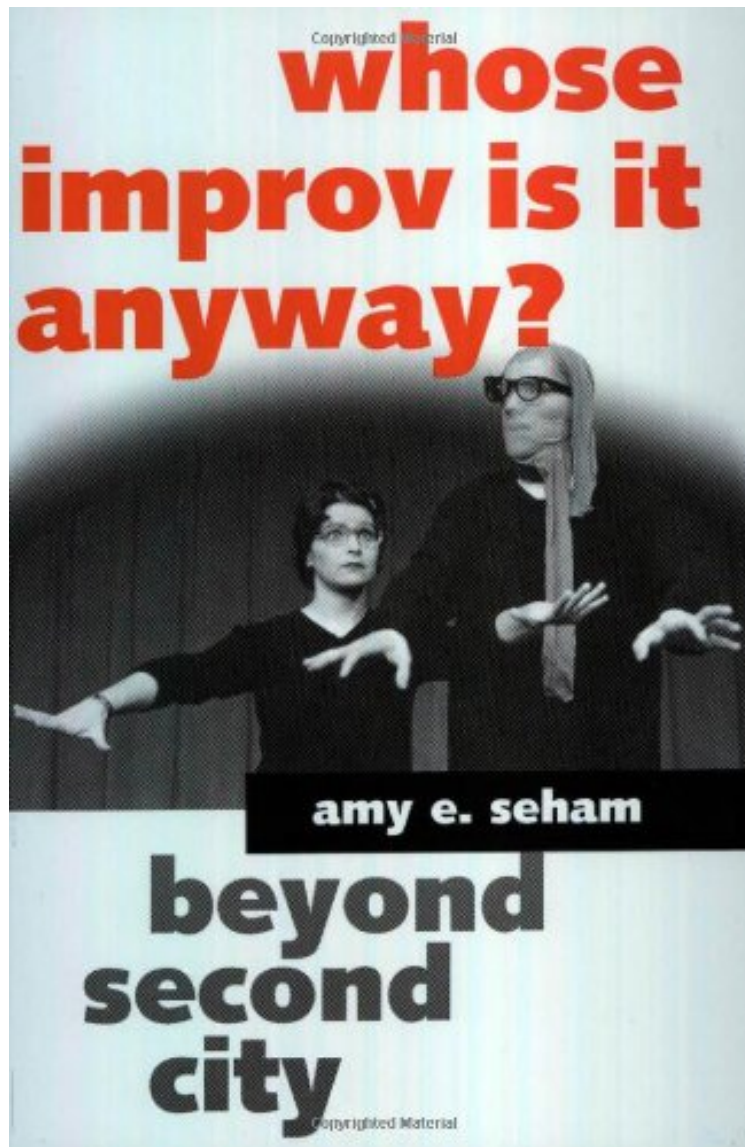


(Download pdf ebook) Whose Improv Is It Anyway?: Beyond Second City

## Whose Improv Is It Anyway?: Beyond Second City

Amy E. Seham

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**Amy E. Seham : Whose Improv Is It Anyway?: Beyond Second City** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Whose Improv Is It Anyway?: Beyond Second City:

5 of 6 people found the following review helpful. Willing to say the 'taboo"By ShmikeyAs a female improviser, I had been aware of and frustrated by many of the gender power dynamics in the improv troupes I have worked with. This book hit me at the exact right time in my comedy career -- it gave the words and theory I needed to face head-on the unproductive loops and outsider status that I had been trying to fight.After I read of this book, I started talking openly

about race and gender with my improv troupe. It was the jumping-off point for us, as a company, to become more conscious in our approach to the art and our relationships with each other, on and off stage. 28 of 31 people found the following review helpful. Valuable but frustrating  
By Customer  
There is so much valuable in this book that its shortcomings are all the more frustrating. Nobody else has described in as much depth the history of the improv movement in Chicago since the rise of Second City. Certainly there are hard facts in here that I didn't know, and this is a field in which I wrote one of the early books. Unfortunately, much of the text has been written through such narrow ideological blinders that the author sometimes offers arguments so contorted that she unwittingly contradicts herself. As she quotes from my book, *SOMETHING WONDERFUL RIGHT AWAY*, I have to confess to being upset by the use she makes of one passage with an early Second City player, the late Roger Bowen. She misinterprets what he said about black players in improv profoundly, and her misinterpretation has the lamentable effect of implying he was a racist. Since Bowen isn't around to defend himself, and since he was one of the most progressive, thoughtful and generous souls ever to grace an improvisational stage, this is deeply disturbing. His memory deserves better. If one can distinguish between the often genuinely insightful analyses she presents and gaffes such as the one I mention above, there is a great deal here to chew on. She correctly identifies the contradictions in a form of theatre that grew out of a desire to offer a progressive/radical view of society and those aspects of improvisation which encourage the reinforcement of stereotypes. I'm not aware of anybody else who has made this point as well, so this would deserve its place in the literature if only for raising this issue. On balance, a book that I think serious improvisers should read, but with some skepticism. 12 of 18 people found the following review helpful. More Than a Little Misleading...  
By Daniel Telfer  
I borrowed this book from a friend and was quite excited. I performed at Chicago's Improv Olympic for over three years as well as places like the Playground and the Chicago Improv Festival, and right there on the cover is one of my teachers! As I flipped through it I saw tons of pictures of people I called friend and was excited to see interviews with some of my former team coaches. The trouble seems to be that while the book was written in good faith (in the spirit of giving theaters who perform chiefly improv as much credit as the not-so-improv-anymore Second City) it misinterprets many facts. Shortly after mentioning the book on an online message board I discovered that someone who I was excited to see mentioned in the book had been given a false history in it. Upon further inspection I noticed the book, although covering much ground where it had never been covered before in improv, seemed to have a bit of a bullying attitude towards what true improv was. All these things combined was very frustrating, as people who don't live here have nothing to go by when it comes to this "age" of improv besides this misleading and inaccurate book. Hopefully someone will come along who is less ambitious and more interested in chronicling events, and I hope this happens for those not in Chicago. If you are in Chicago, you're better off scanning the reviews in the free papers for a more clear vision of the scene, even though there aren't as many nice group photos.

On both sides of the stage improv-comedy's popularity has increased exponentially throughout the 1980s and '90s and into the new millennium. Presto! An original song is created out of thin air. With nothing but a suggestion from the audience, daring young improvisers working without a net or a script create hilarious characters, sketches, and songs. Thrilled by the danger, the immediacy, and the virtuosity of improv-comedy, spectators laugh and cheer. American improv-comedy burst onto the scene in the 1950s with Chicago's the Compass Players (best known for the brilliant comedy duo Mike Nichols and Elaine May) and the Second City, which launched the careers of many popular comedians, including Gilda Radner, John Belushi, and Mike Myers. Chicago continues to be a mecca for young performers who travel from faraway places to study improv. At the same time, the techniques of Chicago improv have infiltrated classrooms, workshops, rehearsals, and comedy clubs across North and South America, Europe, Australia, and Japan. Improv's influence is increasingly evident in contemporary films and in interactive entertainment on the internet. Drawing on the experiences of working improvisers, *Whose Improv Is It Anyway?* provides a never-before-published account of developments beyond Second City's mainstream approach to the genre. This fascinating history chronicles the origins of "the Harold," a sophisticated new "long-form" style of improv developed in the '80s at ImprovOlympic, and details the importance and pitfalls of ComedySports. Here also is a backstage glimpse at the Annoyance Theatre, best known on the national scene for its production of *The Real Live Brady Bunch*. Readers will get the scoop on the recent work of players who, feeling excluded by early improv's "white guys in ties," created such independent groups as the Free Associates and the African American troupe *Oui Be Negroes*. There is far more to the art of improv than may be suggested by the sketches on *Saturday Night Live* or the games on *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* This history, an insider's look at the evolution of improv-comedy in Chicago, reveals the struggles, the laughter, and the ideals of mutual support, freedom, and openness that have inspired many performers. It explores the power games, the gender inequities, and the racial tensions that can emerge in improvised performance, and it shares the techniques and strategies veteran players use to combat these problems. Improv art is revealed to be an art of compromise, a fragile negotiation between the poles of process and product. The result, as shown here, can be exciting, shimmering, magical, and not exclusively the property of any troupe or actor.

From Library Journal  
Most accounts of improvisational comedy rely on the inspiring story of Chicago's Second City

company, founded in the 1950s, and its many stars. Seham (theater and dance, Gustavus Adolphus Coll.) takes a far more sophisticated look at the genre and the history and theory behind it. Her basic point: Chicago-style improv has been dominated both in numbers and in control of content and style by young, white, straight men, which means that it's harder for women and minorities to shape scenes and conjure characters. (For example, men are less willing to accept a female improviser's attempt to initiate a male role, and whites are less able to grasp a minority performer's references.) Relying on extensive interviews as well as texts, she tells the story not only of Second City but of the 1980s groups that succeeded it, like ImprovOlympic and ComedySportz. The latter, she notes, were more committed to improvisation, while Second City became commercialized and incorporated pre-written sketches. Still, the power dynamics remained the same. In Chicago, a third wave of improv began in the late 1980s, including the raunchy and outrageous Annoyance Theater, minority groups like Oui Be Negroes, and all-women's groups. Now, concludes Seham, an even newer wave is addressing the paradoxes of improv. Though this well-detailed book lapses periodically into academic jargon, it should well serve strong performing arts collections. Norman Oder, "Library Journal"

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An inside view of improv comedy in Chicago

About the Author

Amy E. Seham is an assistant professor of theater and dance at Gustavus Adolphus College in St. Peter, Minnesota. In Connecticut she has served as artistic director of Performance Studio in New Haven and of Free Shakespeare on the Green in New Haven and Stamford.