

## COMEDIETTES

### THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

#### *Chicago*

“The Paris of the Midwest”, Chicago is the third largest city in the country and responsible for the birth of so many major contributions to pop culture. House music, roller derby, softball, twinkies, the first gay rights movement in the 1920s, long-form improvisation, and even Charlie Chaplin’s first film studio Essanay. In fact, there were several Chicago film studios in the early 1900s and the first Black film director, Oscar Micheaux, worked primarily in Chicago. It is a place known for its strong work ethic. It is physically cold and gritty, but the people persevere.

#### *Chicago Comedy Scene*

Every city in America has a comedy scene, but Chicago is known as the place to get good at comedy. Being a comedian from Chicago has clout. It implies that you work hard and you know how to perform. This reputation is over 60 years old - ever since Second City was formed in 1959 by University of Chicago students. Several comedy institutions spun off from Second City such as iO, Annoyance Theater, and the original Upright Citizens Brigade sketch troupe.

So many comedians and respected artists got their start in Chicago: Mike Nichols, Elaine May, Del Close, Shelley Berman, Bob Newhart, Alan Alda, Harold Ramis, Gild Radner, Bill Murray, Catherine O’Hara, John Belushi, Kathy Griffin, Tina Fey, Amy Poehler, Stephan Colbert, Chris Farley, Amy Sedaris, Lil Rel Howery, Bernie Mac, Jane Lynch, Bob Odenkirk, Jordan Peele, Aidy Bryant, Tim Robinson, Sam Richardson, Kumail Nanjiani and so so so many more.



The scene has adapted from cabaret performances to comedy clubs to independent shows that are put up in bookstores, bars, comic book shops, and music venues (I ran one in a punk venue for several years).

To “climb the ladder” in standup comedy, you have to go to open mics until you are good enough to be booked on amateur and independent shows. You film a good set and it becomes your clip. You send the clip to bookers and hope they audition you either in a showcase audition or with a guest spot. If they have you back, then you’ve “passed” and are now in their roster of comics.

[History of Second City](#)

[Zanies Website](#)

### *Comedy Clubs in Chicago*

Second City put Chicago on the map as a comedy city, but they do not host standup comedians. They strictly do improv and sketch revues. Since improv is so big in Chicago, most standup comedians have dabbled in it at least a little bit although they love to make fun of improvisers for being “the theater kids” of comedy.

The major comedy clubs for standup comedians are The Laugh Factory, Comedy Bar, and Zanies. The Lincoln Lodge was an independent show for 20 years before they opened a large venue which is now extremely popular.

The club is most closely modeled after Zanies which has a traditional comedy club model. You are asked to do a showcase audition and after a few of those you “pass” the club are put into the rotation of comedians who perform on a regular basis and open for bigger names who drop into the club. It has been running since 1978 and has a location in Nashville.

[Wiki Entry on Zanies](#)

## GLOSSARY

**Alt** - a term that originally meant performing comedy outside of clubs, but has expanded into defining any comedy that is not “traditional”. That includes everything from Janeane Garafalo bringing her notebook on stage, to performing with instruments, to experimenting with the audience.

**Bomb** - to do poorly

**Clip** - a video of a comedian’s set that is used to get them booked on shows. It works sort of like a resume or audition that gets sent to bookers, clubs, and agents. Typically 5-10 minutes.

**The Crucible** - “that play Arthur Miller wrote”. The character Sunny refers to is John Proctor.

**Drink Tickets** - comedians typically get 1-2 free drinks at shows. Some amateur shows only pay in drink tickets, a joke that many comedians make when referring to their low status or lack of money.

**Gary** - Gary, Indiana is across the lake from Chicago. It is a depleted and struggling city.

**GC** - group chat

**Helpful heckling** - person interrupting the show because they think they are adding to it. They aren’t yelling insults. It’s still annoying.

**Jeff Probst** - host of Survivor

**The Light** - the signal that it’s time to wrap up your set. You get the light 1-2 minutes before your time is up, unless you’ve asked for something different.

**Lilith Fair** - a popular music festival in the 90s catering to female alternative musicians and singer-songwriters.

**Mic** - short for “open mic”

**Observational comedy** - non-personal jokes about the world around us. Jerry Seinfeld is most famous for doing it.

**Open micer** (pronounced miker) - someone who is new or primarily only performs at open mics. The insinuation is that the comedian is not good enough to get booked on “real shows”.

**Road Show** - A show that you have to travel outside of your city to do. Usually not a big venue and typically a one-night gig.

**Rosemont** - a suburb just north of Chicago, close to O'Hare Airport. Zanies Comedy Club has a location there.

**Running a bit** - trying out a joke in casual conversation.

**Running the light** - going over your time.

**Set** - the comedy routine.

**Showcases** - A booked comedy show, typically at a club.

**Sketch Comedy** - This is what outsiders call "skits", but a comedian would never say that as skit implies something children and youth groups do. Sketch comedy is a world unto itself. There are several types of sketches and formulas to write them.

**Snapped** - a TV show on Oxygen about women who kill their husbands.

**Spawn Ranch** - the compound Charles Manson's cult lived on.

**Spots** - The available slot on the show that you can be booked on.

[The UVA Rape Case](#) - Sunny refers to "that girl from that college" which is a reference to this well-known case from 2014 in which *Rolling Stone* printed a false rape claim from a student at UVA despite evidence during the reporting that suggested the story had been exaggerated. Jia Tolentino has an amazing essay about this case in her book *Trick Mirror* in which she posits some victims fear that their trauma won't be believed, so they exaggerate it to make it sound undeniably worse.

## THE STRUCTURE

The play is intentionally structured: the first half is the set-up and the second half is the punchline. But what does that mean? Okay, let's chat!

The first half is grounded and structured in the traditional Aristotelian model. The second half purposefully models itself after feminist playwriting structure which lends itself to the surreal.

### *Feminist Structure*

Aristotelian is rising action to climax and quick resolution - the traditional model. Feminist structure consists of a series of scenes. They can be vignettes, monologues, or interwoven scenes that do not necessarily follow time in a linear sense. They sort of mimic gendered orgasms.

The second half of this play is in feminist structure due to the standup performances which serve to feel outside of the linear structure of the play. They are a part of the narrative as we know that there is a show going on, but we are also aware that these acts are serving as their own thing.

Examples: *Cloud 9* by Caryl Churchill, *The Successful Life of 3* by Maria Irene Fornes, *The Vagina Monologues* by Eve Ensler, and *Plano* by Will Arbury.

## THE CHARACTERS: *Inspiration and References*

### HOLLY

Holly is tough, gritty, works hard, and cares about telling good jokes. She sees femininity as detracting from her power onstage - and she has a lot of power onstage. Her heroes are primarily male comedians and she has earned being “one of the guys”.

#### [Kristen Toomey](#)

She is based most closely on this comedian who is a major player in the Chicago scenes. She is a fantastic comedian, but has struggled to get on board with progress for women in comedy. Kristen is pictured below...in her weird hat phase.

#### [Jeannie Doogan](#)

Another Chicago comedian. Well-respected, south side Irish woman. She has the cadence and style of joke-telling. Very easy with crowds.

#### [Kathleen Madigan](#)

Every comedian knows who Kathleen Madigan is (pictured below). She has been working steadily for 30 years, has multiple comedy specials, does USO tours, and tours all over the world. She is the definition of a comedian who “does the work” even if it never leads to the big break.



## APRIL



April is inspired by female comedians in the post-MeToo and post-pandemic world. These female comedians have less tolerance for putting up with prejudice. These comedians are self-assured and not afraid to be vulnerable and feminine. In fact, they harness it.

April is also not a traditional standup. She does modern “alt” comedy which often verges onto performance art. Her jokes are inventive, but they aren’t as tight as traditional joke structures have been and instead rely on personality within the performance. Comedians like this include Sarah Sherman, Ayo Edibri, Jo Firestone, and Aparna Nancherla (pictured).

### *Megan Stalter*

A recognizable face now, Meg became famous from viral videos she posted in 2020. She was also a cast member at the Lincoln Lodge at the same time I was and some of these conversations are based on her protesting an alleged abuser being booked on a show when she was new to the Lodge. We were told: “we don’t listen to gossip”. She gets along with everyone, but will always stick up for women. This clip is a good example of that as it got her banned from this show because she pointed out that they rarely book women.

 04 Megan Stalter

### [Catherine Cohen](#)

A music-based comedian who came up in NYC's sketch comedy world. She hit her stride performing at cabaret bars. Both Meg and Catherine are aping Kate Berlant, but the two of them are much more successful. Catherine actually introduced Meg to her manager which helped launch her career, a fantastic example of something that someone of Holly’s generation would have rarely done.

## GERI

Geri is an amalgamation of a lot of powerful women in the comedy industry. However, she is most closely based on Mark Geary of The Lincoln Lodge whom I worked for. Several lines are direct quotes from Mark. The Lincoln Lodge launched the careers of many comedians who trained out of Chicago such as Kumail Nanjiani, Hannibal Burress, Kyle Kinane, TJ Miller, Nick Vatterot, Cameron Esposito, Steven Castillo, Sarah Sherman and more.

Geri is also modeled after: *Charna Halpern*

Del Close is the founder of modern long-form improv and the inventor of The Harold, but Charna Halpern is responsible for making improv a lucrative business. Charna's history is complicated. Del Close was deeply sexist and Charna perpetuated his biases.

[She's the Hidden Architect of Modern Comedy](#)



## *Mitzy Shore*

The legendary founder of The Comedy Store in Hollywood. She is most certainly who everyone will assume Geri is based on. She launched the careers of hundreds of comedians for decades and was beloved. She married into the industry after she met comedian Sammy Shore while she worked at a resort in Wisconsin in the 1950s. Sammy began opening for Elvis Presley in Vegas and Mitzy became friends with Elvis - and a savvy business woman behind Sammy's career. The two made so much money from those gigs that they opened a comedy theater in Hollywood. She passed away in 2018.

## SUNNY

Sunny is your typical egotistical comic. He has swagger. He lives for being onstage, probably harming personal relationships for the sake of his career. He can be compared to “canceled” comedians like Chris D’Elia, Louis CK, Shane Gillis, TJ Miller, etc. He’s the kind of guy who would be a guest on Joe Rogan’s podcast.



As the play suggests, by the time these comedians get “canceled” they have already been doing this for years and years and it was suppressed in their smaller scenes as they came up. The reason for that tends to be that they are protected either by bookers or by fellow male comedians who are like them. It is sort of a circle jerk reassuring one another that they’ve done nothing wrong (thus the group chat reference - male comedians LOVE a group chat).

Comedians are extremely gossipy, especially male comedians. A lot of it comes from insecurity (which is also why people get into comedy to begin with) and a want to tear others down in order to protect their territory. Gossiping and shit-talking are ways comedians bond and guys Sunny is modeled over relish in it.

[A short sketch making fun of this kind of comic](#)

[Danny Kallas: THE Chicago Comedian](#) (the comedian from the sketch above is wearing a T-shirt of the show that Danny runs - very inside baseball)

[Adam Ray “Eating Out Barbie”](#)

## REFERENCES

### *Pie in the Face*

Listen. We all know the pie in the face gag. But what's the story behind it? Luckily, I'm a comedy nerd.

The origins are in slapstick comedy which was extremely popular during the silent film era for obvious reasons: it's all physical. Fatty Arbuckle's popular film *A Noise from the Deep* (1913) featured pie gags. Ironically, Fatty Arbuckle might be the first comedian canceled due to rape accusations and his crime is debated to this day.

[Fatty Arbuckle and Pies in the Face](#)  
[The Skinny on the Fatty Arbuckle Case](#)

The gag can be traced to 1889 with Canadian performer Doc Kelley who used a pie-in-the-face routine as part of his traveling medicine show. It showed up in the 1909 film *Mr. Flip*. Soupy Sales used pies-in-the-face frequently on his 1950s TV show.

[A history of Pies in the Face](#)

### *Performance Art*

April's set is modeled after performance art rather than comedy.

- [Maureen in Rent](#) - satire on this kind of thing
- [Bridget Everett](#): she is a long-time New York cabaret act who mixes humor, music, and burlesque with in-your-face performances.

### *Ukulele Comedy*

- This was very big in the twee days of the 2010s (maybe thanks to Zooey Dechanel who had a chokehold on trends at that time). [Garfunkel and Oates](#) were a duo that popularized the type of comedy at the time, but this was everywhere - and it was predominantly female. The performers were typically "cutesy" - wearing dresses and vintage clothes - while singing original songs with raunchy topics. That juxtaposition was part of the humor.
- Those two certainly didn't invent it. Silly ukulele and banjo songs were commonplace in vaudeville and in the 60s folk scene where comics would also perform.

### *Joan Rivers*

One of the most famous female comedians in the first standup boom. Joan was one of the only working comedians when she started in the 1960s Greenwich Village scene (sounds like



*Marvelous Mrs. Maisel*, doesn't it?). She came up with some of the most famous American comedians in the latter half of the 20th century. She was technically the first female late night host when she took over for Johnny Carson for a brief period. Her career lasted 55 years and was marred with criticism and tragedy, but she never stopped writing and performing new material.

### *Phyllis Diller*



While Joan was starting in the New York scene, Phyllis was starting in California. She didn't get onstage until she was 37 when she first performed at The Purple Onion with the encouragement of her husband. Thanks to her outrageous one-liners and quirky costumes, she became a huge sensation.

### *Fanny Brice*



Her life story was loosely adapted into the hit musical *Funny Girl*. She wanted to be in show business and dropped out of school to join a burlesque show. She performed in Ziegfield's Follies, but soon formed a comedic persona that launched her into stardom. She wasn't "the lady" - she was the funny girl! She had her own radio show and even her own TV series in 1950 - forty years into her career.

### *Who's On First*



One of the most famous sketches of all time and still considered one of the best. Abbott and Costello were a comedy duo with roots in vaudeville and burlesque. They began working together after 1935 when they both performed at Ettinge Burlesque Theater. Costello's regular partner was sick, so Abbott filled in. It was magic!

Abbott was the "devious straight man" and Costello was the dumb clown. They did night clubs, cabarets, radio, USO tours, films, and TV shows.

Who's On First was first devised in 1936. They performed it live, honing it to the version everyone knows best over the course of the next three years. It debuted on the radio in 1938. They performed it live, on radio, and on TV shows for the next 20 years. There are allegedly 20 different versions of the sketch ranging in time and context.

[Watch Who's On First Here](#)