A Fool's Journey: An Exploration of Physical Comedy in Theory and Practice

Author: Bryce Allen Pinkham

Persistent link: http://hdl.handle.net/2345/576

This work is posted on eScholarship@BC, Boston College University Libraries.

Boston College Electronic Thesis or Dissertation, 2005

Copyright is held by the author, with all rights reserved, unless otherwise noted.
A Fool's Journey

An Exploration of Physical Comedy
In Theory and Practice

A Senior Honors Thesis
By
Bryce Pinkham

This Thesis is submitted on 5/20/05 in partial fulfillment of the requirements of the honors program in the College of Arts and Sciences at Boston College.

Submitted by
Bryce Pinkham

Advised by
Scott T. Cummings
TABLE OF CONTENTS

Preface

Introduction .......................................5

I. Theoretical
  Why Comedy........................................ 6
  The fool.......................................... 9
  Arlecchino: A Classical Fool...................... 15
  Bill Irwin: A Contemporary Fool................... 25

II. Practical
  The Concept....................................... 30
  A Summary......................................... 34
  The Development................................... 38

III. Conclusion................................... 42

Bibliography ...................................... 46

Supplemental Materials
Acknowledgements

A special thanks to all those who lent their time, talent and resources to this project: Howard Enoch and the Robsham Theatre Arts Center, The Arts and Sciences Honors Program, Beth Whitaker, the Signature Theatre, Kathy Peter, Gwenmarie Ewing, Steven Schmidt, Jamie Fagant, Caitlin Henry, Dan O’Brien, Dan Destefano, Matt Thompson, Emily Dendinger, Michelle Murphy, Stephanie Marquis, Mairin Lee, Jeff Vincent, Margo Beirne, Kelly Doyle, Jen Gardner, Jim Fagan, Matt O’Hare, Mr. Bill Irwin, and the Fung Wah Bus Company.

A final thanks to Shep Barnett and Scott T. Cummings: this would not have happened without you. Thank you for your dedication, inspiration, and support.
Preface

The art of acting is by its very nature a process of self-reflection. In order to prepare himself physically, emotionally and psychologically for a role, an actor must make an effort to understand his own physical, emotional and psychological foundations. With that in mind, I ask the reader at the outset of this Senior Honors Thesis to forgive what may seem like a fair amount of introspection on my part. My purpose is analytical not egotistical. I hope that with a modicum of personal context, the reader may better understand the process I will hereafter describe as an extended research project that catalyzed a journey of personal discovery.

To say that I enjoy goofing off would be an understatement; someone who knows me might laugh out loud at such a remark. I have often been told that my twenty-two year-old body belies an impish spirit that will not let me sit still for more than ten minutes: If one wants to distract me, all he needs to do is give me something that bounces. This, for lack of a better word, “obsession” with being active may be linked to a childhood that was indeed very much “on the move.” Growing up in a Northern Californian suburb of San Francisco, I had two loves. Along with many boys my age, the world of sports was one
that held great fascination, allure, and challenge for me. With some degree of certainty, and a lesser degree of modesty, I can assure the reader that I was quite promising as a young athlete. Splitting my time equally between soccer, baseball, and volleyball proved to be quite the scheduling nightmare for my parents. On any given summer evening in my neighborhood the sounds of crickets and June bugs were often accompanied by the repetitive “thwack… thwack” of a tennis ball being hurled against my aging garage door. My driveway often became the infield for an endless game of catch – endless, at least, until it was too dark to see. As my body bounded around my driveway practicing curveballs and turning double plays with myself, my imagination began to discover a playground all its own. Soon I was on the field at Candlestick Park, playing in the World Series. I could hear the announcers’ voices as they broadcast my very actions over the radio waves to listeners across the country. Sometimes I would emulate my favorite players, attempting to embody their particular batting stances, their style of fielding, even their very physical and vocal demeanor. Looking back at a young boy whose body was always moving towards the pursuit of some tangible goal, I also see a young boy whose imagination was simultaneously very active. While I was training my body to perform the precise movements necessary to complete a
successful penalty shot, my mind was dreaming about the post-game celebration and subsequent press conference after my penalty shot won the World Cup. On one hand, I had an outlet for my body’s intense desire to be active. What I lacked was a distinct outlet for my energetic imagination. This outlet finally came in the form of theatre.

Today I consider myself to be a product of these two different backgrounds. There is something about the simplicity of sports that I find very appealing in a world where people are not always clear on what they want. In a game of soccer, there is a clear objective: to get the ball into the goal. A team, consisting of individual players with separate talents, strengths, and weaknesses, must attempt to achieve this objective while following certain rules set down in advance. To watch, or better yet, to participate in this process of goal-driven action is exhilarating. The size of the obstacle varies, whatever form it may take (the other team’s abilities, the weather conditions, the players with hangovers, etc.), and watching a team jostle with the obstacle in pursuit of victory is thrilling. Given circumstances yield standard results; in sports there is always an obvious winner and loser. Though the degree varies from sport to sport, there is usually a clear right and wrong – it is ‘right’ to hit the ball over the fence, it is ‘wrong’ to swing and miss. Generally,
when faced with failure, most athletes believe that harder
work and more frequent practice render most obstacles
surmountable. Growing up surrounded by the mentality that
objectives are concrete and unwavering, I became convinced
that with enough effort, I could make my body do anything,
and that with enough practice I could eventually get
something ‘right.’

Contrary to this athletic culture that convinced me
that failure was something only losers did, the creatively-
oriented theatre culture that I became part of as an
adolescent provided me with an alternative outlet for my
seemingly endless supply of energy. The theatre became a
place where I could let my imagination run free without
fear of twenty push-ups worth of punishment. Through
various youth theatre programs, I was taught to unabashedly
follow my imagination. I was allowed to imagine the World
Cup and the World Series, even if those were not palpable
scenarios in my other reality. In these same programs, I
learned the joy of creation and experienced the thrill of
making people laugh. There is no better feeling, I am
convinced, than exiting the stage to the sound of
calamitous laughter - such an audience reaction has the
effect of lifting a performer’s feet off the ground,
permitting them to dance in mid-air and occasionally touch
back down to earth, but only for mere emphasis.
Unfortunately, the day came when I had to choose to privilege one culture over the other; various constrains make it impossible to play a collegiate level sport and also act in collegiate level theater productions. In choosing the serious pursuit of theatre over athletics, the athlete in me didn’t die; he came with me and became a natural part of my performance work, prompting a recognition of the many correlations between sports and theater. Like the athlete on the playing field, the actor onstage must have a clear objective. For the actor playing Shakespeare's Richard III, the crown of England must be as desirable as the World Cup Trophy is to the Brazilian National Soccer Team. On another level, growing up learning to twist my ankle one way, or hold my bat another way, put me in great touch with my body, a physical skill that helps an actor create movements and gestures that suggest character and situation. Additionally, certain types of theatre, particularly those investigated in the following pages, are oftentimes very strenuous. The actor who is not only physically fit, but who thoroughly enjoys exercise, is the one who can perform these styles with the energy and élan they deserve.

After reflecting on my progression from the world of sports to the world of theatre, I can better understand why I am an actor with a large interest in the physical. My
partially dormant athleticism coupled with an aforementioned proclivity for goofing off made it easy to choose physical comedy as the subject of my Senior Honors Thesis. The desire for the project I will hereafter describe came not only from a wish to better prepare myself for a professional career in theatre, but also from a need to export my physically goofy energy into a enterprise that would be both artistically and emotionally fulfilling. If I could suggest that the reader take one thing away from what may seem a lengthy preface, it would be that everything in the following pages can be understood as deriving from my restless athleticism—both of body and imagination.

Introduction

My Senior Honors Thesis may be understood as a two-part investigation that addresses both theoretical and practical concerns of physical comedy and the language of gesture. On the one hand, I have engaged in the scholarly
investigation of physical comedy with research that traverses its history and origins, as well as highlights some of its most prominent figures. I will first present some of my more general findings about comedy in order to more accurately zero in on the figure of ‘the Fool.’ I will thereafter investigate the function of the Fool in society and report on whom I perceive as his most definitive historical and contemporary iterations. These theoretical components will eventually serve as a foundation for the practical side of my project— the creation of my own physical performance piece. In the final part of this document I will outline the process of conceiving and developing a performance all my own, referring to my research whenever possible. My hope is that this paper will serve as both an informational document about some of the most important historical influences on physical comedy and the language of gesture, as well as relate how those influences affected me in the process of imagination and creation that is the joy of theatre.
I. The Theoretical

Why Comedy?

During an alleged “respite from the theatre” while studying abroad in New Zealand (a country very congenial towards the physically active, I might add), I found myself immersed in the pages of Erich Segal’s *The Death of Comedy*. Segal’s book is a comprehensive look at the life cycle of the genre of comedy from its birth in ancient Greece and the plays of Aristophanes to what Segal calls its “death” in the modern works of Samuel Beckett and the Theatre of the Absurd. Until reading this book, ‘comedy’ to me was merely a way to describe a funny play or movie. Through reading Segal, I came to understand that comedy is more than just ‘funny’—it is a tradition, a philosophy, and, in a sense, a way of life.

Segal writes that scholars have never conclusively agreed on the actual derivation of the word ‘comedy,’ but that several different theories provide convincing evidence for the possible origin of the word. Initially, many scholars thought that ‘comedy’ was derived from *koma*, meaning ‘sleep,’ and *oide*, meaning ‘song.’ Segal cites Freud, who once equated the psychodynamics of the comic and
the oneric, alluding to his essays on jokes and dreams as “twin brothers” (Segal, 1). The dream process is one of escape from the rational world. As dreamers, we escape to a world of fantasy where the limits of time, space, and circumstance are eradicated, and anything becomes possible. Plato describes the dream process as one in which, as reason slumbers, “unlawful pleasures are awakened” (Segal, 3). In much the same way that dreams allow us to escape from the rules that govern our everyday lives, the most ancient comic plots deal with rule-breaking, irrational behavior, social anarchy, and the pursuit of “unlawful pleasure.”

Comedy also mimics the dream process in its return to a more primitive, child-like consciousness. Bergson, in his essay on dreams writes that sleep

Is probably the single most infantile activity we engage in. That is, it persists from infancy with very little change...throughout life while other basic activities undergo tremendous modifications...sleep manifests itself the same in the adult as in the infant. The comfortable warm bed, the relative lack of stimulus input, the lack of motor output, or indeed, any interchange with the external environment, all of these factors recreate a state present in earliest infancy and contribute to ‘regression’ (Segal, 460).

Comedy, like sleep, is also a return to our most uninhibited puerile instincts, and this Bergsonian regression is one reason why comedy is so enjoyable. As
audience members (and actors), we enjoy being transported back to a world where we are released from the social and moral rules that govern our adult lives; we like being allowed to poop our pants and laugh about it afterwards (Segal practically devotes an entire chapter to scatological humor, but for the sake of the squeamish reader, I shall desist). Suffice it to say that comedy - and specifically comic characters - seem to eschew the rational, grown-up, waking world for one that resembles the dream of a child, a world where anything is possible.

Aristotle is among the many ancients who gave some credence to the Doric tradition of deriving the term ‘comedy’ from kome or ‘country village.’ This derivation speaks to the notion that the practice of comedy may have arisen out of folk ritual performed before the existence of cities. Before modern civilization, life revolved around the changing seasons; man’s chief concerns were the elementary needs of food, shelter and clothing. From a modern urban standpoint, this folk life seems very simple, but at the same time, very free. The country provides us with the only lasting memory of such a life, and, in this way, represents a return to our more primitive origins. Like the country itself, which is not bound by the city’s walls, this primitive existence was one of greater freedom. The country not only provides a wide-open space to play in,
but also a laid-back attitude conducive to revelry of all kinds. One need look no further than comedies like Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* or Oscar Wilde’s *The Importance of Being Earnest* to understand that the dichotomy of ‘city’ and ‘country’ plays an important role in the genre. Beyond the watchful eyes of the authorities, fantasies impossible in the civilized land of law and order become possible in the land of imagination and dream.

The derivation that Segal believes is not only the most accurate, but also the most comprehensive is the one that comes from modern linguists who link the word ‘comedy’ to the word *komos*. *Komos* describes the wild, wine-soaked, no-holds-barred revel which characterized most Aristophanic finales – and which, not incidentally, typically took place at night (Segal, 6). The key here is that *komos* is a revel, or as Segal cleverly states, “a revel without a cause.” Modern Europeans might better recognize the term *komos* by its modern English equivalent, ‘holiday humor.’ It is a celebration in which revelers are free to sing, dance, inebriate and engage in sexually promiscuous activities. It is no mistake that so many ancient comedies end in dance, song, or the prelude to a sexual encounter. Some would even go so far as to argue that this specific country ritual never died, but morphed into its twin – the play (Segal, 8). The point to make here is that, as Plato
understood, one of the prime appeals of comedy (as in the komos) is an unconscious desire to break society’s rules (Segal, 8).

Segal concedes that each of these derivations of the word ‘comedy’ remains relevant, and each offers important information about the nature of comedy as a genre. Koma reminds us that comedy, like dreams, has the ability to turn impossible fantasies into attainable realities. Kome suggests that like the country, comedy is free of ‘civilized’ restrictions and provides a much-needed escape from the fortified ‘protection’ of social and moral codes. Lastly, komos suggests that comedy is a revelry in which participants are free to indulge their pleasures for drink, dance, song and the flesh without fear of repercussion. Perhaps the exact derivation is not meant to be known. In fact, they are all related through ideas of freedom and natural, uninhibited impulse. As Segal states,

It matters less who comedy’s true father was than what its true nature is. Komos is a rule-breaking revel in the flesh, comedy is an orgy in the mind. Perhaps with ‘holiday humour’ we can entertain all three proposals and argue that comedy, the mask that launched a thousand quips, is named with as provocative an etymology as Helen of Troy: a dreamsong of a revel in the country (Segal, 9).

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

The Fool
Whatever the debate about comedy's true paternity, scholars seem to agree on the most prevalent of its offspring. No other character better embodies the essence and spirit of comedy than the character I shall hereafter refer to as 'the Fool'. The Fool is comic theory manifest in a physical form. He is comedy in the flesh. He is not one character alone, but lives in many characters: from the village idiot and the harmless eccentric to the wily servant and the pitiful hobo. Throughout theater history, he has taken the form of clowns, jesters, jongleurs, minstrels, mimes, tramps and postmodern marionettes. Let me stress to the reader that my use of the term 'Fool' encompasses an idea about something all of these characters share. I am not referring to a specific comic archetype of dramatic literature embodied by Touchstone, or even Lear's Fool. Though both of these figures have elements of the Fool in them, I am expanding this concept to include those comic figures that exist outside dramatic texts. The Fool is more than a character title - he is a mind, body and spirit, and his presence serves an important role in society and the genre of comedy. My conception of the Fool lives in the artful song of clever Feste as well as in the gluttonous belch of the clumsy Maccus. The Fool spans many cultures and time periods; his existence is not solely linked to the advent of the Greek drama that introduced him.
to the Western world or to the Italian comedy that immortalized him. Some might even dispute my claim that comedy gave birth to the Fool, arguing that the Fool could play chicken to comedy’s egg; only he would enjoy so a fowl job. Either way, comedy and the Fool were companions from the cradle.

Like comedy, the Fool was born in the country. It is no surprise, therefore, that since the very beginning many comic heroes have been country bumpkins. Reared in the country, it is no further surprise that the Fool’s dominating characteristic is the same simplicity that helps define comedy itself. Like the country folk that are his brethren, the Fool is simple in many ways. I perceive this simplicity - of mind, body, and spirit - manifested in several key elements of his behavior.

**Mind of a Simpleton**

In his book *Clowns*, John H. Towsen writes that the word ‘Fool’ is usually taken to mean someone lacking common sense. In other words, the Fool is simple-minded; he does not possess the sophisticated intelligence of a mature adult. This simple-mindedness reveals itself in several different ways. Sometimes, the Fool does not speak with a refined urban tongue; like Forrest Gump, a Hollywood’s modern version of the Fool, he often parodies normal
speech. Additionally, the Fool’s wants and needs are basic and straightforward like those of the country folk that spawned his genre. His main appetites are love and food, and like the revelers of the komos, he is often sexually uninhibited. Consistently operating at a lower level of intellect, and commonly pursuing base and vulgar human needs, the Fool very often delights in obscene humor. He does not share civilized society’s sense of the polite or respect for the rational, in part because he never learned these mores, but also because he finds life so much more fun without them. As Towsen says, the Fool, like comedy, “blissfully operates outside the laws of logic” (Towsen, 5). This insouciant grace is not only evidence of a simple mind, but also suggests that the Fool simply never wanted to grow up.

**Spirit of a Child**

Though he may be old enough to wade through the lascivious waters of adulthood, the Fool contains a spirit that is content to splash about in the kiddy pool. The Fool’s aforementioned simplicity often manifests itself in his exhibition of behaviors and emotions akin to those of a child. Like a child, the Fool often lacks social graces. Rarely does he censor his speech, choosing rather to let his words spill out in even the most sacred settings,
oftentimes leaving him a tricky mess to clean up afterwards. Additionally, the pedomorphic fool is rarely content to sit still. This restlessness often leads to a delight for prank-pulling and general trickery. Like those of a child, the Fool’s pranks are rarely serious and never intend to cause undue harm. In addition to possessing the mischievous rascality of a child, the Fool can also exhibit the emotional capriciousness of a toddler. He can change from happy to sad in an instant, set off by the slightest misfortune. Likewise, it does not take much, no more than the smell of a good meal, to restore him to his former cheer.

**Body of an Animal**

Just as the Fool manifests comedy's mental regression to the infantile, he embodies comedy's devolution from the civilized to the primitive with a frequent display of animal-like qualities that suggest a primitive, feral nature. Animalistic fools litter comedy, from Peisetaerus and Euelpides in Aristophanes’ *The Birds*, to Bottom in Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Even some of the earliest comic figures were depicted as part animal. The half goat, half man satyrs of the Greek satyr plays were a chorus of Dionysian followers that would enter after a trilogy of Greek tragedies. The satyrs provided comic relief that contained themes of, among other things,
drinking, overt sexuality (often including large phallic props), pranks and general merriment. The antics of these early bestial comics are echoed today by the animalistic burlesque comedy performed by Mascots that surround professional and collegiate sports.

The mascot of the Philadelphia Phillies baseball team, the Philadelphia Phanatic, is a prime example of a Fool character who is not a specific animal, but who is definitely more animal than human. A Phillies Press release describes him as “A feathery, green creature from the Galapagos Islands,” however, everyone knows that inside his costume there exists a live human being. In an odd way, he is a reversal of man; men walk around with an animal hidden somewhere inside them; this animal walks around hiding a man within. At Phillies home games, the Phanatic dances with fans, shoots hotdogs into the crowd, and toys with opposing players, coaches, and umpires on the playing field. Only this furry green fool is granted the freedom to enter the playing field and bother the players and coaches. A signature element of the Phanatic’s mid-inning burlesque is his solicitation of a smooch from the opposing team’s third base coach, followed by a giant flop onto the turf, if his wish is granted. Although a normal fan might find himself in handcuffs for such behavior, the stadium managers grant the Phanatic the freedom to act out
the latent animalistic desires of every crowd member. By allowing the Fool, in this case the Phanatic, to behave on animal instinct and disrupt civilized order, members of the society in microcosm at Veteran’s stadium keep their own animalistic desires at bay, and peace is preserved. In reality, the Phanatic is the only individual who could never get thrown out of the park. Like many Fools before him, the Phanatic is given license to entertain by questioning authority and mocking the sacred.

**Function of the Fool**

In *Clowns*, Towsen cites the Native American Hopi of the American Southwest as evidence that many societies have a necessity for the Fool. A certain ritual performed by the Hopi for as long as they can remember demonstrates one fundamental role of the Fool in society. In the ritual, a sacred dance is interrupted by the sudden and noisy appearance of several *Chuku’wimkya* clowns on a nearby rooftop. Covered from head to toe in mud from sacred springs, these clowns begin to step off the edge of the roof, suspending one foot in mid-air before retreating in mock fear. Their buffoonish actions provoke uproarious laughter from the spectators below, who quickly lose interest in the dancers. The clowns eventually join in the ceremony; however, their participation is purposely disrespectful and overtly irreverent. In other instances,
these clowns perform mimes and vulgar skits that burlesque
the other performers, as well as insure a smooth-flowing
production. While ostensibly mocking the entire
performance, these Fools actually enhance and embellish it
(Towsen, 4-8). In this way, the Fool is both an intrusion
and a welcome entertainment, both a scapegoat and an
integral part of the community. Towsen asserts that
society’s simultaneous exclusion and fascination with the
Fool,

Reflects man’s recognition of folly as an
unavoidable part of his life. The stupidity we
laugh at in the Fool reflects our own potential
foolishness, the realization that we too may slip
on the proverbial banana peel. The clown’s
antics, although exaggerated, are not as removed
from our own realm of experience as we might
choose to believe. ‘If every fool wore a crown,’
goes an old proverb, ‘we should all be kings’
(Towsen, 6).

In the rituals of the Southwest Yaqui Indians, the
Fool’s role is elevated to the level of social regulator.
Towsen points out that these actors are given the freedom
to publicly ridicule whomever they please, and thus serve
as strong deterrents to antisocial behavior. Among the
Tubatulabal of California, the clown’s opinions are held in
such high esteem that if he criticizes the chief, a new
leader is likely to be selected (Towsen, 9). In addition
to serving as ‘social regulator,’ the clowns of these
Native American tribes also play an important role as
‘tension breaker.’ Because they are free to satirize and ridicule at will, the clowns of these Native American tribes are able to broach subjects like alcoholism and sex in public. Towsen opines that the Fool’s humor “can be considered therapeutic when it deals explicitly with sexual and scatological matters” (Towsen, 8). He points to the existence of phallic clowning in both ancient Greece and among the Pueblo Tribes of the American Southwest as evidence of the Fool’s important role as a social release valve. The Fool provokes laughter about embarrassing subjects, and “By laughing at taboo subjects, the community confronts inhibitions in an open, yet vicarious manner” (Towsen, 8). In this way, the Fool, and by association, comedy, serve an important social function in many societies.

I have begun my discussion of the Fool by talking about him in a broad theoretical sense with reference to comedy and his role in society. I will now begin to focus more on the Fool ‘in practice.’ It is undoubtedly worthwhile to discuss the idea of the Fool and what function he plays in society, but who did he actually turn out to be? More importantly, with regard to my project, how did he perform? What did he do? Of all of the Fools that stumbled or snuck into my research I will focus the following discussion on the two that had the most impact on
me as someone interested in theatre history and performance. This transition from the broad theoretical to the narrow theatrical begins with the Fool’s chief manifestation in the early days of professional theatre in modern Europe.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

_Arlecchino: A Classical Fool_

It was not until the appearance of the Italian _Commedia dell’ Arte_ troupes around the end of the fifteenth century that theatre evolved from an art into a profession. The incredible physical and mental demands of this unique brand of improvisational comedy required actors to dedicate their entire lives to the perfection of the form. In _The Italian Comedy_, Pierre Louis Duchartre explains that _Commedia dell’ Arte_ “in distinction to the written comedies, was not, and could not, be performed except by the professional actor” (19). Time and space do not permit a detailed description of the _Commedia dell’Arte_, however, I must pause to stress _Commedia’s_ importance to comedy and this project. Additionally, I urge the reader who is interested in physical comedy to seek out further knowledge of _Commedia dell’Arte_ in order to better understand the
beginning of a tradition that has informed the greatest physical comedians of our time.

Suffice it to say that no other art form has had greater influence of the genre of comedy in the history of Western civilization than the *Commedia dell’ Arte*. For three centuries the Italian comedy thrived across Europe, a remarkable fact considering that troupes did not begin to employ the language of their audiences until 1668. Troupes like *I Comici Confidenti* (The Confident Comedians) who traveled from Italy to France in 1571, relied on the mastery of an ancient language of gesture descendant from the theatrically inclined Etruscans and their gesturally enhanced Atellan farce. Duchartre quotes Charles Sorel on the actors of the *Commedia*:

> Because they make a strong point of gesture and represent many things through action, even those who do not understand their language cannot fail to understand the subject of the piece; for which reason there are many people in Paris who take pleasure in their playing (Duchartre, 22).

The most prominent use of broad physical gestures by theatre’s first professional actors was most likely in the comic *lazzi* that were used to cover dropped lines, fill time between scenes, or rejuvenate a bored audience. These *lazzi* were pre-planned comic bits that were most often composed of intensely physical buffoonery and might include anything from back flips to animal mimicry. In addition to
lazzi, actors employed a professional command over their bodies to help audience members differentiate one character from another. Each character in the Commedia had a distinctive physical nature (and in some cases, a mask) derived from his most definitive character traits. Paintings from the time period allow the modern actor to infer the miserly shuffle of the old man named Pantalone and the bold swagger of the braggart soldier named Il Capitano. Though scholars are certain of the existence of such characters, Duchartre reports that there is no end to the list of names given to the characters of the Commedia dell’Arte in documents dating from the Renaissance to the time of Molière. He assures the reader, however, that after studying them, one can discern a limited number of fundamental types to which each actor, each locality and the customs of each period made a special contribution (20). The influence of these characters can be felt all the way from Shakespeare and Molière to silent film and the modern sitcom. Yet never were these immortal types as alive as they were in the hands of the Italian improvisators who possessed a genius and mastery of their art to a degree rarely equaled in the history of the theatre (Duchartre, 22). It is among the many characters of this Italian professional comedy that one can find the
single most distinctive instance of the Fool in all of classical theatre.

No other figure in all of theatrical history better personifies the mind, body and spirit of the Fool than that of Harlequin, or as he is known in Italian, ‘Arlecchino.’ Like comedy and the Fool, Harlequin does not have a definitive origin, and yet he seems to permeate all facets of the comic tradition. He is “the most strangely individualized of all the traditional characters, and he is also the most enigmatic” (Duchartre, 124). Opinions about his heritage range from the probable to the absurd. In an article on Harlequin written in 1776, French dramatist Jean François Marmontel cites Harlequin’s often-darkened features and lowly servant status to help infer “that an African Negro was the first model of the character” (Sand, 59). Other scholars believe that Harlequin descended from the leones of the ancient Roman stages, citing their motley outfits and blackened faces as evidence of a common lineage. Additionally, the leones were believed to be servants to the Roman God Mercury; Mercury was the patron of merchants, thieves, and panders, and as Duchartre suggests, is the perfect divine model for Harlequin. Mercury’s reputation as an agile, speedy and clever messenger makes him a suitable ancestor for comedy’s most physical trickster. Duchartre further proposes that
Harlequin is “Without doubt of divine essence, if not indeed, the god Mercury himself” and that because he has much of the divine in him, “… like all the gods, it has pleased him to remain aloof throughout the centuries which have enveloped him in a cloud of legends” (Duchartre, 124). Like the gods of antiquity, Harlequin appears and reappears in many shapes and forms, never fully revealing himself to the world, remaining ever “volatile and elusive” (Duchartre, 124). This certain intangibility of Harlequin makes it difficult to examine him as a single character; his character traits have evolved over time, and he has as many names as patches on his motley suit.

However, it is this very elusive inconsistency that makes Arlecchino the ideal fool. Like the Fool, he is hard to pin down (in part because he will not stand still,) but also because Commedia was not particularly conducive to historical documentation. What we know of Arlecchino we gain from inference, personal account, pictorial representations, and only a handful of extant sketch comedies that feature the trickster. Allardyce Nicoll, in his book titled The World of Harlequin, warns that historic attempts to determine the genealogy of Harlequin prove feckless because of the “inevitable uncertainty concerning that genealogy” (Nicoll, viii). Like Nicoll, I am less interested in the exact beginnings of Arlecchino’s
character and more intrigued by the ways in which he manifests the purposes and functions of the Fool. Additionally, I am interested in his unique art of “physical poetry” and how it fits into a tradition of a corporeal language that he helped propel into modernity.

It was not until the end of the sixteenth century that Arlecchino began to take a definite shape in the Italian improvisational comedy that eventually became known as the Commedia dell’Arte. The exact details of his origin are, as usual, unclear, but by the time Commedia had a popular following, a character by the name of Arlecchino, claiming to come from a small town in Northern Italy called Bergamo, had established himself alongside the lovers, the general and the old man. The Town of Bergamo is built in the form of an amphitheatre on the hills of the Brentano valley, and in the sixteenth century it was believed that the lower town produced nothing but fools and dullards, whereas the upper town was the home of nimble-wits (Duchartre, 124). It seems fitting therefore that though the character of Arlecchino claims both the upper and lower regions as his birthplace, it is believed that he originally descended from the lower, simpler part of Bergamo in search of love and a bite to eat.

Consistent with comedy’s model for the Fool (a figure with a country heritage and a consequently less-than-
civilized level of intelligence), Arlecchino began as a country simpleton. In more ways than one, his is the perfect mind to study in order to better understand the mental composition of the Fool. Though history provided him with flashes of wit and a clever temerity, he has for the most part always been simple-minded. His type of ignorance, however, is not that of the lethargic coach potato. He does not lack energy or willpower; he is just “fundamentally naïve” (Duchartre, 133). Likewise, Arlecchino’s mental dearth does not bring with it malevolence or contempt. Nicoll maintains that “Harlequin exists in a mental world wherein concepts of morality have no being.” She further asserts that even though Harlequin may lack the mental capacity to act in a moral context, he does not display “viciousness...his words and actions have no flavor of evil in them...in contradistinction from many of his companions, too, he exhibits little malice” (Nicoll, 70). In other words, Arlecchino’s simplicity does not make him mean, he just does not consider things beyond their immediate advantage or disadvantage:

He gets an idea; it seems to him at the moment a good one; gaily he applies it, and, no matter what scrape it leads him into, he never gains from his experience: one minute later he will be merrily pursuing another thought, equally calculated to lead him to embarrassment (Nicoll, 70).
Arlecchino also exhibits the mental simplicity of the Fool in that his needs and desires are the simplest human ones. If he is not in pursuit of the vivacious Columbina, he is busy making plans for his next meal. In *Ruzzante Returns From the Wars*, Ruzzante (the name famous actor Angelo Beolco gave to his version of the Harlequin character) suspects he may be dead and speaking to the audience as a ghost: “Suppose I’m not really me? Suppose I got killed in combat? So, now I’m a ghost! Oh, that’d be a great one!” He quickly realizes his mistake when he recognizes one of his most distinctive characteristics: “But, uh, uh! Ghosts don’t get hungry. I’m me alright. Me, myself and I’m alive” (Beolco, 62). In another preserved scenario written anonymously, titled *Three Cuckolds*, Arlecchino entreats the audience,

> Everybody look! Look at poor Arlecchino! Drawn, wasted, starved for food, starved for the love of the kitchen queen, starved too for a good joke on somebody. He hasn’t tricked anyone for weeks...Arlecchino will surely die of waste, wasting away from the want of a meal, wasting away from the want of a prank, wasting away from the want of that foul, beautiful, exquisite, dirty, queenly, wretched, tender, powerful, tasteful, tasty, toothsome, loathsome, lovesome, likesome, wantsome, needsome Cintia. Everybody weep! (Bentley, 82).

In both of the previous examples, Arlecchino seems to identify with the fact that he is perpetually in search of food and love. Additionally, his desire to play a good
joke on someone speaks to the playful nature of his character. As Nicoll pointed out, his mischievousness is indeed playful, and rarely comes across as malicious. Arlecchino’s impish spirit reiterates another important characteristic of the fool.

Though he may live in the body of a grown man, Arlecchino is, as Marmontel writes, “a mere sketch of a man, a great child visited by flashes of reason and intelligence” (Sand, 64). Like a child, his emotions are whimsical, and he exhibits a playful spirit — what Nicoll refers to as “a sense of fun” (72) that is not unlike the antic playground energy of a preadolescent. The daring Arlecchino seems to derive a high level of enjoyment from the capers he finds himself stuck in; even in the most dire situation there is evident in him a sense of delight or amusement at the dilemma in which he finds himself involved. Nicoll’s description of a scene from La Figlia disubbediente in which Harlequin pretends to be a poor solider and begs for alms provides the perfect example of such a dilemma:

Cinthio approaches; Harlequin raises his cap: ‘Sir,’ he says, ‘Please help a dumb man.’ Cinthio smiles: ‘You are dumb then, my friend?’ ‘Oh yes, sir,’ replies Harlequin innocently, and on Cinthio’s asking him how he can be dumb when he is able to reply to a questioner, he eagerly gives his explanation: ‘But sir, if I were not to reply to you that would be rude; I am well brought up, I know how I should act.’ In the very moment of saying this, however, he suddenly
appreciates his error and quickly adds ‘But you are right, sir; I made a mistake— I meant to say I am deaf.’ ‘Deaf!’ cries Cinthio, ‘That can’t be.’ ‘Oh yes, I assure you, sir,’ Harlequin answers, ‘I cannot even hear a cannon going off.’ ‘But at any rate’, says Cinthio, ‘you understand what is being said to you, especially if somebody calls you to give you some money.’ ‘Most certainly, sir’, is Harlequin’s quick reply, and he goes on to claim that once more he had made a slight mistake; he really should have said he was blind (Nicoll, 72).

Rather than just give up his attempts, Harlequin chooses to dig himself into an even larger hole. This scene conjures up memories of a second grade classmate who was always testing the teacher to see how much she would let him get away with. My fellow classmates and I knew that his fantastical stories were never true, but it was fun to watch him try to get the teacher to believe them. It is this same mischievous pleasure that I detect in Harlequin/Arlecchino, and it only furthers my claim that he embodies the juvenile, roguish nature of comedy and the Fool.

As the Fool, Arlecchino has been shown to posses the simple desires of a less-than-civilized being, as well as the playful, mercurial spirit of a child. While both his simple country mind and his childlike spirit already distinguish Arlecchino from his fellow Commedia characters, it is Arlecchino’s unique physical nature that makes him one of the most universally recognizable Fools. As I have
said, the Fool represents a regression from a human state to a more natural animal state. In the early years of Arlecchino’s development, this animal-like nature was expressly manifest in Arlecchino’s body. Not only were his actions very suggestive of an evolutionarily regressed being, but his very movements often imitated those of certain animals. Marmontel writes, “the model Harlequin is all suppleness and agility, with the grace of a young cat” (Sand, 64). Harlequin makes Duchartre “think of a dolphin, appearing and disappearing in the sea, bounding and turning and capering” (124). Carlo Mazzone-Clementi, a modern Commedia teacher, aptly compares the movements of various Commedia characters, including Arlecchino, to those of barnyard inhabitants: “Hens, chicks, roosters, capons, ducks, peacocks.” These perceptions are no mistake; the actors who nursed Arlecchino through his early development understood that animal humor was funny. In some scenarios, transformed by a magician, Arlecchino would actually become a specific animal, like a stork or a cat, and parade around the stage mimicking the precise movements of a specific creature. As Mazzone-Clementi explains, “All the farmyard bipeds make us laugh, their walks are absurd parodies of man’s own gait” (Towsen, 73). It is precisely this parody that makes the Fool so enjoyable. The spring in Arlecchino’s step and the way he leaps across the stage, as
Madden describes, seemingly “always in the air...like a drunk gazelle,” is not only delightful to watch, but also proves that he is the perfect example of the Fool who is part animal. He represents, as I have said, a more instinctual, natural part of ourselves; we laugh at him because somewhere deep inside our highly sophisticated beings still resides a modicum of base, animal instinct.

No other Commedia character demands such a high level of physical agility, inventiveness, and expressiveness, as does Arlecchino. In a description of the Harlequin character written in 1751 in the Calendrier historique des theatres, an anonymous author wrote that “the first thing that the public always asks of a new Harlequin is that he be agile, and that he jump well, dance and turn somersaults” (Duchartre, 133). Actors like the incomparable Riccoboni were expected to perform on some level as an acrobat. Riccoboni wrote,

The acting of the Harlequins before the seventeenth century was nothing but a continual play of extravagant tricks, violent movements, and outrageous rogueries. He was at once insolent, mocking, inept, clownish, and emphatically ribald. I believe that he was extraordinarily agile and he seems to be constantly in the air; and I might confidently add that he was a proficient tumbler (Duchartre, 125).

Clearly, the actor charged with playing Arlecchino would require a certain level of physical strength and dexterity.
Duchartre claims that Harlequin “is the unwitting and unrecognized creator of a new form of poetry, essentially muscular, accented by gesture, punctuated by somersaults, enriched with philosophic reflections and incongruous noises” (134). It is this very “physical poetry” that Arlecchino left behind as his lasting legacy, one that subsequently lived on in various forms.

Modern Physical Poets: Deburau, The Icon and The Tramp

It was not too long after the demise of Commedia that the language of gesture, used to such great effect by the Italian Comedians, contributed to the development of another legacy - modern pantomime. The purest and most magnificent performer in this Parisian born legacy was a man named Jean Gaspard Deburau. Responsible for creating the modern concept of mime, a performance in which an actor tells stories without the use of words or too many props, Deburau was said to have been entrancing as a silent performer. Simpson writes that Deburau “evidently had the power to suggest emotion with the barest movements and gestures, and he held his audience enraptured” (49). Duchartre confirms that Deburau was “gifted with extraordinary agility...he would move his audience, varied as they were, from laughter to tears and back again, without
so much as uttering a word” (260). Deburau may have been the purest mime of the tradition, but if there is one performer who the world thinks of when they hear the word “mime,” it is the iconic Marcel Marceau.

In performance, Marceau’s movements are subtle but articulate; he does no more than those movements essential to convey his meaning, and his precision is enchanting. Marceau is worth mentioning not only as a physical poet, but also as an important creator of a more modern iteration of the Fool. Marceau’s classic alter ego, Bip, is a version of the comic hero that I had yet to encounter until this study. Unlike Arlecchino, Bip is neither clever nor fortuitous. His failure is always inevitable, yet the audience roots for him anyway. Even more than Arlecchino, the quixotic Bip always has the audience’s complete and utter support and with it faces each new struggle with hopeful exuberance. Although mime is not always associated with the comic tradition started by Arlecchino and friends, it would be foolish to ignore Marceau’s contributions to the comic genre.

If Arlecchino ever experienced a modern resurrection, it would have been in the silent comedy of Charlie Chaplin. Chaplin’s Tramp character is the Fool manifest for the twentieth century, his motley coat and slapstick traded in for baggy trousers and a cane. Chaplin’s own description
of the Tramp could just as easily refer to *Commedia’s* chimerical jokester: “This fellow is many sided, a tramp, a gentlemen, a poet, a dreamer, a lonely fellow, always hopeful of romance and adventure” (Madden, 32). Furthermore, Chaplin’s Little Tramp is recognized as “one of Harlequin’s numerous avatars” (Madden, 32) because he often displays the childlike characteristics, simplemindedness, and clumsy misfortune of the Fool. And yet, Chaplin’s version of the Fool is infinitely more melancholy. Like Marceau’s Bip, he seems to prove ineffectual in all the roles given to him - he always seems to fail where Arlecchino would have won. Perhaps Chaplin’s Fool is a more appropriate one for his time. Segal finds it fitting that Chaplin’s silent Fool was so popular in a time when silence was the only weapon society could use to respond to the atrocities of World War I. Regardless of the differences between Harlequin and Charlie, The Fool reached mythic proportions in each of them. They are, as Madden says, “poetic images” that are now ever present as comic icons. Like comedy, the Fool seems to endure the test of time. Arlecchino is the ultimate classic version of the Fool character, and, as I have shown, his influence is forever engrained in the comic tradition. Moreover, the mercurial Harlequin-Fool still haunts the stages and
screens of today — in new, more colorful and talkative guises.

As one whose ultimate goal was to apply my theoretical and historical research into comedy, the Fool, and the language of gesture as a practical guide towards the creation of a performance in the contemporary theatre, I felt the need to investigate where the Fool and the language of gesture are manifest in my contemporary surroundings. The following section is devoted to one performer who I believe is not only the most definitive physical performer of my time, but who is also the most recent mainstream iteration of the Fool.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

**Bill Irwin: A Contemporary Fool**

If Charlie Chaplin was the Arlecchino of the early twentieth century, Bill Irwin is the contemporary theatre’s reincarnation of the ebullient trickster. In a recent documentary entitled *Bill Irwin: Clown Prince*, actor Brandon Fraser, a former student of Irwin’s relates, “describing Bill Irwin is something that people who love the theatre have been trying to do for years.” However, dramaturges, directors and critics never seem to be able to agree on a suitable title for Bill Irwin. He has been
called everything from a clown to a mime to a “metaphysical vaudevillian” (Dunning, 9/8/81). Not even Irwin himself can give a clear answer as to what he is. When asked to describe himself as an actor, Irwin replied: “I get called a mime a lot, but I think I am really a physical actor...I think I’m an actor who chooses not to speak - to work physically - or sometimes an actor who chooses to work as a clown” (Clown Prince, 12/14/04). Irwin has been compared to everyone from Chaplin to Fred Astaire to Marcel Marceau. Robert Brustein, after seeing Irwin’s Largely New York on Broadway in 1989, wrote that Irwin, without sacrificing any originality, has the ability of remind one of all of comedy’s immortals:

He has the choreographic skill of Charlie Chaplin, the awkwardness of Jacques Tati, the hangdog moroseness of Buster Keaton, the collegiate innocence of Harold Lloyd, the mimetic grace of Marceau and Barrault, the anarchy of Harpo Marx, the self-denigrating embarrassment of Stan Laurel. Yet he still manages to establish his own persona of innocence and sweetness and cherubic wholesomeness (Brustein, 5/29/89)

The range of description used for Irwin is evidence of his many talents. The reality is that Irwin has drawn on a wild mixture of classical and popular art forms for his unique blend of physical comedy. In Irwin’s performances one can find a hint of everything from mime, to Commedia dell’Arte, to the Avante Garde theater traditions of Grotowski, to formal circus clowning, to anything-goes
street performing and post-modern dance (Dunning, 9/8/81). However, no single theatrical discipline clearly holds more importance for Irwin, and this is part of the reason why no one can agree on what he is. It is this incredibly varied gestalt of influence and training that have made Bill Irwin one of the modern theatre’s most dynamic innovators.

After studying under the tutelage of Herbert Blau at Ohio’s Oberlin College, Irwin left for clown school. He attended the Ringling Brothers and Barnum and Bailey Clown College eight-week intensive in Venice, Florida, where he learned everything from juggling to the history of clowning. He studied clips of clowns like Buster Keaton and Ray Bolger, as well as live performances of an obscure but influential 1960’s clown named George Karl. After graduating, Irwin joined the small, upstart Pickle Family Circus run by Lawrence Pisoni in 1974. Though it lacked the stakes and salary of Broadway, the Pickle Family Circus guided Irwin’s first steps as a professional clown and gave him the opportunity to experiment with new ideas. In 1982, Irwin left the circus and relocated to New York, where he debuted his ambitious theatrical piece In Regard of Flight (Miller, 8).

As Irwin himself describes it, In Regard of Flight is a “Compendium of clown bits that grew into a dream-play about what it’s like to be a performer” (Clown Prince
12/14/04). In the piece, Irwin creates an environment where the unwilling performer not only controls, but also is controlled by the theatrical milieu, which includes his fellow actors, audience members, and a host of obstinate props. On the one hand the piece is intensely physical; Irwin springs, slithers, bends and undulates all over the place, a human hybrid of Gumby and a Slinky Toy (Brantley, 10/16/03). Irwin’s body is at one moment as elastic as silly putty, and at the next as firm as a statue. “Kinetic Dilemmas like being pulled in two directions at once, are delightfully legible in his body” (Perron, 5/00). Bits like being sucked offstage by an invisible Beckettian force and later collapsing his lanky frame into a trunk, appearing to descend three flights of stairs in the process, are indicative of the amazing command Irwin has over the various part of his anatomy. Armed with only his pliable upper body and his “languid and lilting legs” (Perron 05/04), Irwin can tell an entire story, and, as Julie Taymor opines, his stories have “developed a new theatre with physical clowning as the language” (Clown Prince, 12/14/04).

In Regard of Flight was the first piece of Bill Irwin’s that I studied and I never wanted it to end. Irwin’s incredible physical talent is undeniably amazing, but what I found equally enjoyable was the witty, and at
times poignant, story and characters that Irwin and his fellow actors created. The storyline, although choppy at times, serves a purpose beyond just showing off Irwin’s own talents. While evoking memories of traditional vaudeville, the piece also mocks the self-conscious elitism that Irwin detected among the academics and critics of theatre in the early eighties. Irwin’s piece is therefore more than just a group of tricks. His delightful gags and presentational pratfalls are artfully strung together by character and dilemma. The interactions with fellow actors Doug Skinner and Michael O’Connor not only provide the foundation needed for Irwin to build his shtick-house, but also give him the opportunity to deliver a meaningful message to the audience.

The second Irwin piece that had a considerable impact on my eventual project was *Fool Moon*, which opened on Broadway in 1993. Irwin’s partner in silent crime, David Shiner, begins the show by entering the theatre as if he were an audience member searching for his seat. Hilarity delightfully ensues as Shiner reacts to various audience members with the improvisational wisdom worthy of Riccoboni or Beolco. At the opening of the show, Shiner climbs through an entire row in search of his seat, pausing only to apologize to those unsuspecting recipients of his cantankerous flails. At one point, his hands, as if by
accident, get caught in the golden locks of an early-eighties perm. The audience erupts with schadenfreudal laughter as the unassuming blonde is forced to interact with Shiner. Shiner eventually makes his way to the side balcony, where he forcefully evicts an unwilling patron from her seat. Irwin soon appears on the balcony to tell Shiner that they must start the show, only to trip and nearly plummet into the house. The two finally make it to the stage and begin the show, which includes a notable amount of audience participation. Audience members are invited to join Irwin and Shiner’s silent playground, making the show even more unexpected at every turn. The inclusion of the audience as part of the show appealed to me and strongly influenced the eventual role audience members would play in my performance piece.

Like the comic geniuses of the past, Bill Irwin understands that as a talented artist he has the ability to create something more than just an exhibition of his own personal gifts. Like the mimes and clowns who have fed Irwin’s inspiration, Irwin has put his expertise at the service of a greater vision - a powerful story, a mimetic narrative, a comic odyssey, and a farcical scenario (Brustein, 5/29/89). Irwin was the first artist ever awarded the prestigious McArthur “Genius” Grant for his continuing innovation in the theatre. The “Genius” of
Irwin comes from the fact that he knows he stands at the end of a long line of clowns and tricksters. 

Irwin is in fact recognized as one of the premier comedy historians of the modern day; Brandon Fraser calls him an “encyclopedia of comedy” (Clown Prince 12/14/04). Along with his knowledge of physical comedy’s past, Irwin carries a tremendous feeling of responsibility about extending this tradition into the future. In a recent interview, Irwin himself recognized the difficulty of following in the footsteps of the likes of Chaplin, Keaton, and Marceau: “Clown: the word has a history and a responsibility and the moment you start to think of it that way you’re screwed, you can’t then perform as a clown” (Clown Prince, 12/14/04). Irwin understands that he is part of a legacy, part of a history. He understands that he belongs to a tradition that dates back to Bergamo and even further to Atella. And like the Dorian Mimes, Italian Comedians, Chaplin and Marceau, Irwin strongly believes that the physical language of the body is more powerful than words because it is a language that every human can understand. What the theatre world understands is that Bill Irwin’s fresh contribution to the realm of physical comedy is undeniably magical.
II. THE PRACTICAL

As I made clear in my introduction, the research portion of my Senior Honors Thesis was penultimate to the creation of my own piece of theatre. This final section will document a process of conception and development, describe the actual content of the performance, and will then offer my own reflections on the piece and what creating it taught me. Richard Hornby describes actor training as a heuristic activity. He explains that although an actor may know the methods by which to proceed, he will not know the outcome until he achieves it. Hornby compares the process of acting to “Climbing a mountain in a fog; you know you must try to keep moving upward, but you do not know what the peak looks like until you get there” (Wangh, xxxvii). At many turns, the process of creating LOSTIN COLLEGE: A Physical Comedy felt like climbing a mountain in a fog. My hope in this section is to gain some perspective on where I stand now by chronicling the process and analyzing the performance project that resulted from it.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *
There are several reasons why I wanted my Senior Honors Thesis to include a performance project. First and foremost, I wanted to put theory into practice; that is, I wanted to find connections between my scholarly research on physical comedy and my professional interests as an actor by building a ‘creative’ component into the thesis. In the process, I thought it would be good if I generated performance material that might be useful after graduation in my pursuit of an acting career. This soon led to some conflicting impulses about the nature of the performance. On one hand, I wanted to create a piece of theater that would stand on its own, that had a formal integrity and a sense of a whole, and that might be the ‘first draft’ of a full work that I would continue to develop in the years ahead. On the other hand, I thought it would be good to create a variety of shorter, more miscellaneous pieces. This strategy had the benefit of preparing monologues that in the long run might be useful as audition material in a professional situation, and that in the short term gave me to opportunity to demonstrate an impressive variety of performance skills to a friendly audience of my peers and schoolmates.
As the academic part of my research continued, I found myself more and more enamored with the figure of the Fool, and I began to imagine a piece comprised of a series of monologues from important Fool characters in theater history, from Commedia’s Arlecchino to Shakespeare's Feste to Molière's Scapin and beyond. At one point, my focus narrowed down to Shakespeare alone. I was fascinated by theories that Shakespeare wrote his fools for the specific talents and traits of the actors who would play them on stage. Scholars suggest that the progression from buffoonish clown characters (Dogberry and Launcelot) to more sophisticated and intellectual fools (Touchstone, Feste, Lear's Fool) in Shakespeare's plays was directly linked to the replacing of actor Will Kempe with Robert Armin in the Chamberlain’s Men around 1600 (Goldsmith, 47). This gave me the idea for a show that pitted Will Kempe against Robert Armin in a head-to-head battle to determine Shakespeare’s comic favorite. The conceit was tempting, but I eventually decided that I did not want to limit my focus to Shakespeare. Besides, every time I sat down to read about Kempe or Armin, I found myself distracted by an impish child in me that just wanted to juggle the library books rather than actually read them. This precocious spirit led me to the character that would eventually
stumble and tumble his way into what became LOSTIN COLLEGE: A Physical Comedy.

As I became more and more intrigued with Commedia dell'Arte and the character of Arlecchino, I became curious about what had happened to this little trickster after the disappearance of traditional Commedia. In his 1968 study, Harlequin’s Stick, Charlie’s Cane, Steven Madden argues that the Arlecchino character (among other stock Commedia types) experienced a resurrection in the twentieth century silent comedy of Charlie Chaplin, Buster Keaton, Harold Lloyd and others. Madden's ideas provoked me to wonder where Arlecchino was today, what his more recent guises were, and what tricks he was playing in the 21st century. I should have known that the spirit of Arlecchino was all around me. I found his animalistic qualities in characters on Saturday Night Live and his vulgar humor at The Comedy Cellar stand-up comedy club in New York. I found his childish charm and his acrobatic poetry in the 500 Clown comedy troupe is Chicago. I found his quick wit and adroit improvisational skills at ImprovAsylum in Boston. I even found his mischievous delight for pranks in groups like Improv Everywhere. Arlecchino has clearly handed down his most defining characteristics to the various comic inventors of our time, but where is his actual person,
where is his motley coat and buoyant gait? Again the answer was right under my nose.

It was not until this year that I was introduced to the incredible talent and genius of Bill Irwin, but my research into this contemporary Harlequin has inspired me beyond description. It was not only Irwin’s elastic antics or command of the language of gesture that eventually influenced LOSTIN COLLEGE: A Physical Comedy; a large amount of inspiration for my project came from the type of theatrical milieu Irwin creates in pieces like In Regard of Flight and Fool Moon. Irwin’s interaction with fellow actors, audience members and props greatly influenced my own choices about how to deal with these theatrical elements. The more of Irwin’s work that I watched, the more I became convinced that a one-man show, while providing me with sufficient opportunities for ego-inflation, could never offer the comic potential promised by the addition of one or more actors. Informed by the traditions of Commedia and the genius of Irwin, I chose to enlist the help of two talented comedic actors, a choice I am now thankful to have made. In a similar vein, I was impacted by Irwin’s consistent inclusion of the audience as part of his performance piece. I therefore chose to design a piece with deliberate audience participation, not only to pay homage to Irwin and the Italian masters, but also to
experience the fear, energy, and effect of improvisational comedy. Lastly, Irwin’s enchanting manipulation of inanimate objects motivated me to find ways in which ordinary items could be used for extraordinary story telling. Ultimately, studying Irwin taught me that good stories don’t require excessive detail - they just need to be told well.

Though I felt comfortable borrowing some of Irwin’s characteristic style, I am confident that his version of the Arlecchino-Fool could never be duplicated. As evident by the varying iterations presented by Kempe, Armin, Chaplin, Marceau, and others, the Fool manifests himself in different ways in different actors. Eager to conceive my own version of the Fool in the non-verbal tradition of the Tramp, Bip, and Irwin, I found myself imagining what would happen if the impish seventeenth century Bergamese rogue suddenly found himself face to face with my contemporary American college surroundings, attitudes, and accoutrements. I eventually decided that it would be fun to let loose my version of this character in a familiar environment: the Boston College campus. The excitement of this idea coupled with a growing resentment for the boring monotony of senior recitals helped me create a concept for a show that would allow me to create my own version of the Fool, as well as allow me to apply what theories of comedy
and stage movement I had learned into the practical telling of a story my audience could relate to.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

A Summary

LOSTIN COLLEGE: A Physical Comedy consists of four pantomime sketches presented by one Performer (in this case myself), which are separated by various interludes that include two other actors. The central character in the sketches is my version of the Fool, who, in this instance, has been cast as a contemporary college student. In the sketches themselves, the Performer utilizes a silent language of gesture to tell the story of this student as he appears in four typical campus locations: the Shuttle Bus, the Gym, the Library, and the Dining Hall. In each sketch, the Student encounters the same four characters, each of which is based on a familiar campus type - the bubbly co-ed who is incessantly blabbering away on her cell phone, the grumpy workaday university employee who takes his middle-aged anger out on students, the aloof acquaintance too cool to say hello, and the beautiful girl who immediately draws the amorous attentions of the Student. All of these characters, with the notable exception of the love interest, are played more or less simultaneously by the one Performer. This absent-minded Performer arrives at the
theater late for his own performance, crawling over audience members as if looking for his seat. His presence is an immediate distraction as his cell phone erupts into digitized pop music, inspiring an impromptu dance. After similar episodes with a large bag of popcorn and a giant cough drop, the Performer is summoned to the stage to begin the show.

Two supporting actors embellish the show with comic styles that both contrast and compliment the silent Fool. These two characters assist the Performer/Student not only by participating in the sketches themselves, but also providing the majority of the material for the interludes. Inspired by the comic lazzì of the Commedia dell’Arte, these interludes serve as timely opportunities for the Performer to catch his breath and prepare for his next sketch.

In contrast to the silent nature of the Performer/Student, the character of the Professor seems to be in love with his own voice. He begins the show with a perfunctory announcement that soon turns from the expected (pointing out fire exits) to the absurd (pleading with audience members not to step in liquid hot magma, “in the event of a volcanic eruption”). Beyond announcing each of the Performer’s sketches from his professorial podium, the Professor makes several attempts to fill the interims
between the four sketches with a lecture he has composed on the derivation of the word ‘comedy.’ The lecture, one that the Professor is clearly excited to give, is interrupted on several occasions by various distractions (technical difficulties, the antics of the Student, the Professor’s own cell-phone) that provide ample comic business to fill the time between the pantomimes. Eventually, the Professor is able to begin his master lecture complete with PowerPoint slides only to be interrupted again by the Performer’s insatiable desire for the spotlight.

At the very beginning of the show, the Performer drags a dilapidated, vaudevillian travel trunk onto the stage. From the trunk he produces and displays for the audience a number of different items that he will use later in the performance, the last of which are an accordion and the character of the Accordion Player who has been napping inside the trunk. Once reunited with his trusty instrument, the lanky Accordion Player begins the show with a clever rendition of the school fight song. The comic trio of LOSTIN COLLEGE: A Physical Comedy would not be complete without the presence of this simple, yet affable musician. The Accordion Player, ever eager to please, provides both background music and sound effects for the various sketches, and in the process becomes an accomplice or sidekick to the Performer/Student, aiding in his various
struggles. For example, in the sketch that takes place in the Gym, it is the Accordion Player’s adaptation of “Eye of the Tiger” and the “Rocky” theme song that help the Student summon the strength to hoist an incredibly heavy barbell over his head. Additionally, the Accordion Player provides his own interlude material, burlesquing the set changes with the occasional polka or “Idiosyncratic Love Song”. His quirky lyrics are the only words he uses in the show, and even they are barely intelligible above the bittersweet melody of his Accordion. Unlike the Professor, whose seems to resent being in a position of lesser importance, the Accordion Player seems to enjoy his role, however slight.

LOSTIN COLLEGE: A Physical Comedy centers on the telling of two stories. From the beginning, the audience is not only watching, but is part of the story of a performer who is having trouble pulling off his show. Ostensibly an audience member himself, the Performer arrives late, cannot get the microphone or projector to work correctly, cannot get the stage manager to listen to him, and even has to stop in the middle of his first sketch to have the set corrected. While the Professor makes the appropriate corrections, The Performer attempts to entertain the audience by performing a simple hat trick (flipping his bowler from his foot to his head). When the trick fails for the first time, he shrugs it off, assuring
the audience that it was just a simple mistake. When the trick fails a second time, he turns his back to the audience and proceeds to chastise the hat for its insubordination. After a third failure, he ventures out into the audience and recruits an unsuspecting female to help him. Once back on stage, he properly positions his involuntary assistant’s hands in the air well above her head, pausing only slightly to admire the body he has instinctually dragged onstage. Once the Student’s attentions are again focused on the task at hand, he flips the hat off his foot, catches it in mid-air, places it in his volunteer’s outstretched hands, and jumps up into it to complete the trick.

Concomitant with the story of the Performer and his show is the story he is telling in the body of his four sketches. The world of the Student, the pretty girl and the various campus types finally collides with the world of the Performer, Professor, Accordion Player and audience in the fourth and final sketch. In the previous sketches, the Student has lamentably failed to win the heart of the girl, even after reconciling his differences with the three other characters. During the interlude following the third sketch, the Professor finally begins to give his long-awaited lecture, not aware that the Performer has made his way onstage to again unknowingly steal focus. The lecture
on the nature of comedy culminates with the Professor’s demonstration of the orgiastic ritual “Dance of the Komos,” to raucous upbeat music provided by the Accordion Player. Upon seeing that some sort of dance is taking place, the Performer (ever the Fool) plucks a young woman from the audience and leads her to the stage to dance with him. His overzealous mimicry of the dancing Professor is interrupted when the Professor, angry at having his spotlight stolen yet again, announces the final sketch. As the lights go down, the Performer stops dancing, realizes he only has several seconds to prepare and quickly enlists the girl from the audience to help make the proper set changes. The Performer begins the Dining Hall Sketch, as the unlucky audience girl remains awkwardly perched on the side of the stage, not knowing whether to watch the sketch from her spot or return to her seat. The lonely Student, unaware of this new presence in his world, carefully selects his food items, pays the cashier and sits down to begin his meal. It isn’t long before his gaze falls on the girl from the audience, and the transformation is complete.

In this climatic moment of the show, the audience girl has not only become the embodiment of the Student’s love interest, but also mirrored the Performer’s initial entrance and completed the audience’s role in assisting with the show. The Student invites the girl to join the
sketch, even giving her an impromptu mime lesson before sitting her down for a romantic meal. The final moment of the sketch happens as the Student musters up the courage to suggestively lean in for what he hopes will be a kiss on the cheek. Once his goal is realized, both of the storylines have come full circle: the Student finally wins the love of the girl, and the Performer finally wins the love of the audience by successfully completing his at times disorderly and dysfunctional show. As he leads the girl back to her seat he begins conducting applause for her as if the director of a symphony. He eventually brings this extemporaneous applause to a crescendo, realizes it is for him, and finally bows, bringing the show to an abrupt and satisfying close.

* * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * * *

The Development

Perhaps the hardest part of creating LOSTIN COLLEGE: A Physical Comedy was maintaining what I call an inside-out approach to developing the body of the piece. In the beginning I had a tendency to want to run before I could walk, that is to say, I often found myself worrying about the larger picture of the show before having a solid center to build out from. At the strong urging of my advisors, I focused my early efforts on creating a solid foundation
from which I could then develop and add peripheral elements. Following my desire to communicate a story through the language of gesture that would resonate with fellow Boston College students, I began by developing the four silent sketches that I could rehearse and eventually perform on my own, each set in a familiar spot on campus. The process of developing and rehearsing a silent comedy sketch is not one that easily translates to the written word. Describing how I came up with certain bits on paper has proven to be both fruitless and frustrating. My hope is that by outlining the life of one particular sketch, the reader may catch some glimpse of my creative process, however distorted.

The development of a sketch called ‘The Newton Bus’ was instrumental in shaping the evolution of my piece as a whole. Not only did it teach me valuable lessons about simple story telling, but it also created the characters and circumstances that would provide me with comic fodder for the entire rest of my play. The reader may be interested to know that my ideas for the four supporting characters came from experiences of my own that I felt my peers could relate to. Any student who lived on Newton Campus can remember that cantankerous bus driver, that girl on the cell phone, and that guy who always pretended you were not there. The choice to include the pretty girl was
a conscious effort to begin a larger storyline that could be carried through the three other sketches. Motivated by the knowledge that the Fool is always in search of love, I felt that a love story would be the most appropriate and simple story to tell. At first I was not sure if the characters and situation that I set up in my first versions of ‘The Newton Bus’ would provide ample material for the rest of the sketches. I soon found that the simple relationships, conflicts, and storyline would provide me with more than enough material for future scenes.

One of the earliest lessons former mime Shep Barnett taught me was that the easiest way to develop a successful piece was to stick with a simple idea; as Harold Lloyd once said, “Comedy that is basic will live forever” (Madden, 136). To this end, Shep suggested that each sketch I created simply possess a clear ‘beginning’ aimed at establishing a specific environment, a ‘middle’ that would present characters, relationships and a conflict, and an ‘end’ that would provide a clear resolution to the problem. Though this model may seem fairly elementary on paper, implementing a clear ‘beginning,’ ‘middle,’ and ‘end’ proved to be quite the challenge. I had a tendency to want to fill each sketch with as much comic business as I could; I had to constantly remind myself that the most important ideas in the scene were simply the three characters and the
girl. In ‘The Newton Bus’, the ‘beginning’ shows a student waiting for something; it becomes clear that he is at the Bus stop once he starts watching other cars drive by. The ‘middle’ of the sketch begins once the bus arrives and he hops aboard. Discovering the interactions with the characters was somewhat extemporaneous and somewhat calculated. It made sense that the bus driver would be the first character to embody; each subsequent sketch consequently started with an interaction with the bus-driver in order to create some sense of connection between the sketches themselves. It is this sort of simple continuity makes a world of difference. The cell-phone girl and newspaper man were direct character choices on my part. Motivated by Irwin, who wrote a theatrical piece that basically makes fun of theatrical pieces, I wanted to tell a story that poked fun at the institution that I have grown to love over the past four years. Though I love BC, there are several things I can’t stand about the atmosphere. One of these things included a strong distaste for what many BC students do not seem to have a problem doing: making their private cell-phone conversations irreversibly public. I also take issue with a prevailing behavioral trend on our campus in which students will not say hello to each other unless they are more than just acquaintances. Everyday I see people who pretend they
don’t remember me or choose to ignore the fact that I exist. I wanted to express my dislike for this common practice, and the guy behind the newspaper is my version of one such person. It took a while for Shep to convince me that the simple story of meeting three people and falling in love with a pretty girl who gets away was enough to captivate an audience’s attention. It took me a while to trust that simple was better, but in the end I learned that a simple foundation can lead to a world of discoveries.
III. Conclusion

After a considerable amount of time for reflection, I am able now to look back on the piece I created with some level of objective reason and document some final impressions about what I created and how it affected me. In performance, LOSTIN COLLEGE: A Physical Comedy could not have been more thrilling. Looking back at a recording of each night (which has been included for the reader in this thesis package), I am reminded how much fun I had just goofing around. In the Saturday night performance there was a moment that I will never forget and that will forever guide me in any improvisational work I do in the future. In the sketch called ‘The Library’ I do a book juggling trick in which I flip a library book from my foot up into the air, catch it on my upper back and then, with a flick of my neck, fling it back into the air and finally grab it with my hands. I could not land the trick successfully during my Saturday night warm-ups, and when it came time to do the trick in the show I could feel myself shaking from nerves. Not surprisingly, my first attempt at the trick fact failed; in fact, the book careened into the front row of seats. For some reason I remained completely in character and simply gestured for the book back. A fine young man in the first row granted my request and the show
continued. Before my second attempt I decided to gesture
towards the girl who had helped me with the hat trick at
the beginning of the show as if to say “I might need you
again...pay attention!” The audience loved this, and their
laughter relaxed me to the point where I was able to flip
the book onto my back. The audience was so happy that I
had completed the first half of the trick that they
exploded into applause. For a reason that is still
unexplainable to me, I proceeded to shush the audience,
reminding them that we were in a library and that there
were people reading. This only inspired more laughter and
relaxed me further making it easy to finish the trick.
This moment, and others from each night, taught me to trust
my comic instincts and, above all else, to commit to the
character. Because the character of the Performer was so
concentrated on finishing the book trick, it was easy for
him to ask an audience member for the book back. Likewise,
the Student was so committed to the reality of a library
onstage that he actually silenced the audience so they
would not get in trouble with the librarian. The audience
response that I received in these moments and throughout
rest of the play was assurance enough of my success.

Hegel believed that the most efficient way to arrive
at truth was to establish a thesis, develop a contradictory
antithesis, and eventually combine and resolve the two into
a coherent synthesis. This process of dialectical interaction may best describe the project I have attempted to outline in the preceding pages. On the one hand, I undertook the academic endeavor of compiling a body of research that would increase my knowledge of comedy and the Fool. Through a quantifiable process of scholarly research, I became familiar with various physical comedians, their history, their place in the tradition, and their various styles and techniques. In contrast to this factually based thesis, I set out to construct a creative element that could aptly be defined as the antithesis of my scholarly research. Through this equally challenging endeavor, I not only learned practical movement skills, but also found the opportunity to exert my own creative comic instincts. Both halves of this project played an equal role in this process, influencing and directing each other at every juncture. I often chose where to focus my research based on what I wanted my creative project to be. Likewise, many of the difficult decisions regarding LOSTIN COLLEGE: A Physical Comedy, were made keeping in mind those theories and traditions of comedy I had researched. Upon the completion of my seemingly contradictory elements, I am now keen to reflect upon their synthesis.

I believe that the synthesis of my two opposing projects is in me. Though this may sound redundant, I am
convinced that the “truth” that may be gleaned from examining the interaction between my scholarly research and my creative project is that I have grown as a scholar and an actor. On one hand, I now have a greater knowledge of what ‘comedy’ is and what it means to be a part of a physically comic tradition that extends from Arlecchino to Bill Irwin. I understand that comedy is a regression to a more primitive, simple and free way of life; comedy is unconcerned with the rational laws of logic, and, like the Fool, is rather content to goof off.

I say that the synthesis of my theory and practice is in me because through the opposing processes of intellectual contemplation and physical exploration I have come to the conclusion that the Fool lives in me, his comic philosophy towards life often seeping into my everyday routine. One reason I believe this project was so successful is because of the amount of pleasure I derived from it. The restless athlete in me found occupation in my own version of Arlecchino’s physical poetry. My “impish spirit,” which I identified at the beginning of this document, found amusement in a theatrical playground that included two other actors, an audience, and a host of Irwinian props. As a performer intent on pursuing a professional career in theatre, I now feel that I have a greater practical knowledge about what it means to perform
physical Comedy, and how one can endeavor to create a piece of theatre from scratch. This process has bolstered the confidence I have in my own abilities not only as a physical comedian, but also as a playwright. Jean Cocteau describes the ideal theatre man as an athlete complet (complete athlete), a man who can produce every aspect of a play for the theatre. Though I may be a far cry from Cocteau’s hypothetical ideal, I have demonstrated to myself and others that I have the abilities to research and create a piece of theatre all my own; this is a validation that I consider invaluable as I continue to grow as an artist, intellectual and individual.
Bibliography

London: Rockliff, 1951.


Duchartre, Pierre Louis. The Italian Comedy. 


Towns, John H. *Clowns*.

Wangh, Stephen. *An Acrobat of the Heart*.

Young, Jordan R. *Acting Solo: The Art of One-Man Shows*.
Supplemental Materials

- *LOSTIN COLLEGE: A Physical Comedy Script (Draft)*
- Newton Bus Sketch (Draft)
- Newton Bus Internal Monologue
- The BC Heights Newspaper Review
- Publicity Poster
- Performance Program
- *LOSTIN COLLEGE: A Physical Comedy DVD*
On stage right is the official Boston College Podium with the words Boston College in Solid Gold Lettering on the front, except the “B” has been covered up with an “L” and the second “O” has been replaced with an “I” to create “Lostin College." In the center of the stage are seven 16-inch platforms that form a small stage upon the stage. Onstage there is nothing. In front of the stage is a microphone sitting in a boom mic stand, its wire runs under the platforms. Behind the platforms is a large projector screen. Ragtime music plays as the audience enters.

Once the lights dim, a large, awkward man called THE PROFESSOR enters from the back door in the theatre, he walks through the center aisle of the audience and approaches the podium.

THE PROFESSOR: Welcome to the Bonn Studio in the Robsham Theatre Arts Center. Tonight’s performance of Lostin College (he gestures to the podium where 'Boston College’ has been replaced by 'Lostin College’): a Physical Comedy will run approximately 30-40 minutes. The State law of Massachusetts requires me to inform you that there are fire exits located (he indicates) here and here, should we need to evacuate. In the event of a fire, please exit the building calmly and orderly, but please don’t prop the doors for others, “Per Order of the Boston Fire Dept.”

(Pause...maybe this is the end of his little speech...and then...)

In the event of an earthquake, please remember to (miming the actions with little energy) “Duck and Cover” under your seat protecting the back of your neck with your hands like so (he demonstrates). Should an earthquake occur, the plastic seats your are now sitting on will protect you from large falling objects, (he points above him) like lighting instruments and heavy sound equipment.

(Another pause)
(In all seriousness) In the event of a hurricane or tornado please remember to hold on to your belongings, as strong winds may scatter debris, animals and small children.

(Another pause)

(Even more serious) Should a volcano erupt, please remember that molten lava can reach temperatures up to 1,250 degrees Celsius or 2,282 degrees Fahrenheit, please stay clear of liquid hot magma and also be mindful of debris avalanches and blankets of ash that may result.

(Another short pause)

In the event of Tsunami...

(He stops and realizes that this is out of taste...and is frozen...he doesn’t know what to do...panic barely registers on his face..then he slowly inches out from behind his podium. Sidesteps over to the platforms platforms that make up the stage...He reaches under the nearest platform and pulls out an envelope with “Emergency Disclaimer” written in Bold Letters on the Front..he removes a piece of paper and reads from it)

This announcement and all other material you will see tonight in no way reflect the attitudes or beliefs of the Robsham Theatre Arts Center, the faculty, staff or students of Boston College.

(He breathes a sigh of relieve; his ass is safe at least)

(THE PERFORMER enters from the main entrance of the theatre, as if he were an audience member who has arrived late. He is looking for his seat. He carries a large bag of what appears to be popcorn...he ad libs with the audience as need be)

Tonight’s performance will run approximately 40 minutes. There will be no intermission. I would like to take this opportunity to ask you to silence all cell phones and pagers, as they are distracting to the actors ...

(Suddenly a cell-phone ring is heard...THE PERFORMER likes the obnoxious tone and starts to dance to it...he stops, realizes it is his phone that is ringing, and then pulls it
out to answer it... just before speaking into it, he catches
the eye of THE PROFESSOR who is glaring at him. He hangs
up and puts it away and finally finds his seat. THE
PROFESSOR continues)

If you have any cough drops, medicine or candy...

(THE PERFORMER takes out giant cough drop and begins to
unwrap it)

That you anticipate needing during the show...

(THE PROFESSOR pauses...the noise is getting to him, it
irks the very depths of his soul),

please take this time to unwrap them...

(pauses again... he sees it is THE PERFORMER; the
frustration registers on his face)

...as the noise may be distracting to the actors and fellow
audience members.

(THE PROFESSOR walks briskly into the audience and
addresses THE PERFORMER)

Psssst... hey... (THE PERFORMER waves)... yes hi... you’re an hour
late... you were supposed to be here at 7... (THE PERFORMER
silently compliments THE PROFESSOR on his outfit) I don’t
care if you think it’s becoming on me... go... get you’re stuff... I
look like an idiot up here reading this crap you wrote... go!
go get your stuff, we have to start!

(THE PERFORMER realizes he is indeed late and starts to
leave... he then turns back around and offers THE PROFESSOR
some of the popcorn he has been chewing on... THE PROFESSOR
takes a bite)

...mmm... this is pretty good... is this kettle korn (THE
PERFORMER nods)... it’s sweeter... that’s how you can
tell... there’s less butter... (realizing the audience is
waiting)... JUST GO!

(During this next speech THE PERFORMER drags on a large
travel trunk, the kind one might expect a traveling
vaudeville performer to have owned)
Welcome to the Bonn Studio in the Robsham Theatre Arts Center. Tonight’s performance of Lost in College (he again gestures to the podium): a Physical Comedy will run approximately 30-40 minutes.

By this time THE PERFORMER has dragged the trunk center stage and is waiting for THE PROFESSOR to leave...

Ya know...there are in fact, several different theories on the derivation of the word “comedy.” On the one hand scholars believe...

Finally THE PERFORMER makes it clear that THE PROFESSOR should be leaving...THE PROFESSOR reluctantly obliges. THE PERFORMER proceeds to open the trunk with the lid blocking an audience member from viewing the trunk’s contents. With all the flair of a magician, THE PERFORMER reaches into the box first extracts a set of juggling balls...he juggles...then grows tired of them...he sees something else...he pulls out the juggling pins...same result...the same sequence with a bowler hat, cane and library book...finally he sees what he is reallly looking for and extracts an old-fashion accordion which he places on one of the blocks on the stage. He returns to the trunk and pulls out THE ACCORDION PLAYER who appears as though he has just woken up. He is groggy and takes a minute to grasp his surroundings. THE PERFORMER places him to the side of the trunk and then brings him his accordion. THE ACCORDION PLAYER now knows what is going on, he begins to play “For Boston” (note: the first verse should be melancholy, perhaps in a minor key, followed by a second verse that is more lively and upbeat). Meanwhile, THE PERFORMER drags the trunk to the stage left corner. He then directs THE ACCORDION PLAYER who is still playing over to the trunk and sits him down on the corner. As THE PERFORMER exits the lights dim, leaving THE ACCORDION PLAYER as the only thing lit onstage. As THE ACCORDION PLAYER finishes “For Boston” his melody morphs into” a polka dance. After this change in music, the lights come up on the state upon the stage and THE PERFORMER re-enters and hops up on the platform stage.

He heads straight for the microphone but is halted by earsplitting feedback...he backs away...he tries again with the same result...He finally sneaks up on the microphone and stops the feedback by sticking the thing in his crotch. His next task is to bring up the image on the projector screen. He signals to the booth for them to bring up the image...he gets no response...he continues...finally, he steps in front of the screen to chastise whoever is working
the projector machine...as he begins to do so the image
finally comes up and he is blinded. He again signals for
the lights to come down...
They finally do and only a light over the podium remains he
prepares for the scene. THE PROFESSOR enters from stage
right.

THE PROFESSOR: Sketch #1, “The Newton Bus”

{THE NEWTON BUS SKETCH}

The end of the sketch is marked as the bus pulls away and
he watches the girl walk away. He slumps down and the
lights fade.

Next, the interlude lights are come up.

THE PROFESSOR enters from stage right and walks to the
podium. He begins a lecture that he seems to be excited to
get the chance to give:

THE PROFESSOR: There are in fact, several different
theories on the derivation of the word “comedy.” On the
one hand scholars believe...

A cell phone is heard. THE PROFESSOR is incredulous, he
looks out over the crowd awaiting the pleasure of scolding
someone...a pause...he realizes it is his own...he sheepishly
reaches into his pocket and answers the phone

Hey man...no, I’m doing this thing....no for that guy...the one
that looks like a cross between Jude Law, Justin Timberlake
and Princess Diana...yeah...that’s the one...no he doesn’t know
it was us that called...he still thinks it was YALE....I
know...ok...huh...I don’t know, stick a peanut in it...ok..gotta

The Lights have dimmed for him to announce
the next sketch

Sketch #2, “The Complex”

Lights goes out as “The Complex” slide comes up on the
screen
A. {THE COMPLEX SKETCH}

After the Lights go down on the Sketch, THE PROFESSOR Approaches his podium,

THE PROFESSOR: Idiosyncratic Love Song #1

Lights up on THE ACCORDION PLAYER who is still sitting on his trunk. He plays and sings a love song that is both quirky and charming.

After the song, THE PROFESSOR returns to his podium and announces,

THE PROFESSOR: Sketch #3, “The Library”

B. {THE LIBRARY SKETCH}

At the end of the Library Sketch, THE ACCORDION PLAYER is onstage and continues to play the polka that he started in the last bit. THE PROFESSOR returns to his podium.

THE PROFESSOR: One of the obvious limitations of performing with a small cast in which one particular actor continually occupies the spotlight, is that said actor must be given ample time to rest and recollect his thoughts as he prepares for the next hilarious sketch.

(THE PERFORMER, comes out to the trunk in a bathrobe and grabs a pillow from inside…he moves up onstage and tries to go to sleep. Seeing this might be his one opportunity to give his exciting lecture, THE PROFESSOR continues…)

THE PROFESSOR: Comic theorists have never conclusively agreed on the actual derivation of the word “comedy”, but several scholarly suggestions seem to provide the most convincing evidence for the origin and meaning of the word. Originally it was thought that “comedy” was derived from ‘koma,’ meaning ‘sleep’ (he points to the sleeping performer) and ‘oide,’ meaning ‘song.’ (he points to THE ACCORDION PLAYER) As comic dreamers, we the audience, escape to a world of fantasy where the limits of time, space and circumstance are eradicated, and anything becomes possible.

Aristotle is among the many ancients who gave some credence to the Doric tradition of deriving “comedy” from
“kome” or “country village.” The comic hero is often portrayed therefore as a country simpleton with less than a civilized level of intelligence (THE PERFORMER ad libs some stupid behavior) And like the country-folk that are his brethren, the comic hero is content with pursuing the simple pleasures of life. His main pursuits are Love…and Food... (THE PERFORMER flirts with woman in the audience, then pretends like he is going to eat her arm)

The Derivation that scholars believe is not only the most accurate but also the most comprehensive is the word “komos” which described the wild, wine-soaked, no-holds-barred revel which characterized many of Ancient Greece’s (he makes quotes with his hands) “Old Comedies”. “Komos” is a “revel without a cause” in which participants are free to indulge their pleasures for drink, dance, song and the flesh, without fear of repercussion.

It will now be my extreme pleasure to recreate one of the country rituals that may have given rise to the very genre we know today as comedy. I beg your indulgence, as I join the sacred and the carnal “at the hip” (he points to his hips)…The Dance of the Komos!

(he wakes up THE ACCORDION PLAYER and then indicates for him to begin playing. His dance is a combination of sacred ritual dance and wild sexual movements, he alternates between the two on the varying verses of the song. Meanwhile, THE PERFORMER has made himself comfortable with one of the ladies in the audience and now realizing that there is dancing going on, invites her up onstage to dance with him. Soon he is stealing THE PROFESSOR’s thunder and THE PROFESSOR is none too pleased about his. He stops...tells THE ACCORDION PLAYER to stop and then walks over to the podium and announces in an angry tone:

Sketch #4 : The Dining Hall!

Immediately, the Lights change to indicate that the sketch is starting...THE PERFORMER and girl are caught onstage...he indicates for her to stay there while he does the sketch...the projector screen comes up...

C. {THE DINING HALL SKETCH}

After the sketch, THE PERFORMER walks the girl back to her seat and indicates for the audience to clap for her. He proceeds to lead the clapping like an orchestra conductor
until he has everyone clapping for him quite loudly. He bows, brings out his fellow actors and the show is over.

THE END
This is a working draft of

**The Newton Bus Sketch**

A young college student in baggy pants, overalls and bowler hat stands waiting for the Newton Bus...he checks his watch...he rolls his eyes at the audience and looks up the street. One car zooms by and the accordion player plays the sound of a honking horn...the Performer is pleased by this...he gives the accordion player the thumbs up...another car goes bye...the third car zooms by...the student is surprised at how fast that last car was going.

The bus finally appears down the road. The student rolls his eyes to the audience again as if to say “finally...it’s about time”. The bus pulls up in front of the student. The doors open and the student grabs the handrails and prepares to jump onboard. He finally propels himself to the top step...he is proud of his athletic feat. He tips his hat to the bus driver.

The bus driver (played by the same actor as the student...all characters are played by the same Performer) grimaces at the ebullient youth and mumbles some crabby response followed by a head motion that can only suggest “get the hell on the bus you idiot”

The student shares his surprise at the bus driver’s bad mood with the audience. He then starts to look for a place to sit on the bus. Instantly he hears some loud obnoxious noise, he looks and there he sees a girl babbling away on her cell phone. She has the phone in one hand and her purse (the actor uses his hat for this) in the other.

Cell-phone girl babbles away and then reaches into her purse for something. She pulls out a date book from which she reads some important information to whoever is on the phone.

The student is taken aback by how loud she is; he sticks his finger in his ear and twists it as if to suggest to the audience that her banter has left him temporarily deaf. He continues searching for a seat.

The next person he sees is an acquaintance who he recognizes from his Orientation group. The student is excited to see him on the bus and says hello.
The acquaintance looks up from his newspaper (the hat again)…he looks left, he looks right, he looks up…he then vanishes behind the newspaper clearly choosing to ignore our friend the student.

The student shrugs, shows his disappointment to the audience, and moves on. There is clearly no place to sit as he looks left and right for a seat, he finally decides to squeeze in between two people standing. He begs the pardon of the two passengers as he slides between them. He removes his hat and places it over his heart as the bus lurches to a start.

As he bounces along with the movement of the bus, the student observes the others around him. He gaze soon lands on a girl standing across the aisle from him. She is gorgeous, and he is instantly in love. He turns to the audience and mouths the word “WOW” to show his excitement. The Performer uses the Bowler hat to simulate a heartbeat, as the student finds his body attracted, as if magnetically, to this new girl. The student soon hears the sound of the heartbeat, but is unsure where the sound if coming from. When he finally realizes it is his own heart pounding. He lets go of the handrail to stop his heart from beating, only to be lurched forward by the movement of the bus. As soon as he gets a hand back the rail, the heartbeat starts again, only this time it is double the speed it was before.

Finally the bus comes to a staggering halt. The student looks at the girl, then the audience. He shows his bashfulness by putting his hand in his mouth and shrinking his frame down into itself. He turns to talk to the girl, realizes his neck is compressed into his shoulders, and turns back to the audience.

After successfully pulling his head out of his shoulders, the student takes a deep breath and turns to talk to the girl. He quickly turns back to the audience, as if to say “What should I say to her?” he quickly has an idea.

He decided to perform a hat trick that will help him introduce himself. Of course the trick fails and he ends up hitting himself is the face with the hat.

Finally, he calms down and decides he is just going to go saying hello. Just as he steps toward the girl’s side of the bus, passengers start to leave the bus. A passenger
pushes by his right shoulder and the student apologizes for getting in the way. Immediately the same happens on the left shoulder and then the right again, this time spinning the student all the way around.

Finally he looks back for the girl, but she is gone. He sees her outside and rushes to the door only to be clobbered by oncoming passengers. He finally makes it to the window, trying to get her attention. His efforts are useless, she cannot see him, and he watches her disappear from sight as the bus pulls away.

The last image is of the student as he turns around, looks to the audience and collapses, a ball of sadness in his seat.
Newton Bus Internal Monologue

I wonder where that bus is. There goes one car. There goes another. Zoom! Wow that one was going fast! Is this bus going to be late again? AH! Here is comes. I’m glad it’s finally here, now I can get to class on time.

Hey there bus driver...how are you?

Bus Driver: You stupid kid, do you have any idea how boring it is to drive this bus back and forth all day?

Oh- sorry, have a nice day anyway...jezz he’s in a bad mood.

Well, guess I’ll just find a seat....who is that girl?

Girl: Oh my god you would not believe what he said to me. He was like “I think you’re cute, but I don’t want to date you,” and I was like “well then why did you ask if you could take me to the movies?” ...What? Jennny’s number...yeah hold on.....617-829-5684...So anyway...I was like “are you serious?”

Me: Whoa- that girl is crazy...why is she talking on her cell phone for the whole bus to hear?...Oh well...wonder if there is a seat on this side of the bus....Hey- John, it’s great to see you...how have you been?

Newspaper man: I someone talking to me...oh god who is it....Oh it’s that annoying theatre kid, I can’t be seen talking to him on the bus...maybe if I hide behind my newspaper he won’t see me.

Me: I guess he doesn’t remember me...Oh well, I’ll just pretend that nothing happened....Well guess I’ll just stand since it seems that all the seats are taken...oh- who is that? She is beautiful!...I think I’m in love! What is that noise? Is it him?....Is it Cell-phone girl?...Oh my god it’s me.....Ahh...I hope no one saw that....Phew the bus has stopped. Ok- I have to go talk to her...wait...what am I going to say...I know...I’ll impress her with a hat trick...damn....ok...I’ll just go tell her that I think she is pretty.

Ahh people are getting off! Wait...I want to talk to you pretty girl! Ahh now people are getting on...I need to get
off...wait! Oh—there she goes...I’ll probably never see her again...