what compensation models they had, or even whether there were compensation models at all was common. Kayla Pulley, an improviser who had been on two Harold teams, was incredulous when I mentioned that some producers besides TJ & Dave were getting door splits for their shows, asking, "when?? Wait, like before the pandy?" When I confirmed and asked if she had heard about these arrangements, she quickly replied "no," and asked if that was true even of midnight shows, one of which she had been in. After talking through door splits more, Pulley qualified her initial response. She may have been told about door splits, but if she was, it was not a point of emphasis. "You know how you just explained it to me? Everyone doesn't always do that."[94]

[93] Shelby Plummer (Improviser and Creative Director) in discussion with the author, June 2022.
[94] Kayla Pulley (Improviser) in discussion with the author, June 2022.

Late in 2019, new Creative Director Kevin Knickerbocker attempted to explain. An email sent to an iO performer mailing list on November 13, 2019 advertised an all-theater meeting for November 20. It read (bolding in original):

> *If you want to do **the Showcase** in the spring, come to this meeting!*
>
> *If you want to know how **the Harold Commission** works, come to this meeting!*
>
> *If you want to know **iO's plan for marketing** shows, or how you can help with **inclusion and representation** at iO, or how **door splits** work (i.e., making money on a show you produce), come to this meeting!*
>
> *There will be lots of other topics discussed as well, by Charna, me, Tim Lyons, the Harold Commission, and more. My goal for this: for you to hear what we are doing, how things work, and how we can help you and your shows!* [95]

Door splits are clearly a focus but are lower in implied performer interest than information on the Showcase and the Harold Commission. My memory of this meeting is that the bulk of the proceedings were on those two topics. The efficacy of this meeting in increasing door splits is unknown, since the theater shut down four months later.[96] During her time as Creative Director, Plummer estimated that upwards of 60 or 70% of independent producers on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday took door split deals, but only 30% of producers for Monday through Thursday shows. This suggests that unpaid norms of longform improv are not simply a matter of ignorance of payment options, but often an active rejection of payment. Only two performers I interviewed, Plummer and Pulley, said they would need to be paid before considering doing another improv show, and only Plummer would require cash.[97] Pulley, with an attitude reminiscent of Miles Stroth's agreement to become bar manager, asked for a cider before performing in a post-

[95] Kevin Knickerbocker, email to active performer at iO mailing list, Nov 13, 2019.
[96] Halpern has since sold iO; as of July 2022, the new ownership had begun offering non-leveled online classes and workshops but had not yet reopened the building.
[97] Plummer, June 2022.

pandemic show.[98] Susan Messing said she only negotiated for pay to improvise in the context of festival or fly-out appearances, and Peter Gwinn had only done it for corporate gigs. Messing in particular impressed upon me multiple times that she did not mind performing in shows for free.[99] Gretchen Eng had negotiated for pay, but on behalf of her improv team Devil's Daughter, and not just herself. Even then, she "might not have ever asked to be paid for [improv] if it weren't for more progressive-minded friends who have been on the team."[100] The rest had never asked, with many finding the concept distasteful.

To see if we can explain why that is, the rest of the paper will draw on the work of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu. Bourdieu argued that tastes, preferences, and practices do not act, and are not formed, in isolation from each other, but rather work in tandem as a "system of differences [which] allow the most fundamental social differences to be expressed," or, to put it another way, the things we like and the things we do reflect our position in society, because our position in society influences the range of things we might like or do.[101] A person's position in society is both a function of what they have and what they have in relation to others. Having $100 might be worth a lot if everyone else has $1, and having $1 million might not be worth anything if everyone else has euros. Bourdieu pointed out that money, or economic capital, is not the only form of capital people exchange in society. They exchange cultural capital (like titles of educational attainment or ease with and mastery of various forms of art) and social capital (networks of friends and contacts). And like a person flush with dollars when the stores only take euros, accumulated cultural and social capital is only valuable if other people are willing to

[98] Pulley, June 2022.
[99] Messing, July 2022.
[100] Eng, July 2022.
[101] Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1984), 226.

accept it. People and groups thus find themselves situated along three dimensions: 1) the total volume of capital they have, 2) the relative composition of their types of capital (do they have more cultural capital but little economic capital, e.g.), and 3) how the first two dimensions are changing over time (i.e., your social trajectory).[102] Your position within this space structures a system of dispositions – the way you move and think through the world – that Bourdieu calls *habitus.* Habitus give us our own taste and, in turn, structures the way we perceive the taste of others. This means "taste is a match-maker," social signs "through which a habitus confirms its affinity with other habitus."[103] The upshot of all this is that it means looking at a cultural practice by positioning it in the appropriate fields of social relation should allow us to better understand the meaning of that practice. Who is producing unpaid longform improv, and who is consuming it? Unlike Bourdieu, we do not have access to robust statistical analysis confirming which tastes and practices correlate to which classes and class fractions in 21st century America. Instead, we will cautiously but optimistically use some of Bourdieu's 20th century French observations on class habitus as they seem appropriate. We will look at the producers (the improvisers) and the consumers (the audiences) next.

In her 2001 ethnography of Chicago improvisers, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*, Amy Seham found that "[t]hroughout the '90s, the average [ImprovOlympic] team included two white women and seven white men, with a tiny handful of black, Asian, and Latino performers--mostly male--scattered across the roster. Players tend to be well educated and middle class, often members of the professional-managerial class or of the 'cognitariat'--information workers and computer jockeys."[104] How much of this is still true today, and how is it different from other

[102] Ibid., 114.
[103] Ibid., 243.
[104] Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?,* 56-7.

comedy producers? A review of Harold teams during 2013 and 2014 found that the gender ratio had evened out slightly – there was a pretty even split between teams with three women and seven men and teams with four women and six men, with only the oldest Harold teams featuring more skewed divides – but non-white performers were ill-represented. A look at the archived web page for the final Harold rosters in 2020 shows that the gender disparity was mostly gone, and indeed had several teams with more women than men. There was also an extremely evident rise in the number of performers of colors, especially women of color, and particularly on the youngest teams.[105] This was almost certainly the result of a concerted diversity effort by creative management at iO. Although she was not in charge of casting Harold teams, Shelby Plummer purposefully sought out groups made up mostly or entirely of performers of color for runs at iO during her tenure as Creative Director.[106] The Harold Commission, having already undergone a transparency and diversity push of its own members, attempted to force the issue in 2018 by both opening up Harold auditions to people who had never taken classes and "exclusively extending an audition invitation to performers who identify as Female Identifying, people of color, LGBTQ+, disabled, non-binary and/or other diverse voices," a comprehensive list that ultimately served to exclude neurotypical cis-heterosexual white men.[107] Less than 24 hours later, Charna Halpern sent out an email asking performers to "[p]lease disregard the last notice regarding Harold auditions – there were a number of factual errors."[108] Halpern did not clarify whether the

[105] This demographic evidence is all based on my read of listed names and headshots and so, as you can imagine, is empirically problematic. Yet even though it would be foolish to commit to any hard numbers, there is still a striking shift from looking at rosters in 2014 to 2020.
[106] Plummer, June 2022.
[107] Shelby Plummer, email to active performers at iO mailing list, Aug 22, 2018.
[108] Charna Halpern, email to active performers at iO mailing list, Augu 23, 2018.

issue with the Harold Commissions plan was its exclusivity of neurotypical cis-heterosexual white men or its inclusivity of improvisers who had not attended the iO training center.[109]

As to improvisers' educational attainment, all members of my interview sample had an undergraduate college education, but only two, Susan Messing and Colette Gregory, received degrees from what might be considered an elite university, Northwestern. Most common were state schools – NC State University; University of Illinois at Springfield; University of California, Santa Cruz; Virginia Commonwealth University; Indiana University Bloomington; University of Nevada, Reno, University of Georgia, and Boston University. Two attended Columbia College Chicago, and three more attended small private colleges, Carleton College, Vassar College, and University of Puget Sound. Two attended or attend graduate school, DePaul University and Adler University; a third was enrolled in a Master's program at the University of Chicago but dropped out. Older figures in iO's history also went to state schools; Halpern graduated from Southern Illinois University and Close, while never graduating, attended several, including what became Kansas State University. David Shepherd, a graduate of Harvard and Columbia Universities, is the notable exception. In the aggregate, this probably places longform improvisers' educational capital somewhere between that of TV and film writers and standups. Michael P. Jeffries, in a study on American comedy workers, found that "almost half the people I spoke with grew up in households in which at least one parent or guardian held a professional degree (beyond a bachelor's degree)"[110] and 56 of the 67 in his sample graduated from four-year universities themselves.[111] Jeffries does not break these stats down by type of comedy performed, but there is some evidence that film and sitcom writers skew towards more elite

[109] I neglected to ask Halpern to clarify this point during our interview.
[110] Michael P. Jeffries, *Behind the Laughs: Community and Inequality in Comedy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2017), 26.
[111] Ibid., 36

education and stand-ups are less likely to be college-educated than improvisers. The Simpsons writer Matt Selman, himself a graduate of the University of Pennsylvania, said that "you're fighting through the Yale graduates to get a job"[112] in sitcom writing. According to Zippia, a website that aggregates career information from resumes, stand-up comedians have at least a bachelor's degree only 71.9% of the time,[113] a lower percentage than Jeffries's sample of all comedy workers. While not the most reliable source, Zippia's page for comedians more broadly lists 76.9% as having bachelor's degrees, suggesting that stand-ups do have lower educational capital than other types of comedians (although still significantly higher than the American average).[114]

The sort of jobs improvisers have now still reflect Seham's report of a cognitariat, but not so much a professional-managerial class. Jobs held at some point included software engineer, graphic designer, accountant, sales, IT for a financial firm, and a financial aid advisor. Although none were included in this study, many tech firms acted as hiring hubs for improvisers, including GrubHub, Groupon, Cars.com, and Buildout. Three of my interviewees were bartenders, although I purposely sought them out for this project as a way to get insight on paid working culture at iO; still, they follow in the proud lineage of improviser-bartenders Andy Duncan and Mickey LeGlaire of the Compass.[115] Shelby Plummer was a nanny, even while Creative Director, another role that was not uncommon among iO improvisers.[116] Susan Messing and Kayla Pulley were able to support themselves creatively; Messing taught, acted, and did voice

[112] Quotes in Jeffries, *Behind the Laughs*, 37.
[113] "HOW TO BECOME A STAND UP COMEDIAN," *Zippia*, last accessed July 8, 2022, https://www.zippia.com/stand-up-comedian-jobs/.
[114] "HOW TO BECOME A COMEDIAN," *Zippia*, last accessed July 8, 2022, https://www.zippia.com/comedian-jobs/.
[115] Coleman, *The Compass*, 101.
[116] Plummer, June 2022.

acting,[117] while Pulley taught and acted with a children's theater.[118] Colette Gregory[119] and Gretchen Eng[120] initially worked more traditional day jobs with smaller creative incomes (college counselor and acting, and administrator at an arts non-profit and running a children's choir, respectively) before transitioning into teaching and corporate improv. A key distinction between improvisers and other comedians is that greater success in non-improv types of comedy is met with greater financial returns, such that the more successful writers and stand-ups are able to make those practices their careers. As one moves up in prestige, a comedian is able to make more money either because of union membership and seniority (writers) or the ability to attract audiences and command higher booking fees or gate receipts (stand-ups). Improvisers, by contrast, rarely make any money at all from performing. Ollie Hobson, who has performed on one of Chicago's longest-running Harold teams, The Late 90s, for years, was told in classes that "the only people that make money from improv [are] TJ [Jagadowski] and [Peter] Grosz 'cause they have a commercial where they get to improvise" in a national series of ads for the fast-food franchise Sonic. "It was hammered into my head pretty quickly [that] you don't get paid to improvise."[121] Successful improvisers usually attempt to move into writing, stand-up, or acting (Peter Gwinn, for example, has been writing professionally for years, currently with *Wait Wait… Don't Tell Me!*); the reverse move is almost unheard of.[122] This transition is even aided by improv theaters through the use of showcases. Prestigious comedy festivals like Just For Laughs or television sketch shows like Saturday Night Live, when choosing whom to hire, will come to

[117] Messing, July 2022.
[118] Pulley, June 2022.
[119] Colette Gregory (Improviser) in discussion with the author, July 2022.
[120] Eng, July 2022.
[121] Ollie Hobson (Improviser) in discussion with the author, June 2022.
[122] I can think of one notable exception, where Paul F. Tompkins, already a successful stand-up and television sketch actor and writer, began doing improv relatively late in his career. Through either ad or patron support, he presumably made some money from his improv podcast *Superego,* but the lion's share of his income almost certainly still comes from stand-up and television.

improv theaters to watch curated selections of performers. Unlike stand-ups, however, who also have showcases (indeed, "the showcase" is its own type of stand-up show), improvisers who perform in showcases are not doing their usual style of performance, i.e. improv. Instead, they perform pre-written material, usually two-to-three solo sketches with a different comedy character in each.

The advent of the modern iO showcase, referred to commonly as the SNL showcase, was identified by both Gwinn and Farrell Walsh as a turning point in how iO performers related to the theater. On previous occasions that SNL producers came to iO, Halpern would organize a group to perform a longform set – usually a Harold or, more simply, a no-frills form called a Montage. This was understandably an undesirable way for SNL to scout talent for a written sketch show, and in 2010 the format was changed to solo sketches.[123] Two iO performers were hired by SNL that same year, Vanessa Bayer and Paul Brittain. Gwinn was living in New York at the time. When he returned to Chicago, he noticed that "there was a lot of resentment over who got an SNL showcase slot [and] there was a certain sense of entitlement to having that opportunity." Gwinn contrasted this mentality, where performers began to believe iO, with its direct-line access to one of the most prestigious jobs in comedy, was "an end in itself," to his own that iO was like a school. "We're gonna play here, and we're gonna get really good, and then we're gonna go off somewhere else, and someone will pay us."[124] Walsh was not only in Chicago at the time, but was also Vanessa Bayer's teammate on the Harold team Revolver. Like Gwinn, he saw that the showcase fundamentally changed the relationship iO had to its

[123] In my interview, Halpern initially believed this format began much earlier, during the 1990s. After talking it over, we were able to at least determine it was no earlier than 2004, since John Lutz was hired as a writer by SNL that year after appearing in a longform audition. Halpern believed Lutz's audition may have been the last one like that. I go with the 2010 date here because it matches up with the more consistent timeline offered by Farrell Walsh.
[124] Gwinn, July 2022.

performers. “Before that, really you were there ’cause you enjoyed doing improv.” Even if you were actively trying to get a professional comedy job, including a job on SNL, “iO didn’t really have anything to do with that.”[125] The showcase suddenly meant that iO could offer a material reward to its performers. This had two effects. First, it attracted students who were no longer interested in improv for improv’s sake. Walsh had started teaching at iO the year before the showcase. Afterwards, when he would ask a class what shows they had seen the previous week, “[students] would say, ‘I was in this sketch show at the Playground [Theater].’ Great, not what we’re talking about.” The second effect was that performers were unable to set and enforce the rules of the game. Students interested in getting on SNL no longer needed to abide by community norms since the showcase process was not controlled by other performers. As Walsh put it, “interest in the quote unquote art form dropped considerably, not with everybody, but across the board. Generally, it dropped, and it was more about the business of getting ahead in comedy.” Charna Halpern, never one to turn down earned media, embraced the power of the showcase to attract paying students. An updated printing of *Truth in Comedy* replaced Andy Dick’s back cover blurb with a new one from Cecily Strong, who was hired on SNL after participating in the showcase in 2012. The blurb reads in full:

> Charna was my teacher and right away made me feel supported and comfortable as an improviser. She encouraged me to play in different shows at her theater. I worked in the iO box office as a way to supplement my acting career. She pushed me to eventually audition for SNL, offering to help with my audition. Charna does so much to make sure her performers find work outside. Performing at iO WILL make you better.[126]

A pathway for success is presented that forgoes any obligation to invest in the community the way previous generations of improvisers had, since Halpern by herself can lead you to success. First, you are Halpern’s student. Then you perform at her theater. Then you work at her theater.

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[125] Walsh, June 2022

[126] Halpern, et al, *Truth in Comedy*, 2nd edition, back cover.

Then she handpicks you for SNL. Finally, you get SNL. But the SNL-focused student's isolation from the community could cut both ways. Kayla Pulley recounted how a member of her Pool team[127] had made a racist remark during a scene. Even though she felt like her team and the theater did not sufficiently support her in the aftermath, she stuck around anyway because the possibility of being in the SNL showcase was an opportunity not available anywhere else.[128]

While iO had never been able to offer such a clear professional product before, it would be wrong to say that iO had not dealt with the same sort of dynamic earlier. What Gwinn remembered as a common and healthy goal to have in his early days - leaving iO to find paying gigs that would take you away from the theater - was itself a contentious proposition not long prior. Susan Messing recalled having to keep quiet about a pilot she had booked out of fear it would upset others in the community. When I asked if iO performers were using the theater as a stepping stone, Messing clarified that "no, it was just a place to play."[129] Armando Diaz said that a turning point came in the late 1980s when ImprovOlympian Tim Meadows was hired by The Second City. "All of the sudden, there was kind of this legitimacy. A lot of it had to do with Del [Close], because he directed Second City. He'd be like 'you have to check out this guy [Chris] Farley,' which gave him an audition. And Farley got hired. And that just kind of really started to establish ImprovOlympic."[130] By the time The Second City revue *Piñata Full of Bees* opened in 1995, Gwinn said there was no need to take Second City classes anymore, since you could get on the Mainstage having only gone through iO. Certainly not everyone treated iO as a stepping stone at this point, but you could without getting backlash. These moments of commercial

[127] The Pool was a show that bridged the gap between the training program and Harold teams. Promising graduates who had not been put on teams were given an eight-week run in which they performed the Harold, allowing them to gain comfort with the form and theoretically become more competitive candidates for future Harold team spots.
[128] Pulley, June 2022.
[129] Messing, July 2022.
[130] Armando Diaz, *Improv Interviews*

negotiation within iO allowed the theater to accommodate two groups. The first were those passing through the space without becoming too invested, satisfied to take from iO what they needed and then move on. The second were the dedicated veterans who contributed not only performances without wages, but often worked for free doing upkeep around the theater reminiscent of the early days of the Compass. Gwinn argued that "those theaters survived because people like me would step up and do these things when the need arose," whether that be paying bills, constructing stages, designing marketing materials, or scheduling shows.[131] The former group can be said to have – depending on your perspective – a mercenary relationship with iO or an investment relationship, where free work now leads to greater earnings in the future. But what was the latter group receiving?

Amy Seham suggests, expanding on Bourdieu's work too, that the payment dedicated longform improvisers received was subcultural capital for a new improv lifestyle, a type of currency and legitimacy that encouraged further investment in improv because the capital could only be cashed in improv.[132] In simpler terms, Seham is saying that you get out of improv what you put into it. But this is more descriptive than explanatory. Many fields develop robust exchanges of their own subcultural capital. Michael P. Jeffries argues that this sort of dynamic is common to all comedy communities, but various other comedy institutions are in the habit of paying at least nominal fees, and stand-ups and sketch comedians do not find themselves actively rejecting monetary payment.[133] This attitude was especially common among iO performers who began at Clark Street or earlier. Peter Gwinn offered a milder form of this rejection: "I'm just aware that the money is not there [in non-corporate improv performances]. I'm not going to get a

[131] Gwinn, July 2022. Gwinn straddled the line between both groups, actively seeking and taking jobs away from the theater, but also dedicating large amounts of time to helping run it.
[132] Seham, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?*, 55-6.
[133] Jeffries, *Behind the Laughs*.

living wage, so if you want to pay me ten bucks for a show, at that point just give me a free drink. Which is ten bucks, and I'll tip the bartender." Gwinn differentiates between types of improv activity where payment makes sense, like corporate gigs and teaching, and more standard longform performances, where it does not. When I asked Gwinn why he had never asked to be paid for a non-corporate improv show, he explained, "because I'm doing that for fun."[134] More extreme forms of this rejection were expressed by Louis Saunders and Jorin Garguilo, both of whom had been on Revolver with Farrell Walsh.[135] When I asked Saunders if he had ever asked to be paid to improvise, he said "no, I would never" and laughed. Even if someone asked him to do a corporate gig, "I'd be like, ok, it's going to be a terrible show but I'll do it for free."[136] Like Saunders, Garguilo also disliked corporate improv – "they're so universally terrible" – but has done a few anyway. "It's nice that Charna [Halpern] has explicitly asked me to do this," he said. "For her to be like, 'hey, do you want to do this gig,' was like, no, but you asked me. And so if you want me, yeah I'll do it."[137] By this frame, accepting paid work is more akin to either a favor or an expression of gratitude. The ability to make money off improv was tied to the ability to "really market a show," Saunders argued, "which is when it gets gross."[138] Saunders saw a social stigma around those who had monetized improv, either through performance or through expensive workshops. Both Saunders and Garguilo have been paid to improvise in non-corporate shows before, notably on a team called Pudding-Thank-You that received a percentage of ticket sales from the American Theater Company around 2008. Saunders remembered those shows as "really awesome," "probably the best example of a commerce-based [improv] show," and "actually really popular." But Saunders simultaneously downplayed Pudding-Thank-You's

[134] Gwinn, July 2022.
[135] All three continue to play with each other at the CIC Theater, where Walsh is Managing Director.
[136] Louis Saunders (Improviser) in discussion with the author, June 2022.
[137] Jorin Garguilo (Improviser and teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2022.
[138] Saunders, June 2022.

economic relationship to the American Theater Company, claiming the owner only gave them a cut of the house "to be nice."[139] While Garguilo did not bring up this show during our interview, he similarly distanced himself from the ways his improv might lead to financial compensation. Talking about his payment for teaching at iO and elsewhere, Garguilo said,

> The thing is, that's great to have bar money or random money for whatever, incidental expenses, but the secret is I would be happy not to be paid for that either. The thing that makes it work for me is I have direct deposits and I don't think about it. I disassociate that - being paid from teaching - where I go and teach and that's the thing that matters to me, that's the reason I do it, and I think about it that way. And then I'll also be like, money appeared.[140]

Garguilo had also stopped charging teams he coached, although he was not coaching teams consistently or for long periods of time. Unlike Gwinn, there is no clear boundary for Saunders and Garguilo between improv activities where payment seemed justified and where it did not.

Seham, writing in 2001, also sees the perpetual class-taker as fundamental to iO's well-being, since iO melds the "sports-based metaphor" business model with a membership model (the indefinitely repeating class taker) that increases buy-in of the subculture.[141] But unpaid longform norms have persisted well after the decline of both iO's sports-style gimmicks and multi-session Level 5 students. And when iO began instituting auditions for Harold teams in 2006, they became even more like ComedySportz or The Second City, and yet still did not adapt their payment model. Those familiar with improv will be able, rightfully, to point out that the product of those three theaters are wildly different. I agree, but I will argue that it is the audiences for those products that are more relevant for consideration here.

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[139] Saunders, June 2022.
[140] Garguilo, June 2022.
[141] Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*, 39.

When I asked Peter Gwinn why he thought it was the norm for longform improvisers to be unpaid, he rejoined that they are. "They are getting free space rental. They are getting free box office services. They are getting free bar services. They're getting free advertising in some cases." Gwinn said that his big question for me was "why? Why is that not considered by people?" At least among those interviewed for this study, however, that consideration is very much at the front of peoples' minds. And if Shelby Plummer's estimates are accurate, 70% of shows on weekdays and between 30-40% on the weekends have made the same calculation. But many other places are capable of offering similar services (e.g., a ComedySportz house team) without recreating the culture of iO. What iO *was* able to uniquely offer its longform performers in lieu of formal payment was the ideal audience for longform shows, and that audience was a mirror – performers, students, and improv nerds. Cesar Jaime, who began taking classes soon after the Clark location opened, found that it was these audiences that were special, with students, other performers, and non-improvisers, "a real paying audience," enthusiastic to watch longform. "This is your payment. You're playing for a real audience at a real fucking theater."[142] A Jack Helbig review of two improv shows in the Chicago Reader from a few years earlier drove this point home. "Nothing made me more aware of the ideal performing conditions improvisers have at ImprovOlympia[143] than seeing the pure hell Blue Velveeta goes through trying to entertain the jaded, dumb, drunk, and disorderly crowd at the Improv," Helbig, himself a former iO student and performer, lamented. The Improv, one of a chain of national comedy clubs, attracted the sort of crowd you might get at any of their standup shows. Affinitive producers and consumers, on the other hand, discipline each other in something more supportive of the other. Del Close celebrated how "we've got our audiences so hip, if our actors try to rely on a canned

[142] Cesar Jaime (Improviser and teacher) in discussion with the author, June 2022.
[143] iO has gone through a few names – ImprovOlympics, ImprovOlympic, ImprovOlympia, and finally iO. The last two were adopted after a suit by the International Olympic Committee over the use of the word 'Olympic.'

joke, the audience boos."[144] A cagier, more thoughtful audience prods the performers to step up their game, which in turn develops smarter audiences. Relatedly, it attracts and rewards affinitive critics, who then reward the theater.

Matt Fotis argues that the appeal of a longform improv show is due to its *operational aesthetic*; that is, a consumer gains pleasure in consuming something by knowing how it works.[145] But to appreciate something in this way, you first must learn its process. Even a by-the-numbers Harold can be difficult for a neophyte to follow. Amy Seham spoke to an audience member at one Harold show who said "I think it's hard unless you already know the format, which they don't really explain—it's hard for people to understand and appreciate this improv."[146] When I asked interviewees how they explained improv to non-improvisers, there was hesitancy among both older and newer performers. "I kinda don't," said Louis Saunders, "just 'cause I want to avoid the conversation."[147] Karl Bradley, a former Kingsbury iO student and a current teacher at the Annoyance Theatre, also replied, "I don't."[148] But iO, despite never offering very thorough explanations to new audiences, did work in other ways to educate crowds. Free Wednesday night shows offered low barrier ways for interested parties to experience a Harold. And the process of turning students into performers was also about teaching students to be ideal audiences through repetition. Students got into shows for free (when not otherwise sold out) and were repeatedly encouraged by teachers and peers to attend performances. Contrast this method of education with a ComedySportz host and audience, who patiently explains an already simple improv game to the crowd thoroughly and with examples. The ability to attract and teach

[144] Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*, 43, qtd. in Adler, "The 'How' of Funny."
[145] Matt Fotis, *Long Form Improvisation and American Comedy: The Harold* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), 60.
[146] Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?,* 43.
[147] Saunders, June 2022.
[148] Karl Bradley (Improviser and teacher) in discussion with the author, July 2022.

an audience how to watch a show is crucial to a theater's success. Art and humor historian Judy Batalion argues that the material of a show is often less important to its success than the makeup of the audience: "the audience is everything."[149] A core issue with the bars at the Kingsbury iO was that they broke up the affinitive audience that performers had become structured to respond to. The target audiences at ComedySportz or The Second City, families and tourists, were frequently cited by interviewees as sub-ideal members in Kingsbury iO crowds.

It seems clear that we have found something unique – an ideal audience – that iO was able to offer longform improvisers. Bourdieu writes that "a work of art has meaning and interest only for someone who possesses the cultural competence, that is, the code, into which it is encoded," helping to explain the interplay between improviser and audience members. But that iO was able to provide a unique audience does not seem sufficient yet as an explanation for why longform improvisers are unpaid. When asked, interviewees rallied around two main speculations of why this norm exists.

The first is an economic argument, most forcefully argued by Farrell Walsh and Peter Gwinn. For Walsh, who is the Managing Director of a small non-profit longform theater called CIC, even a back-of-the-napkin accounting of how much they would be spending on performers quickly adds up. If longform audiences are, in fact, in scarce supply like earlier analysis suggests, it makes more sense why longform theaters cannot begin adapting ComedySportz-style payment models, since ComedySportz has a wider base of potential audience members that are willing to pay more for shows. Many interviewees who were sympathetic to the idea of paying

[149] Judy Batalion, "Difference at Work," in *The Laughing Stalk: Live Comedy and its Audiences*, ed. Judy Batalion (Anderson, SC: Parlor Press), 11. In the same collection, Alice Raynor argues that is the opposite way around, with the joke creating the audience rather than the audience creating the joke. The beauty of Bourdieu's social theory is that both can be true.

longform improvisers still found it hard to shake that concern. Gretchen Eng, who had successfully negotiated a door split for Devil's Daughter with the Annoyance Theatre, said that she felt "guilt" over asking for pay – "why do we deserve this? What happens if everyone asks for it? Will we bankrupt the theater?"[150] Charna Halpern also saw economics as the primary reason she did not pay performers. Back at the Clark Street iO, one performer had demanded payment but backed off when Halpern said that, if she did have to start paying performers and restricting who played, that performer was not talented enough to make the cut. The cost to Halpern was not merely the wage being requested by any individual. For example, when a group of Harold performers approached her at the Kingsbury iO and asked to be paid $25 per show, she explained that with payroll insurance and tax, it would cost her "$125 just to pay someone $25."[151]

Yet it also seems obvious that economic forces alone cannot account for the unpaid norms of longform improvisation. For one, simply adding up the number of performers in a show and multiplying by the payment amount as a way to estimate costs implies that the structure of shows themselves is invariable. There is clearly a tradeoff that could be made, if desired, between maximizing the number of performers and maximizing possible payment, as Halpern herself suggested to the Clark Street performer. When I asked interviewees what they thought the improv community would be like if longform improvisers were paid, many responded that it would be much smaller. If audiences for longform shows require high numbers of longform improvisers, the math does become pernicious. But successful teams, and especially successful Harold teams, are often not paid either, despite clearing that fiscal bar. A team like Revolver, for

[150] Eng, July 2022.
[151] Halpern, July 2022.

instance, regularly played to packed rooms on Friday nights but were never paid.[152] A door split model seems even more amenable to this kind of situation; since ticket sales make up relatively low fractions of longform theaters' revenues, setting up pre-arranged payment plans for the successful teams would be unlikely to destroy a theater's business model. Cesar Jaime, who had been around iO for 25 years when it closed and worked often with Halpern, stated repeatedly that he thought it was fiscally feasible and that greed was ultimately the reason Halpern declined to proactively offer such deals to teams.[153] But, per Shelby Plummer, many teams on weekends did have door split deals, and at least two teams – the Deltones and their opener Dumb John – received a flat fee of $50 per performer per show. An alternative explanation to greed, harkening back to the "Comedy Mother" profile, is Halpern's preference for control. When I asked Halpern why iO was a for-profit company instead of a non-profit, she gave two reasons. The first was that she wanted a bar and did not believe she could operate one as a non-profit; Halpern did not know if this was actually the case but said that is what her accountant told her (non-profit improv theaters CIC and Stage 773/WHIM do have bars, but both opened over a decade after the Clark Street iO). The other reason was that being a non-profit meant allowing a Board of Directors say in how the theater was run. "Can you imagine [having a Board of Directors fire a founder]," Halpern asked. "There's no way I would ever let that happen." Without further prompting, Halpern continued, "with the Black Lives Matter thing, I had to laugh because here were these people who don't know me who were saying, 'we insist that you step down.'[154] Oh yeah, I'm

[152] They also never asked to be paid, as some of the answers from Walsh, Garguilo, and Saunders above would suggest.
[153] Jaime, June 2022.
[154] In June 2020, iO performers Olivia Jackson, Daniela Aguilar, Cherish Hicks, Jackie Bustamante, and Tommy Nouansacksy created the Change.org petition, "I Will Not Perform at iO until Until [sic] the Following Demands Are Met." It garnered 2,556 signatures, of which I was one. Coming on the heels of the murder of George Floyd and an open letter from black Second City performers that called for investigations into racism at that theater, the petition demanded, among other things, that Halpern "publicly acknowledge and apologize for the institutional racism perpetuated at iO as well as her individual history of racism" and "commit to the decentralization of

sure the bank would love that. The bank gave me $6 million, and they approved me, and I'm sure they would be very happy if I stepped down for a bunch of people they don't know. That's a great thing to request. These are people who really know business."[155] By operating as a for-profit, Halpern could both run the theater in the way she thought best and also ensure she was protected from attempts to remove her. In appealing to her knowledge of business, Halpern suggests that it is not a desire to hoard money that drives her decisions on who to pay, but the practical realities of running an improv theater.

The second major explanation was one of inertia, mentioned by Jane Brown and Kayla Pulley, among others. Longform improvisers are unpaid because they were unpaid when longform improv began. This theory is very useful at highlighting the importance of intentionality - whether a theater plans to pay or not when it begins. By prioritizing this ahead of time, theaters are able to scale up in ways that support sustainable payment plans. Tori Tomalia, the Managing Director of Pointless Brewery & Theater in Ann Arbor, Michigan, said that "from the time we first imagined opening Pointless we knew that paying our performers would an important goal." Only three years after they opened, they had several different payment norms and options for different scenarios.[156] A few more decades into its own journey is ComedySportz. ComedySportz's franchise manual begins by declaring "COMEDYSPORTZ IS

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decision making within the theater," although it did not demand that Halpern resign or sell the theater. It is unclear if this petition was what Halpern had in mind during this discussion – it is certainly possible that she was remembering individual performers who may have called for her resignation. Halpern had actually responded to this petition on June 10, giving the desired apology and committing to implementing several of the petition's demands, but cautioned that "[e]very day that we cannot open, the financial situation gets worse, and there is only so much time we have before the business will not be able to return." On June 17, responding to an email from iO BIPOC video sketch team Free Street Parking, Halpern announced she was closing the theater due to financial pressures. Olivia Jackson, "I Will Not Perform at iO until Until the Following Demands Are Met," *Change.org*, last accessed July 29, 2022, https://www.change.org/p/io-chicago-i-will-not-perform-at-io-until-until-the-following-demands-are-met.

[155] Halpern, July 2022.

[156] Seth Simons, "6 Improv and Sketch Theaters that Pay Performers," *Paste*, July 6, 2018, pastemagazine.com/comedy/labor/6-improv-and-sketch-theaters-that-pay-performers/.

A SPORT. COMEDYSPORTZ IS A BUSINESS."[157] At least during the time of Seham's ethnography, ComedySportz founder Dick Chudnow envisioned employing performers at his flagship Milwaukee branch full time.[158] ComedySportz also serves as a reminder that the intention to pay performers does not always make paying performers sustainable. At the then-ComedySportz Raleigh branch (now an independent theater called ComedyWorx), Jorin Garguilo and other improvisers were paid a cut of ticket sales for their performances. Eventually this changed to a $7 flat fee per show and later disappeared altogether. Garguilo spoke to the owner and learned that even paying the $7 fee would have sunk the company at that time.[159] ComedyWorx is an example of a theater forced to adjust to material changes. But why do we not see this the other way? iO, at least until Halpern took on huge debt in the move to the Kingsbury location, seems to have been healthy financially, and at least through 2016 she was claiming in interviews that the theater was profitable.[160] What kinds of forces were successfully resisting material changes?

Here it should be useful to employ another one of Bourdieu's concepts, classification struggle. Because tastes and practices reflect positions in social space, fights over tastes or practices are actually fights over class,[161] but often presented in a way that makes it non-obvious to its participants. Bourdieu posits that "principles of division" – defining what is for 'us' and what is for 'them' – "function with and for the purposes of the struggle between social groups; in

[157] Seham, *Whose Improv is it Anyway?*, 98.
[158] Ibid.
[159] Garguilo, June 2022.
[160] Henry, "This Unsung Comic Guru."
[161] Construed not in a narrow sense of working class/bourgeoisie or lower/middle/upper class, but, as discussed before, as a combination of total volume of capital, proportions of capital, and trajectory. Deciding who is in the working class and bourgeoisie, or who is in the lower, middle, or upper classes, are themselves symbolic struggles in which various parties attempt to shape or reshape the boundaries of classificatory schemes (consider recent debates like "are cops working class" and "how much money can you make and still be middle class"). Even using one set of class distinctions over another is an example of social groups in conflict over which classification schemes are legitimate.

producing concepts, they produce groups, the very groups which produce the principles and the groups against which they are produced."[162] White Sox fans are both a product of distinction and, in turn, produce the principles that define who White Sox fans are, largely by how those fans distinguish themselves from other baseball fans. These processes do not have to be, and often aren't, conscious. This same process creates and sustains social groups like nationalities and races, as well. Properties or characteristics become associated with groups, and "whenever different groups are juxtaposed, a definition of the approved, valorized behavior tends to be contrasted with the despised, rejected behavior of the other group."[163] These contrasts are most intense between similar groups, since "social identity lies in difference, and difference is asserted against what is closest, which represents the greatest threat."[164] Relations between White Sox and Cubs fans, for example, are more contentious than those between White Sox fans and the Dutch. The struggle between groups to create classifications are thus struggles to define social reality, and the power to name or codify a classification is one such tool in that fight. Bourdieu uses the example of the then-contemporary rise of physical therapists in France, "who count on this new title to separate them from mere masseurs and bring them closer to doctors."[165] These struggles can produce material benefits (like higher wages for those able to claim the title of physical therapist instead of masseur) and symbolic benefits (the social legitimacy of the title 'physical therapist' and any positive characteristics attributed to that title). Classification struggles, then, are strategic attempts (conscious or not) by social groups to secure benefits for their groups, mediated by processes of distinction

[162] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 479.
[163] Ibid.
[164] Ibid.
[165] Ibid., 481.

So what does this mean for payment in improv? Social groups are, as argued earlier, products of and producers of habitus, the internalized structuring structure that limits the range of possibles for various class fractions. Since habitus (when it interacts in specific fields) produces taste, practices, and therefore lifestyles, a classification struggle like that of the 20th century French therapist is really a class struggle, of those in a similar social position and therefore habitus, to secure benefits for their class. So any classification struggles within improv would also be more-or-less disguised struggles between classes and class fractions, rendered symbolically. What we would expect to see would be the closest class fractions as working the hardest to mark distinction among themselves. Del Close's fight with Bernie Sahlins over whether improv could function on its own, and whether improv was art, is one example of a classification struggle, wherein longform improv managed to successfully classify itself as an autonomous form of cultural production. Successfully positioning a cultural object as broadly legitimate increases the cultural capital of those in possession of it. Fights over whether longform improvisers should be paid can also be seen as classification struggles. Usually, artists struggle to reclassify their artistic practices as work. Sociologist Michael Gibson-Light found that "[i]ndependent cultural producers often face challenge to legitimacy or are regarded as non-workers. Though they appear driven by non-monetary influences, musicians and other artists are nonetheless workers."[166] Distinctly, longform improvisers struggle not to position improv as work but to protect it from such reclassifications.

Responses to my question, "when I say 'work' and 'improv,' what does that make you think of" were illustrative. Ollie Hobson "actively made a choice not to" bartend or teach at iO

[166] Michael Gibson-Light, "Classification Struggles in Semi-Formal and Precarious Work: Lessons from Inmate Labor and Cultural Production," *Research in the Sociology of Work* 31 (July 2017): 61-89.

because "I didn't want to hate the place that I really enjoyed."[167] Farrell Walsh suggested that I "put a comma" in between 'work' and 'improv.'[168] Paige Maney said, "work and improv? Impossible."[169] Cesar Jaime stated "they're two separate things."[170] Mike Geraghty, after discussing his opinions on art and commerce, came to the conclusion that "work, to me, is not improv related."[171] Jane Brown asked herself the question "is improv a job […] is it work?" – when I asked her if she thought it was, she said, "no, to me it's not […] I don't get paid."[172] Zoe Agapinan[173] and Peter Gwinn[174] thought of corporate improv, which was described as less fulfilling than non-corporate improv work. Mike Johnson[175] and Gretchen Eng[176] also thought of corporate improv, but specifically how improv could be used to make people better at their jobs. Louis Saunders considered his work/life balance and the amount of work it took to have good shows.[177] Jorin Garguilo wanted to "dismiss out of notion that paid improv is 'the work' […] paid improv is at someone else's behest, and their behest is probably gonna be terrible […] the work is rehearsals, and classes, and thinking about stuff, and reps."[178] Kayla Pulley, who did mention that she supported anyone getting paid for improv, treated 'work' and 'improv' as opposites: "work, really, I think of no fun, and improv I think of fun."[179] Colette Gregory, who actually does make livable wages between teaching improv and corporate gigs, "want[ed] to laugh" because the phrase seemed like an "oxymoron." When I asked what made it oxymoronic,

[167] Hobson, June 2022.
[168] Walsh, June 2022.
[169] Maney, June 2022.
[170] Jaime, June 2022.
[171] Geraghty, June 2022.
[172] Brown, June 2022.
[173] Agapinan, June 2022
[174] Gwinn, July 2022.
[175] Johnson, June 2022.
[176] Eng, July 2022.
[177] Saunders, June 2022.
[178] Garguilo, June 2022.
[179] Pulley, June 2022.

she explained that "improv in its purest form should be play."[180] Susan Messing immediately thought of her many teaching jobs.[181] Karl Bradley did view paid improv as work, but described it as socially neutered – "you do a show, you get paid for it, and then you leave."[182] Only Shelby Plummer directly said that improv is work, but that that was a relatively new opinion for her and not one she held when she was a performer.[183] A common thread here, one that appears among both younger and older improvisers even if it is not universal, is that improv in general is not work, and that defined characteristics of improv like fun and play make it antithetical to work. If improv is paid, it becomes less fun and less playful, and therefore devalued. Bourdieu notes that one potential strategy in classification struggles is "declining the material advantages associated with devalued titles so as to avoid losing the symbolic advantages bestowed by more prestigious labels or, at least, vaguer and more manipulable ones."[184] In this case, the earning potential of improv performance is sacrificed in favor of the ability to claim improv performance as fun and play. This may help explain the animosity many interviewees felt towards The Second City, including those who worked there. The Second City is a "behemoth money-making machine"[185] and "feels more like a job than [a community]."[186] Those who did not perform at The Second City were even harsher, saying that the theater "feels sanitary."[187] Even while "they've nailed the business plan[,] they sell improv games to people who don't know better" and have created a "gift shop for doing word association."[188] By classifying improv as a tool for writing sketch, The Second City maximizes the material benefit of improv at the expense of a symbolic one, taking

[180] Gregory, July 2022.
[181] Messing, July 2022
[182] Bradley, July 2022
[183] Plummer, June 2022.
[184] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 481.
[185] Eng, July 2022.
[186] Plummer, June 2022.
[187] Saunders, June 2022.
[188] Geraghty, June 2022.

away the fun and play that is otherwise so highly sought. Before getting cast on Mainstage, Susan Messing "felt sorry for Second City people, because they had to do the same show all the time. Even though they made it up I was like, I get to do something different every fucking day."[189] It was not just that The Second City worked towards earning money that explained these responses. ComedySportz also, and explicitly, treats itself as a business, but interviewees saw the theater as, at worst, gimmicky but harmless, and many saw it as fun. Unlike The Second City, however, ComedySportz does not position its product as art and does not 'poach' performers away from iO like a demanding Second City gig would, so it is not in competition symbolically or materially with iO. If Bourdieu is right that social groups closest to each other struggle to mark points of distinction the most fiercely, this would suggest that iO and Second City occupy closer social space than iO and ComedySportz and perhaps iO and the Annoyance Theatre.[190]

From this, a few intriguing parallels arise between longform improvisers and Bourdieu's interpretation of the habitus of the French middle-class. Bourdieu notes that "the middle classes are *committed* to the symbolic. Their concern for appearance […] is also a source of their pretension."[191] This obsession with appearances in the middle classes acts as an inverted image of what improv offers its audience and performers. The social reality of appearance as pretension is obscured outside the theater, where the need to "play his role, to 'make believe'," creates a

[189] Messing, July 2022.
[190] The Annoyance has an interesting relationship with iO that is in many ways socially homologous to the relationship between iO and The Second City. Much like how iO in the early 1980s was a reaction to a perceived commercialization of The Second City by emphasizing the artistry of longform improv, the Annoyance was a reaction to a perceived commercialization of iO in the late 1980s by emphasizing freedom from the 'rules' of improv. iO purposefully undercharged shows and classes at The Second City, and the Annoyance did the same to iO. The Annoyance is generally viewed as more 'punk' and welcoming than iO. Those I interviewed all either liked Annoyance (with some liking it better than iO) or acknowledged it as serving a valuable role in the greater improv community. It would be interesting to see if the attitudes of primarily Second City performers towards iO mirror those of iO performers towards Annoyance, and if the attitudes of primarily Annoyance performers towards iO mirror those of iO towards The Second City.
[191] Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 253. Emphasis in original.

hidden social "theatre in which being is never more than perceived being."[192] This is Bourdieu's way of explaining the 'fake it 'til you make it' mentality of the upwardly mobile middle class. Aspiring to the social position of higher classes, but without the internalized habitus those born into those classes possess, a scholastic knowledge of desired behaviors and practices acts as an imperfect substitute for the ease of the highly privileged. But improv presents a way of taking 'play' and 'make believe' and using it to tap into an 'authentic' self. The ur-text of longform improv, *Truth in Comedy*, argues that improv works not when the performer goes for laughs, but when they give an honest reaction.[193] It is a short jump from here to the cottage industry of improv as lifestyle, where people are encouraged to use Yes, And philosophies to flourish in their personal lives. The self-obscured strategy in which middle classes play with role and appearance to improve their social position is now made visible, but simultaneously rebranded away from a shameful deceit[194] and towards a way to display individuality. This creates an interesting ambiguity where play and make believe are conceived both as tools of conformity (an attempt to blend in with the desired class) and of individuality (an honest, more authentic self on stage). But do we actually see a push-and-pull between conformity and individuality in longform improv? I believe that such a dynamic is well-reflected in an anonymous survey on stage fashion published in *The Complete Hambook*. Fashion is a form of taste, and so should also reflect the habitus of a class. And indeed, several examples of conformity/individuality tension are found. One responder wrote that "[a good outfit is] an outfit that doesn't distract but still leaves room for individuality." Another concluded that "I'd rather be a trojan horse for my ideas than a literal expression of identity when performing improv." "I like when people dress to show care for a

[192] Ibid.
[193] Halpern, et al, *Truth in Comedy*.
[194] This may seem like a harsh way to put it, but consider the embarrassment felt when committing a faux pas, a situation in which one's lack of ease or familiarity with a situation is suddenly exposed. Even if one was not consciously 'deceiving' anyone, the act of the faux pas betrays the ill-fit between the person and their place.

show but have a little bit of forward-thinking fashion mixed in," opined a third. "It's a tricky balance, because if you go too hard in dressing individualistically you risk standing out and in some ways affecting the group mind/cohesion."[195] For many improvisers, this ambiguity seems to be easier to manage at longform theaters like iO than at spaces like Second City or ComedySportz. One respondent noted that "at iO and CIC I don't really have anything to rebel against [...] I feel like my style *naturally jives* with it."[196] Second City and ComedySportz might eliminate the ambiguity altogether by symbolically separating the way in which the *work* of improv is different from the *life-style* of improv, reducing expressions of individuality (e.g., through dress codes) and offering payment for services rendered.

Longform improvisers share other similarities with the French middle classes. They have a respect for scholasticism, shown in their high (but not elite) levels of educational attainment, their reliance on classes for both training and income, and in the way they present their shows. This may manifest differently between shortform and longform - the host of a ComedySportz show, for instance, acts very much like a teacher, showing by repetition and example, before a crowd that includes children. iO hosts may not do the same, but the self-consciously ramshackle presentation implies an operation aesthetic by the audience that has already been gained through improv training. Halpern herself viewed iO, first and foremost, as a school. Halpern did not see stage-time as nebulously beneficial exposure, but as a valuable learning experience that directly aided the craft of the improviser. "The more you're on stage, the more confident you are, the better you're going to get […] stage-time is the most important [thing] to the learning process," she said. When Halpern told me that "we had to see if you could make it" when you were on a

[195] Sarah Wagener, "What We Wear & Why We Wear It: the Clothing Survey," in *The Complete Hambook*, 131, 136, 137.
[196] Ibid., 134. Emphasis added.

Harold team, she did not mean that she had to see if you could improvise well enough to perform the Harold. To her, even a Harold team performer was still a student. This Harold performer/student convergence was literally true for about the first decade of iO, when students were selected for teams as early as level 1 and performers continued to take Del Close's class indefinitely. And it was sequentially true up through about 2006, when all students were put on a Harold team after finishing classes. But the implementation of auditions did not change how Halpern viewed her performers. Halpern argued that "just because you take a ballet class doesn't mean you're ready for the Joffrey."[197] When I asked Halpern what the Joffrey was in this metaphor, she said weekend shows and weekly slots on house teams. Halpern considered the Deltones her house team.[198] Besides the Deltones' opener Dumb John, the other paid weekend shows were independently produced like The Improvised Shakespeare Company, Whirled News Tonight, Hot Seat, and Your Fucked Up Relationship.[199] From Halpern's perspective, longform improvisers *were* being paid – through weekend shows, through teaching gigs, through corporate work, through SNL showcase slots - once they had graduated from her real training program. But what it took to graduate could be unclear. The only paid team that Halpern had direct control over was the Deltones; other weekend slots were booked by the Creative Director. Several older interviewees saw a dynamic emerge wherein the best teams or performers were not necessarily rewarded, but those either closest to Halpern or those willing to campaign or agitate for a show slot benefited instead. And teaching and corporate gigs, as explained earlier, could be arbitrary, with performers made teachers after one show or conversation (or, like at iO West, fired after one show).

[197] Halpern, July 2022.
[198] The Deltones performed a musical Harold.
[199] In January 2020, the Harold team Devil's Daughter, taking over Revolver's old slot, was also able to negotiate a door split for a late night Friday show.

Improv as life-style explains the way in which commercialization of the artform (or even the fact that it can be referred to as an artform at all) is so strongly resisted, especially in longform quarters, as it would in some sense be giving away the game. Bourdieu argues that "workers may contribute to their own exploitation through the very effort they make to appropriate their work, which *binds* them to it through the freedoms […] that are left to them."[200] Further, "the propensity to invest in work and to misrecognize its objective truth no doubt rises with the degree to which collective expectations inscribed in the job description correspond more fully to the dispositions of its occupant."[201] If improv, and more specifically longform improv, is the middle class art *par excellence* - in the way its middle class producers form an ouroboros with its audience, in the way its mechanics symbolically legitimate the appearance-based strategies of the middle class – then the correspondence between collective expectations and dispositions could not be higher. Attempts to pay improvisers become symbolic attacks on the life-styles of improvisers themselves. This is thus at the heart of the classification struggle to position 'improv' as far from 'work' as possible. Improv theater owners speak to how paying performers would constrict what improvisers could say or do onstage, and that it would ruin the art; as an extension of life-style, this 'freedom,' a perceived total freedom on stage, allows total exploitation of their labor.

This, of course, assumes that the middle-class attitude and dispositions that Bourdieu identified in France sixty years ago are homologous to the habitus of longform improvisers today. A more robust future analysis would require more detailed plotting and distinguishing of the (dis)tastes and (dis)preferences of various classes of improvisers. As well, it seems likely that

[200] Pierre Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, trans. Richard Nice (Stanford, California: Stanford University Press, 2000), 203. Emphasis in original.
[201] Ibid.

the SNL showcase, the move to Kingsbury, or the combination of the two worked to adjust social positioning among improvisers and students, perhaps even generating a cleft habitus within iO. Improvisers I interviewed that began taking classes after Harold team auditions were instituted were more likely to view their performances as exploitative in an economic sense, even if they continued to participate in, and derived emotional or social benefits from, free improv performances. I myself have never asked to be paid to improvise, for example, and share many dispositions about improv as an artform as older performers. My research sample was also made up entirely of Chicago residents; expanding from a "Those Who Stayed" to a "Those Who Left" focus would also make greater sense of the social field improvisation finds itself in. Snowball-sampling contacts suggested to me by the participants of this study who I did not schedule interviews with also present intriguing future lines of study, including rank-and-file staff members at iO who were not management nor performers, Chicago-based improvisers who did not take iO classes, and improvisers in other cities. There is also still the lingering question of how generalizable this study is to other longform improv theaters. For at least an influential subset, there is good reason to think many of the concepts here could be workably applied elsewhere. Improv theaters like the Uprights Citizens Brigade Theatre in New York City and Los Angeles and the Peoples Improv Theater and Magnet Theater in New York City were founded by prominent former iO performers and adopted many of the same norms around payment that iO had, even if improv performance philosophies could substantially differ. And like iO, the UCB Theatre auditioned performers for Harold teams and viewed stage-time as a more valuable commodity than wages.[202] Theaters that are not within the iO family tree, like Dad's Garage in Atlanta, have different practices that would need to be examined in their proper context.

[202] Jason Zinoman, "Laughs Can Be Cheap at a Comedy Theater," *The New York Times*, February 19, 2013,

One final avenue for further study is an alternative explanation to why longform improvisers are regularly unpaid, one which I can sadly not give full attention to here. Rather than payment for performers acting as symbolic attacks on the lifestyles of longform improvisers, payment may instead be unintelligible currency in a gift economy. The language of improv heavily involves gifts; there are no mistakes in scenes, only gifts. Scene partners gift each other lines and actions, and the logic of Yes, And is built on the reception of a gift (the Yes) and the presentation of a gift in return (the And). But this exchange may not only be occurring on stage. Consider Peter Gwinn and Jorin Garguilo's earlier statements on receiving money for improv. Gwinn would rather receive a beer than $10 and Garguilo would accept corporate gigs from Halpern only because he viewed them as ways to signal appreciation to Halpern. A gift economy, one which deals in symbolic goods, can only function if the disposition to give and receive gifts are commonly held by the community. Bourdieu examined gift economies in his *Pascalian Meditations*. "In such a social universe, the giver knows that his generous act has every chance of being recognized as such (rather than being seen as a naivety or an absurdity, a 'folly') and of obtaining the recognition (in the form of countergift or gratitude) from the beneficiary – in particular because all the other agents operating in that world and shaped by its necessity also expect things to be so."[203] Gift givers and receivers do not have to deliberately or consciously perceive their actions as such, and indeed the embodied naturalness of the tacit logic of gift-giving and the trade in symbolic goods is what actually helps such markets work. "For someone endowed with dispositions attuned to the logic of the economy of symbolic goods," Bourdieu explains, "generous conduct is not the product of a choice made by free will and virtue, a free decision made at the end of a deliberation that allows for the possibility of behaving

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https://www.nytimes.com/2013/02/20/theater/upright-citizens-brigade-grows-by-not-paying-performers.html.

[203] Bourdieu, *Pascalian Meditations*, 193.

differently; it presents itself as 'the only thing to do.'"[204] The causalities of the Clark Street iO social culture dismayed by older improvisers – seeing each other's shows, performing together, talking about improv at the bar – could be analyzed as symbolic exchanges. Did the Kingsbury iO bar setup disrupt this gift economy, or was the new generation of students and performers lacking the necessary disposition to participate in it? But it was not only younger improvisers who stopped circulating gifts; many older performers also stopped seeing shows they were not involved in. Generous dispositions are supposed to be inscribed in the body, and the movement of a bar from inside to outside a theater seems, at first glance, like such a minor change to render the habitus of hundreds of performers moot within a year. Perhaps the necessary structural changes occurred earlier, or longform improvisers have a habitus that traffics heavily in symbolic goods but is not generous.

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