Animal Crackers
Book by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind
Music and Lyrics by Bert Kalmar and Harry Ruby
Directed by Henry Wishcamper

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For more information related to Animal Crackers, lesson plans and activities please visit our Knowledge Nucleus at: www.goodmaneacp.typepad.com
My Love Affair with the Brothers Marx
Introduction to the Study Guide
BY WILLA J. TAYLOR, DIRECTOR OF EDUCATION AND COMMUNITY PROGRAMS

When I was a kid, I would rush home every day from school so that I could get there in time for “Dialing for Dollars.” A local TV production (there were only three TV channels then), it was a combination game-show and movie. At the beginning of the show the host would announce a certain password and then, during commercial breaks, randomly select a phone number from a bowl or drum and call it. If the viewer was watching the show, they would know that they were being called, answer the phone with the correct password, and win a cash prize. If the number did not answer, the prize money would continue to increase.

My grandmother was addicted to the show and although I think she always secretly hoped our phone would ring, the thing she loved most was the movies. Mostly in black and white, they were pulp-fiction tales of damsels in distress, noir-ish detective stories, westerns, and musical comedies featuring elaborate dance numbers and huge penthouse apartments in New York.

One day I came in and there were these odd-looking, fast-talking guys trying to disguise a race horse. I was fascinated. It took all the concentration I could muster just to understand what they were saying but my Nana was in stitches. It was A Day at the Races and it was my introduction to the Marx Brothers. I fell completely in love.

Harpo, Chico, Zeppo and Groucho became my idols. Their verbal acuity and often groan-inducing puns, their brilliant physical comedy and their triumph (always over the pompous, the arrogant, the rich and the crooked) thrilled me. The plots— even when I was a kid—were banal at best. But their impeccable timing... wow.

And although I would never admit this to my mother the librarian, I got my love of language from the Marx Brothers. The quickness of their wit, the ability to play with homophones, homonyms and non-sequiturs, these were the things that made me read everything I could get my hands on just so I could get all the jokes.

This study guide is filled with articles and research that will give you the context of the era of the Marx Brothers’ heyday, some discussion of the essence of Harpo’s brilliance (his clowning) and historical information on some of the references in the show.

It is rare that I get to introduce students to something that I love. It will most likely be something you aren’t used to. Some of the jokes are so rooted in their time period that you may miss them. But if you give yourself over to the production, both the satire and the insanity, you will find that much of it is still fresh.

And it is still funny today.
Animal Crackers Synopsis

The luxurious Rittenhouse Manor is aflurry with preparations for the most important social event of the season. The doyenne of New York society, Mrs. Rittenhouse is throwing a lavish weekend party in honor of Captain Jeffrey T. Spaulding, famed African explorer. In honor of Spaulding, she has arranged to unveil the priceless Beaugard painting “After the Hunt,” on loan to her for the occasion by Roscoe W. Chandler, well-known art collector and businessman.

The guest list for the soiree includes Mrs. Rittenhouse’s daughter Arabella, who she is eager to marry off to Wally Winston, eligible bachelor and society columnist covering the party; her Long Island neighbors—and society rivals—Mrs. Whitehead and her sister Grace; Monsieur Doucet, Chandler’s personal art dealer; and the young lovers John Parker, a struggling painter himself, and Mary Stewart, a reporter.

The jealous Grace and Mrs. Whitehead are desperate to disrupt the party and enlist Hives, Mrs. Rittenhouse’s valet (and their former loyal employee), in a plot to substitute the original Beaugard with a cheap copy. But they aren’t the only ones: Mary persuade John to replace the painting with the replica he made in art school, hoping that Chandler will be so impressed with John’s work that he’ll commission him and they’ll be able to marry.

Captain Spaulding arrives in grand fashion with his secretary Jamison. As the guests are welcoming him, Signor Emanuel Ravelli and his cohort The Professor join the festivities. Ravelli, who has been hired to entertain at the party, recognizes Chandler as an imposter from Czechoslovakia. As Chandler buys Ravelli’s silence, Arabella overhears them and gives the scoop to Winston. Thrilled with this break—and with Arabella—Winston confesses his love for her, then rushes off to file his story.

Mary convinces Ravelli and The Professor to switch the paintings. The guests gather for the unveiling, and as the curtain opens, Doucet is outraged. The painting is a fake! The Beaugard is gone! The lights are knocked out by the storm and when they come back on, the fake is missing, too! Captain Spaulding leads the guests in searching the entire estate.

The following day, Hives informs Mrs. Whitehead and her sister that both their fake and the original Beaugard are missing. As everyone waits for the police to arrive, Wally gets a telegram from his newspaper. Thinking it is the raise and promotion he so richly deserves, he is stunned when he reads he’s been fired for his scoop. He didn’t realize the imposter Chandler was the owner of the paper!

As the police arrive, Captain Spaulding decides to take over the investigation—with dubious help from Ravelli. As the search unfolds, John is implicated in the theft of the original when it is found in his bedroom. To distract the authorities and help John and Mary escape, The Professor—who has been spotted with all three paintings—sprays all the guests with chloroform.

As the entire house sleeps, The Professor has a dream that shapes the conclusion of the story with a dizzying explanation of the shenanigans at the estate. As would only be forgivable of the Marx Brothers, the play ends with a nonsensical resolution that leaves everyone in the house—and in the audience—happier than ever.

Joey Slotnick (Captain Spaulding/Groucho), Molly Brennan (The Professor/Harpo) and Jonathan Brody (Emanuel Ravelli/Chico) appear in the poster for Animal Crackers. Design by Kelly Rickert.
From the backwaters of the American vaudeville circuit to Broadway to the silver screen, four madcap brothers slugged, mugged and shrugged their way to hard-earned show business success. By the dawn of the Great Depression, Groucho, Chico, Harpo and Zeppo Marx had created three hit shows on the Great White Way, and the aplomb with which they perpetrated their trademark lunacy would soon catapult them to stardom during Hollywood’s “Golden Era.”

Born in New York City between 1887 and 1901, the Marx Brothers grew up with immigrant parents—and names that didn’t end in “o.” Their French father Simon Marx (later known as Samuel Marx) was “the worst tailor in New York, including Chicago and LA,” according to Groucho. Their German mother Minnie, the daughter of music hall performers, masterminded and managed the brothers’ early careers in vaudeville. There were five brothers in all: Leonard (later Chico), Adolph (Harpo), Julius (Groucho), Herbert (Zeppo) and Milton (Gummo), who briefly performed in vaudeville before becoming a talent agent. Groucho, Harpo and Chico would become the best-known brothers; legend has it that Gummo’s young son told his classmates that his father was Harpo Marx. When Gummo confronted him about the lie the child exclaimed, “Well, who’s ever heard of Gummo Marx?”

Poor-stricken but filled with seemingly limitless energy, the young Marxes dropped out of school early, worked unsuccessfully at odd jobs and got into fights. But Minnie and her brother, the noted vaudeville singer and writer Al Shean, soon found a way to turn the brood’s wild energy into bread. Groucho was already a successful juvenile singer and song plugger. In 1907, he and Gummo joined forces with an allegedly cross-eyed singer named Mabel O’Donnell to form an act called The Three Nightingales. Other family members and friends soon joined the act, necessitating frequent name changes to indicate the accurate number of singing birds. The act toured the small vaudeville houses of the Midwest and the South without notable success.

Legend has it that one night in 1912, as the Nightingales (now known as The Mascots) harmonized in Nacogdoches, TX, their act was interrupted by a commotion on the street. A local mule was on the lam, and the audience hotfooted out to witness the excitement. Furious that a mule had made asses of them, the brothers flew into a fitful (and fateful) rage, lambasting the crowd for leaving during the act. “Nacogdoches,” growled Groucho, “is full of roaches.” Rather than taking offense, the crowd laughed—and the Marx Brothers turned from singing to comedy.
Their first comic act, *Fun in Hi Skule* (later known as *Home Again*) featured Groucho as a teacher with a German accent and Gummo, Chico and Harpo as his hapless students. Uncle Al Shean helped the brothers by doctoring the script, although the real key to the act’s health was a strong dose of improvisation. Years later, Groucho would recall an impromptu question he shouted out during a mock grammar lesson: “What are the principal parts of a cat?” to which Gummo responded, “Eyes, ears, nose, cheeks and tail.”

During this period the brothers also evolved the distinctive characters they would play for the rest of their lives: Groucho acquired glasses, a greasepaint mustache and a cigar; Chico took on a phony Italian accent and rapid-fire piano playing; and Harpo stopped talking, began wearing a red wig and took up the harp. Eventually Gummo, who often played the straight man, left the act. He was replaced by Zeppo, who would forever be known as “the fourth Marx Brother.”

The brothers’ uninhibited clowning became increasingly popular on the vaudeville circuit until their act was finally booked at New York’s Palace Theatre, the crown jewel of vaudeville houses. In 1924, the Marxes staged their first “legitimate” Broadway show, a revue entitled *I’ll Say She Is*. Replete with songs, shtick and the ever-present chorus of pulchritudinous dancing ladies, their first foray onto the Great White Way led to another show more tailored to the brothers’ unique comic style: *The Cocoanuts* (1925), featuring music and lyrics by Irving Berlin and a book by George S. Kaufman and Morrie Ryskind. The plot revolved around a crooked Florida hotel proprietor (Groucho) whose schemes were abetted and thwarted by Silent Sam (Harpo) and Willie the Wop (Chico). Zeppo played Jamison, the hotel desk clerk. *The Cocoanuts* was an out-and-out smash hit and established the Marx Brothers as the premier comic act in America.

Their next stage collaboration with writers Kaufman and Ryskind, *Animal Crackers*, debuted in 1928. Groucho cavorted as African explorer Captain Jeffrey T. Spaulding; Harpo capered quietly as The Professor (of what subject, it’s never clear); Chico hammed it up as Signor Emanuel Ravelli; Margaret Dumont (who had first appeared with the Marxes in *The Cocoanuts*) established herself as Groucho’s eternal foil as Mrs. Rittenhouse; and Zeppo played a character named Jamison.

During the five-month run of *Animal Crackers*, the Marx Brothers made their first feature film, *The Cocoanuts*, at Paramount’s Long Island Studios. The laborious process by which films were made in the “talkies” era (particularly given the unwieldy sound equipment) at first seemed antithetical to the improvisational energy of the Marxes, and the brothers had to work to keep their performances fresh through endless takes. But despite a few hiccups, *The Cocoanuts* was a resounding success, bringing the brothers’ comic genius to a mass audience. The following year, the Marx Brothers committed *Animal Crackers* to film and themselves to life as cinematic performers; they would never again appear on Broadway. In the early 1930s they would create such comic gems as *Monkey Business*, *Horse Feathers* and *Duck Soup* with Paramount Pictures.
Zeppo soon followed in Gummo’s footsteps and left the act. His exit proved as unremarkable as his tenure as a performing Marx Brother; the press and his brothers scarcely noticed his departure. In an interview four decades later, Zeppo expressed his distaste for his straight-man status: “I always wanted to do comedy, but I never had the opportunity because with three boys doing comedy there wasn’t room for another comedian.” In fact, Zeppo had been an adept understudy for his brothers and even went on once for Groucho in Animal Crackers. “He was so good as Captain Spaulding,” remarked Groucho, “that I would have let him play the part indefinitely, if they had let me smoke in the audience.” But Zeppo put his quick wit to better use and joined Gummo as a theatrical agent. He also owned a company that manufactured the clamping devices used to hold the atomic bomb inside the B-29 bomber plane as it passed over Japan in 1945.

After a falling-out with Paramount, Groucho, Chico and Harpo fell in with Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), where they made their best-known films: A Night at the Opera, A Day at the Races, At the Circus, Go West and The Big Store. The brothers soon announced their retirement from the screen, although they would later renege on that promise when Chico gambled himself into bankruptcy. In the late 1940s, A Night in Casablanca and Love Happy would complete the Marx Brothers’ cinematic oeuvre.

By the time the brothers passed away in the 1960s and ’70s, film and television had long since replaced vaudeville as America’s primary entertainment, and specialty acts had been traded for plot-driven shows. But the Marx Brothers’ films preserve their distinctly vaudevillian performance style. It is this chaotic yet controlled style that inspired director Henry Wishcamper as he adapted Animal Crackers for the Goodman audience.

The One-Liner

A one-liner is exactly what it sounds like—a single sentence that includes both the set-up and punch line of a joke. It was on vaudeville stages that Americans first met Jack Benny and George Burns, comedians infamous for their mastery of the comic device. After the fall of vaudeville in the late 1920s, the Marx Brothers (particularly Groucho) carried the torch.

Try coming up with a one-liner of your own!

Famous Groucho-isms include:
• You go Uruguay and I’ll go mine.
• I won’t belong to any organization that would have me as a member.
• If you fall out of that window and break both your legs, don’t come running to me.
• My brother thinks he’s a chicken—we don’t talk him out of it because we need the eggs.
• I’ve got the brain of a four-year-old and I’ll bet he was glad to be rid of it.
• I was married by a judge but I should have asked for a jury.
• I never forget a face, but in your case, I’ll be glad to make an exception.
• Although it is generally known, I think it’s about time to announce that I was born at a very early age.
The film version of *Animal Crackers* was a hit upon its release in 1930. Captain Spaulding’s quips were quick to enter the comedic vernacular and he became Groucho’s most famous and best-loved character. Chico and Harpo’s scene in the dark searching for “the flash” is a classic.

Despite the film’s success and enduring popularity as an iconic Marx Brothers romp, Paramount sold all of their vintage movies to Universal, who had allowed their licensing rights to expire. The rights and ownership of the film then reverted back to the writers of the original stage version: George S. Kaufman, Morrie Ryskind, Harry Ruby and Bert Kalmar. By the 1970s, the print of the film itself had fallen into such disrepair that the reels being shown at screenings were bootlegs of the original and in very poor condition. It was at this point that a UCLA student, Steve Stoliar, contacted Groucho Marx and formed a student action committee dedicated to the refurbishment and rerelease of *Animal Crackers*. Stoliar’s Committee for the Rerelease of *Animal Crackers* (CRAC) held an event that drew 2,000 people, including Groucho himself, who regaled the crowd with his famous wit and proclaimed *Animal Crackers* the best of the Marx Brothers films. Universal took notice and in May of 1974 the studio remastered *Animal Crackers* into a clean new print. The studio then rereleased this print in the Westwood Theatre in Los Angeles, CA to gauge public interest. The public response was overwhelming and the 44-year-old film went into widespread national release playing to huge crowds.

*Animal Crackers’* tremendous popularity endures. “Hooray for Captain Spaulding” became Groucho’s anthem and a jazzy-up version of the song served as the theme song for his 1970s television show *You Bet Your Life*. The song also turned up years later in Woody Allen’s 1996 film *Everyone Says I Love You*. In a touching homage to the Marx Brothers—whom Allen cites as a major comedic influence—“Hooray for Captain Spaulding” is included in the musical score of the film as a full-scale musical number.

To watch clips *Animal Crackers*, check out our Knowledge Nucleus online at [www.goodmaneacp.typepad.com](http://www.goodmaneacp.typepad.com).
Few things could seem more quintessentially New York than the Marx Brothers’ rapid-fire comic antics; however, it was during the decade the Marx Brothers spent in Chicago that their act acquired many of its renowned characteristics. Their indefatigable mother/manager Minnie moved the brothers (then part of a musical act known as The Six Mascots) to the Windy City in 1910 on the advice of her brother, noted vaudevillian Al Shean. Here the Mascots played the small-time vaudeville houses that proliferated in the city and ventured forth into the rough-and-tumble Midwestern and Southern vaudeville circuits.

To augment their income the family purchased a farm in then-rural La Grange, IL, raising chickens and, improbably, guinea pigs, which they tried to sell (unsuccessfully) to scientific organizations for research. When the brothers began spending more time at Wrigley Field and Comiskey Park than on the farm, the family moved to a house on the South Side’s Grand Boulevard. Minnie also established the Minnie Palmer Agency, representing a variety of marginal vaudeville acts.

In an effort to spark response from audiences unimpressed by the Mascots’ musical prowess, the brothers began using ad-libbed humor in their act; their uninhibited improvisation attracted attention. In 1914 in Rockford, IL, the Mascots were officially rechristened the Marx Brothers.

After a successful engagement of their act *Home Again* at Chicago’s Wilson Avenue Theatre, the brothers hit the big time: a 30-week contract on the Orpheum Circuit, culminating in a booking at the famed Palace Theatre in New York. By 1919, the act’s success was assured, and the brothers returned to New York where their stage triumphs would soon be eclipsed by their success in a new medium: talking pictures.

**The Marx Brothers at Chicago’s Wilson Avenue Theatre**

The Marx Brothers performed their successful act *Home Again* in the Wilson Avenue Theater before traveling with the Orpheum Circuit to the Palace Theatre in New York, NY. Located in what is currently the Ravenswood neighborhood, the Wilson Avenue Theater opened on July 19, 1909, as a vaudeville house for Chicago’s uptown citizens. It was designed for the Jones, Linick and Shaefner circuit by architect Henry L. Ottenheimer. The theater was able to seat up to 900 patrons (Goodman’s Albert theatre seats 856.) The inside of the house boasted a gold paint treatment with an elaborate mural over the proscenium.

The year that the Marx Brothers secured a spot with the Orpheum Circuit as a touring vaudeville act was the year that the Wilson Avenue Theater closed its doors for good. The theater was converted to a Fidelity Bank in 1919. Today the building houses a TCF Bank, with murals on either side of the building. Although the building has been home to at least four banks since the Wilson Avenue Theater closed, the remnants of the original structure that housed the Marx Brothers remain apparent.

*ABOVE: The four Marx Brothers in 1912 while living in Chicago (note the Chicago photographic studio). Photo courtesy of the Paul G. Wesolowski collection.*
The Transition to Talkies: A Brief History of Early Cinema

- **1888** The *Roundhay Garden Scene* is credited as the first film.

- **1893** Thomas Edison is granted Patent #493,426 for “An Apparatus for Exhibiting Photographs of Moving Objects” (the Kinetoscope).

- **1896** The first theater in the United States dedicated to showing motion pictures is Vitavcope Hall in New Orleans, LA. Also that year, the first female film director, Alice Guy-Blaché, presents *The Cabbage Fairy*.

- **1897** Filmmaker Harischandra Skharam Bhatvadekar debuts the first documentary film, a wrestling match in Bombay, India.

- **1899** *Cinderella* is not only one of the first films to stretch over 100 meters, but also the first film to use a photographic dissolve (or fade).

- **1905** The first “Nickelodeon” is born when Harry Davis and John P. Harris open their small, storefront theater in Pittsburgh, PA, and charged a nickel for the price of admission.


- **1909** Matsunosuke Onoe, the first superstar of Japanese cinema, debuts in his first film, *Goban Tadanobu*.

- **1911** Nestor Studios launches the first motion picture studio in Hollywood, CA.

- **1912** Lillian Gish, “The First Lady of the Silent Screen,” stars in her first film.

- **1915** D.W. Griffith directs *The Birth of a Nation*, a film that champions the Klu Klux Klan’s defense of a white woman from a black man (played by white actor Walter Long in blackface).

- **1918** The Warner Brothers studio opens in Hollywood.

- **1919** Actors Mary Pickford, Douglas Fairbanks and Charlie Chaplin join director D. W. Griffith to found United Artists Studio.

- **1924** Film studio Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer is founded.

- **1925** Universal Studios releases *The Phantom of the Opera* which includes color sequences.

- **1926** The first Vitaphone feature (a silent film with accompanying musical soundtrack played during the screening), *Don Juan*, is released starring John Barrymore.

- **1927** Al Jolson stars in the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer*. In the film, Jolson translates his blackface act from vaudeville to the silver screen.

- **1928** *Steamboat Willie* by Walt Disney debuts as the first cartoon with synchronized sound.

- **1929** The first Marx Brothers film, *The Cocoanuts*, is released by Paramount Pictures.

- **1929** First Academy Awards (Oscars) ceremony at the Roosevelt Hotel in Hollywood.

- **1930** Second Marx Brothers film, *Animal Crackers*, is released by Paramount Pictures.

For more information about the invention of the talking picture and to watch clips from *The Jazz Singer*, check out our Knowledge Nucleus online at www.goodmaneacp.typepad.com.
The Marx Brothers knew how to play together. Perhaps genetics can claim some of the credit for their theatrical chemistry. However, as Chicago-based improvisation venues such as The Second City and iO (formerly Improv Olympic) demonstrate, a firm grasp of the principles of improvisation can give perfect strangers the same familial fireworks in performance.

The History of Improv in Chicago

Viola Spolin made Chicago’s improv scene what it is today. During the late 1930s, Spolin worked as a drama supervisor for the Works Progress Administration’s (WPA) Recreational Project, which was part of President Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal—a series of federal programs designed to give Americans jobs and alleviate the pangs of the Great Depression. While working for the WPA, Spolin was charged with teaching drama to people with no previous experience in theatre. Forced to think creatively about curriculum development for a classroom of eager yet foundationless students, Spolin developed a non-verbal, non-psychological approach to drama education.

Spolin found this challenge inspiring. While purist teachers might grow frustrated by students without prior knowledge of Western theories of performance and acting, Spolin held fast to her belief, saying, “Everyone can act... Anyone who wishes to can play in the theater and learn to become ‘stage worthy.’” She coupled this belief with her observation that “everyone improvises, every day.” We don’t call it improvisation—we call it living. What better way to teach than to allow people to do what they inherently do, “every day”?

Rooting her teachings in improvisation exercises, Spolin developed a comprehensive repertoire of games and storytelling activities to encourage people of all ages to take to the stage. Spolin soon found herself celebrated in countless schools and universities across the country.

Two decades later, Spolin’s son, Paul Sills, began his own exploration of improvisation. While attending the University of Chicago, Sills formed the comedy troupe The Compass Players. Rather than using a script, the ensemble performed by following a rough plot outline and improvising the narrative’s specifics. Meeting great success, the troupe decided to go professional under the new name Second City.
When The Second City finally opened its doors on Dec. 16, 1959, its first patrons received a show brimming with songs and sketches about political and social issues. At the end of the show, the actors took suggestions from the audience as prompts for improvised pieces. The ensemble then reworked the best of those pieces before performing them in the next show. Second City still uses this method to write sketches today.

The Work

As Spolin wrote in her book, *Improvisation for the Theatre*, “Everyone ad-libs every waking hour of the day and responds to the world through his senses. It is the enriching, restructuring and integration of all of these daily responses for use in the art form that makes improvisation.” Even though individuals are masters of the improvisation of their life, working as a team to tell a story requires that improv performers remain open and ready.

**Improvisation demands that actors:**

- **Listen.** In order for a scene to make sense, improvisers must keep track of what has been established.

- **Collaborate.** The doctrine of “yes and” is intrinsic to improvisation. “Yes and” demands that partners are constantly accumulating information on stage. For example, if one improviser indicates that a scene takes place at the beach, the scene partner must not only concur that the characters are at the beach (“yes”) but may also add that it looks like it will rain (“and”). This technique maintains forward motion in improvisation.

- **Trust.** In order for a scene to progress, improvisers must make choices about characters, narratives and relationships. In the same vein as “yes and,” improvisers must trust their partners to understand and follow choices that affect the direction of a scene.

This list applies just as readily to forms outside of improvisation—each of these principles speaks to any ensemble work, be it scripted, devised or improvised. Improvisation, however, is arguably the purest training ground on which an actor can hone his/her skills of listening, collaborating and trusting. While the Marx Brothers used a script for most of their work in *Animal Crackers*, their ability to play openly and honestly with each other on screen is a testament to their firm grasp of the tenets of improvisation. (Though they may not have known it!)

**Chicago’s Scene: 50 Years and Still Improving**

This December marks the 50th anniversary of Second City. When its renowned alumnae return to celebrate half a century of critical acclaim, they will find a different Chicago than the one they left behind, brimming with improv venues and comedy troupes. Over the past 25 years, countless comedy theatres of various sizes have opened, closed, reopened and flourished in the Chicagoland area. Due to the popularity and success of these theatres, many venues have incorporated training centers into their work. Such educational programs thrive at Second City, iO Chicago, Annoyance and ComedySportz Chicago. Thanks to Viola Spolin, Paul Sills and the many founders and pioneers of the Chicago improv scene, Chicagoans share in their city the collaborative magic that the Marx Brothers shared in their blood.

**Second City alums include:** Alan Arkin, Del Close, Joan Rivers, Harold Ramis, John Belushi, John Candy, Bill Murray, Dan Akroyd, Gilda Radner, George Wendt, Shelley Long, Jim Belushi, Bonnie Hunt, Mike Myers, Chris Farley, Amy Sedaris, Stephen Colbert, Rachel Dratch, Adam McKay, Tina Fey, T.J. Jagodowski and Suzanne Messing.

Read some of Spolin’s improvisational games and find out more about Second City.
Send in the Clowns
An Interview with Director Henry Wishcamper and Clowning Director Paul Kalina

It takes a village to put on a musical, from actors, dancers and musicians, to choreographers, designers and technicians, to stage management and administrative staff. For the 2009/2010 Season’s production of Animal Crackers, a new citizen has joined the village: a clowning director.

The Men behind the Chaos

An avid Marx Brothers fan since childhood, Director Henry Wishcamper returns to the Goodman Theatre after making his Chicago directorial debut with Horton Foote’s Talking Pictures at Goodman’s 2008 Horton Foote Festival. A Yale graduate and a Drama League Directing Fellow, Wishcamper is the current Artistic Director of Katharsis Theatre Company in Brooklyn, New York, and served as the Artistic Director of the Maine Summer Dramatic Institute in Portland, Maine, from 1997-1999. He also served as the Artistic Associate of Keen Company from 2002-2005.

Clowning director Paul Kalina is a founding member of 500 Clown. After receiving his B.S. in theatre arts from Illinois State University, he became certified as an actor combatant with the Society of American Fight Directors. Kalina used these stage combat skills as he pursued stunt work in live-action stunt shows in both Chicago and LA. In 1996, he was introduced to the world of clowning when he enrolled in the International School of Physical Theatre Dell’Arte in Blue Lake, CA. Since then, Kalina has co-founded Le Pamplemousse and The Bumblinni Brothers, two highly-acclaimed physical theatre acts, as well as clowning outreach programs in hospitals across Chicago.

To discover what a clowning director is and why Animal Crackers has one, the Goodman’s Lara Ehrlich sat down with Director Henry Wishcamper and Clowning Director Paul Kalina to talk about their original take on this Marx Brothers classic.

Lara Ehrlich: Henry, what first attracted you to clowning and the Marx Brothers, and why do you think this production will appeal to Goodman audiences?

Henry Wishcamper: The Marx Brothers were so quick and so funny. They developed their acts in front of live audiences and were constantly ad-libbing and riffing off of each other and the audience. The discoveries they made each night in performance informed their material, which never stopped growing and changing until they released the films. Musical theater is full of spontaneity and virtuosity and excitement. I hope families come—I can’t imagine something I’d rather have my kids see than a show like this.

LE: Could you tell us a little bit about the art of clowning?

Paul Kalina: Clowning encompasses a great many styles, just as theater encompasses a great many forms. Clowns follow their own logic, which takes circumlocutions to do even simple things. If I’m going to pick up a water bottle on the table, for instance, I wouldn’t just ask you to pass me the water bottle or reach across the table—I’d probably go under the table.

LE: Henry, you told us that you met the great mime Tony Montanaro when you were growing up in Maine in the ’70s. What did you learn from him, and how did he impact your work?

HW: Tony was a protégé of [legendary mime] Marcel Marceau. He was the most accomplished American mime and people came from around the world to this teeny town in Maine just to study with him. He opened a school for mimes and jugglers and clowns and storytellers called Celebration Barn Theater, and they started a camp for ten-year-olds. I talked my way into it when I was six years old and created a little clown routine about a very messy boy. I’m sure it didn’t make a lick of sense, but I thought it was very fun and exciting. I wouldn’t be doing what I’m doing now if it wasn’t for Tony.

LE: Paul, when did you discover the Marx Brothers?

PK: I grew up on the Marx Brothers. While I didn’t necessarily get the jokes, I heard my parents laugh at them, so I would laugh. That’s how I began to understand rhythm and comic timing and verbal repartee.
LE: How did you become involved in clowning?

PK: I actually wanted nothing to do with clowning. It was one of the sections at the Dell'Arte School in Northern California, and I tried to get out of it because my only knowledge of clowning at the time was its negative reputation in our culture. I said, “Hmm, no. No rainbow wigs for me.” But I started to watch the Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Grock and Bill Irwin—and Robin Williams and Jim Carrey. And I suddenly realized that they were all clowns, and the world just opened up for me.

LE: Henry, what made you realize that you needed a clowning director for Animal Crackers, and why did you choose Paul?

HW: There are two types of comic business that we have to create for the show: the familiar comic routines from the film and new comic routines that don’t exist in Animal Crackers or in any of the other Marx Brothers films. Both have a unique set of challenges: how do you make iconic scenes fresh, and how do you create new routines from scratch?

Paul and I had similar ideas about how we could blow this script open and make the clowning routines really dynamic and surprising, while remaining true to the Marx Brothers’ icons.

PK: We don’t want audiences to think, “Did they get that right from the movie?” or “That’s not like the movie.” So right off the bat, we’re going to go, “Bam! This is not the movie you know. We’re going to give you a little bit of the show you know, but we’re also going to give you something new.”

When you see a Marx Brothers movie, you’re seeing what the cameras caught on that particular day on that particular take. If you were to watch a different take, the Marx Brothers would be doing something different. They were notorious for playing and spinning out from the script. My job is to get our actors to be able to play on stage so that they can find moments to spin out. We want the audience to think, “This is a special night. I’m the only one who gets to see this.”

LE: It sounds like the stage could easily become chaotic. Henry, would you say that part of your job as director will be to rein in the clowning?

HW: There’s no question. A musical can be one step away from spiraling out of control, but always has logic to it. The sense of control over chaos is what makes Animal Crackers so spectacular and special and surprising. There is a unique and exciting danger in the Marx Brothers’ routines. When you have a cast of actors as accomplished as our cast, chaos is never simply chaos.

LE: Paul, could you tell us how you’ll develop these new routines for the Marx Brothers?

PK: I started to watch the Marx Brothers, Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, Grock and Bill Irwin—and Robin Williams and Jim Carrey. And I suddenly realized that they were all clowns, and the world just opened up for me.

–Paul Kalina

Paul Kalina. Photo by Michael Brosilow.
PK: Henry is describing a very fine line between order and chaos. If the chaos ends in complete destruction, then that’s not clowning. One of the fundamental qualities of a clown is resilience, so when a clown is knocked down he doesn’t stay down—he gets back up. If everything is chaotic, there’s nothing to be learned, there’s nothing to be gained and it’s really not any fun.

LE: So you will have to trust your actors quite a bit.

PK: A lot. But they’re amazing. I’m really excited about the actors playing the three Marx Brothers.

HW: Joey Slotnick will be playing Groucho playing Captain Spaulding. His performance won’t simply be a carbon copy of Groucho’s performance. Instead, Joey will play Groucho in the same way that dozens of actors have played Elvis Presley over the course of the years—nobody’s ever done it exactly the same way. Joey’s own unique personality and intelligence will inform the way that he plays Groucho. My hope is that as an audience member, you’ll have a relationship with Joey Slotnick and with the Groucho icon and with the character of Captain Spaulding—all of which comes together to make something really fresh and new and alive.

LE: Could you tell us a little about the actors who will be playing Harpo, Chico and Mrs. Rittenhouse?

HW: Molly Brennan of Chicago’s acclaimed 500 Clown and Chicago favorite Ora Jones will play The Professor (the Harpo role) and Mrs. Rittenhouse (originally played by Margaret Dumont) respectively. These two great comic actresses share the ability to capture the essence of the iconic performances of Harpo Marx and Margaret Dumont while simultaneously making the roles uniquely their own.

PK: Jonathan Brody, who plays Chico, can play the piano just like Chico could. He’s phenomenal and he has Chico’s rhythms. Clowning is not just about making people laugh, it’s also about virtuosity. Each of the Marx Brothers had a great ability to play instruments. For example, Harpo’s skill with his harp provides pathos that gives their comedy greater weight. That is one thing we looked for in the casting process. Everybody in this cast has phenomenal skills.

LE: What are some of their other skills?

PK: We have tap dancing, guitar-playing, acrobatics, tumbling, ukulele and so many more. Having actors with skills like these is like having a toy chest that you open up and say, “What can we play with?” The goal is to get these actors playing together so comfortably that they can pull anything out of their toy chest at any moment.

HW: Every member of this nine-person company is a star. It will be fun!

Many of the Marx Brothers’ routines were achievable only because they had worked together for so long. Paul and Molly have years of experience working together, which is a huge advantage. It’s their comfort with each other that has allowed their routines to happen.

LE: Read articles about the art of clowning, imagination and its impact on humanity.
Clowning dates back as far as Egypt’s fifth dynasty. Ancient Greeks included clowns in both their theatrical productions and royal court ceremonies. Given its highly visual foundation—physical comedy and stylized make-up—clowning thrived in such large settings as the stage of an amphitheater or the great hall of a castle. Today, some clowns take their craft so seriously that they have their personal makeup copyrighted!

In general, there are two types of clowns. The white face clown’s look includes (as implied) white makeup over most of the face. The traditional white face clown is attributed to the French comedic character of Pierrot, based loosely on clowns in Italy.

The red nose clown, or auguste, is distinguishable because of a... that’s right, red nose. White face clowns hold higher status than red nose clowns but are not particularly wise, often presenting themselves as much more thoughtful and well-reasoned than they actually are. Red nose clowns act as the white face’s sidekick. Often the red nose is seemingly a buffoon but is actually much smarter than the white face.

One classic set-up for a clowning routine is that the white face clown teaches the red nose clown how to perform a basic task. This can go several different ways: the white face clown can teach while the red face clown gets it wrong and, in doing so, wreaks havoc; or, the red nose can outwit the white face and cause him/her significant embarrassment; or, with the addition of a third character, a triangular relationship can be established. In this case, the white face clown would be dealing with both an auguste and a contra auguste.

Contra auguste clowns act just like red nose clowns. In terms of social status, the contra auguste stands somewhere between the white face and the auguste. Therefore, humor can arise from the passing of instructions from the white face to the contra auguste to the auguste—these games of “telephone” inevitably result in disaster.

Two other types of clowns include the Character clown and the Bum clown. Character clowns are clowns that portray a specific archetype through their personality and outfits, often using their profession as fodder for mockery. They can use the traditional white face makeup, but their specialty lies in their outlandish personalities. The Bum clown emerged from the rise in unemployment in 19th century Britain and North America. The Bum clown, traditionally portrayed with white paint around the eyes and a grease-paint stubble beard, acts as a poignant satire of trying times. Bum clown acts include Charlie Chaplin’s famous portrayal of “The Tramp” and Amos Hart’s song from the musical Chicago, “Mr. Cellophane.”

Questions for Discussion:

What connections exist between the Marx Brothers’ work and traditional clowning? Which Marx Brothers characters, if any, fit these clown types? Why?

What modern comedians show characteristics of clowning? Why? Are they effective?

Why do you think clowning has been such a prominent comedic type?
The Marx Brothers were undoubtedly comedic innovators, but their work shows the influence of centuries of comedians before them. Similarly, comedians such as Robin Williams and Woody Allen claim the Marx Brothers as the major influence on their own comedic styles. As with most forms of creative influence, in order to truly understand the comic stars of today we must look to the past. This article traces the evolution of Western comedy over the past 700 years.

Commedia dell’Arte

While ancient thespians certainly pioneered the comedic genre, it was commedia dell’arte that greatly influenced Shakespeare and Molière, both revolutionary comic writers. Between the 14th and 18th centuries, commedia was an improvisational form performed by troupes of approximately seven to ten actors. Commedia shows included musical performance, clowning, comic bits and sight gags. The performances' narratives loosely followed a love story, ending in the happy union of the young lovers. Each character in commedia dell’arte had a specific mask and costume that was universal to all commedia troupes; regardless of the actor, audiences immediately recognized each performer’s role. Names and movement patterns were also standardized. Prepared comedic bits, called *lazzis*, were instituted and used for each specific character throughout improvised acts.

**Stock commedia characters:**

*The Inamorati:* Young lovers who appear unmasked and wear the most fashionable dress of the day.

*Pantalone:* A foolish old man who is very stingy with his money. Pantalone is the father of one of the Inamorats.

*The Doctor or Il Dottore:* Ostensibly an educated man, Il Dottore often speaks long monologues in which he contradicts himself and makes seemingly complex arguments that are obviously ridiculous to the audience.

*The Capitano:* A war hero, young and full of bravado, he is all talk and no action.

*Zanni:* The clever servants or valets. Usually both the Capitano and Pantalone have a valet and are outwitted by that servant.

*Columbina:* The love object’s maid and confidant. She is very clever and usually being pursued by one of the Zanni. She is unmasked.

Stock characters remain indispensable to comedy today. Think of your favorite sitcom. Now try to match the characters to their commedia dell’arte counterpart. If you’re not looking for a perfect match, you might be surprised by how many connections you find! Now think of your favorite comedic film: Does it revolve around a love story? Are the lovers perhaps less interesting than the supporting characters? Basic comedic characters, which originated with commedia, remain a mainstay of popular entertainment.

Restoration Comedy

England’s theatrical scene redefined comedy in the late 17th century. English Restoration comedies, so named for the period, blatantly disrespected the union of marriage. Within these plays, husbands and wives found themselves trapped in partnerships of convenience and frequently sought out other lovers. The result of this treatment of marriage is a canon of works charged with sexuality, thinly masked by social etiquette. While one might expect some Puritan resistance to such philandering, there was little room for any social wrist-slapping given that King Charles II, a Restoration comedy enthusiast, epitomized this discontent with marriage (he fathered over a dozen children with a multitude of mistresses).
Comedic Restoration pieces satirized the luxurious lives of the social elite. Playwrights such as William Wycherley and Aphra Behn used witty repartee as a means for their characters to highlight the shortcomings of others. This witty banter allowed Restoration characters to attain anything they desired using ambiguous language and double entendres. Often, the delightful verbal sparring uncovered insightful critiques of the upper class.

The main characters of Restoration comedies were intelligent, young metropolitan socialites looking for love everywhere outside of their marriages. Much like the characters in commedia, peripheral characters included gossips, insipid parents, savvy maids and widowers. Performances were seldom physically demanding, but Restoration comedies’ dialogue moved at breakneck speed, a demanding task for any actor.

**Farce**

The logical extension of Restoration comedy, farce became wildly popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries with plays such as Noel Coward’s *Blithe Spirit*. Farce serves as pure delight—seldom attempting to convey a profound message, it relies upon complicated situations complete with outrageous miscommunications and mistaken identities. Much like Restoration comedy, farce includes rapid witticisms and complicated plot points. Plotline in farce is distinguished by its frantic pace, matched only by the actors’ frenetic gestural style. Growing out of the farce tradition, the notion of the “situ” became increasingly important in the 20th century as comic writers constructed conflict-ridden situations for characters to deconstruct via comic means. Hence, the situational comedy, or “sitcom.”

**Sketch Comedy**

Sketch comedy draws on both commedia dell’arte and farce. This comedic form is a collaborative effort where a group of actors present a scene of one to ten minutes. The actors and playwrights improvise scene work and create scenarios for performance. Sketch comedy is not the same as improvisational theatre; teams prepare their work before performing. Sketches within a sketch comedy show can explore a similar theme but tend to vary greatly in content.

Today, hit television shows such as *Saturday Night Live* and *MA* are perfect examples of sketch comedy. Within these shows, actors often deviate from the rehearsed script and improvise as well. Live performances of sketch shows are also exceedingly popular, as seen in Chicago at comedy theatres like Second City.

**Vaudeville: The Marx Brothers’ Foundation**

The Marx Brothers’ success in film is directly linked to their successes on the vaudeville stage. From roughly 1870 to 1930, Americans packed into music halls all across the nation to catch the latest vaudeville acts. The performances were essentially variety shows consisting of singers, comedians, contortionists, magicians, ventriloquists, dancers and blackface performers.

At its height, vaudeville venues came second only to churches and schools as the most popular meeting places of the era. The thriving vaudeville scene paved the way for the Marx Brothers by introducing American masses to the idea of physical clowning, established comic routines and rapid-fire one-liners.

**Stand-Up**

Stand-up originated on the music hall stages of vaudeville. Vaudeville acts frequently included a master of ceremonies, or “emcee.” The emcee was charged with entertaining a large crowd between acts, a task which often required telling jokes. From magicians, double-act comedians and emcees, the stand-up comic emerged.
This solo act consists of a monologue of one-liners, humorous stories, anecdotes and occasionally physical comedy. Stand-up is considered one of the most difficult forms of comedy because the performer depends solely on his/herself. Positive or negative audience reactions determine which direction the comedian will take the routine, so a comedian must have a wealth of material. Like sketch comedy routines, comedic stories and jokes do not have to be related, although a through-line is established.

Subject material for stand-up comedians changes with the political and social climate. While in the past many comics have attempted not to offend the audience, comedians now frequently take the stage to discuss social issues such as race, sexuality and religion.

Race has been a prevalent topic for African-American comedians for years. Richard Pryor made a name for himself in modern comedy through his thought-provoking stand-up that tenaciously explored race and racism. Pryor was unafraid to bring topics to the table that most comedians would never touch. Known for his use of profanity and racial slurs, Pryor constantly forced his audiences to examine social issues through a comedic lens. Although their styles were drastically different, Pryor stated that his original comedic inspiration was Bill Cosby.

While Pryor decided to examine race, Bill Cosby combatted racism in society by omitting it entirely from his stand-up. Cosby’s trademark clean comedic style includes recounting stories from his family and childhood without discussing race relations. Even though he was known as an adamant civil rights activist, Cosby believed that comedy was a place where people could unite despite racial issues.

While sex and sexuality were once considered taboo subjects, comedians are now embracing these topics for their wealth of humor. The lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgendered and queer/questioning (LGBTQ) community has celebrated noteworthy comedians such as Suzanne Westenhoefer. Although Westenhoefer claims to be the “first out lesbian comedian”, she was preceded by queen of queer comedy Kate Clinton. Westenhoefer tackles politics, sexuality and her sexual identity in her stand-up acts. Instead of preparing material, Westenhoefer takes the stage completely unprepared and improvises. Her brassy sketches regularly examine American sexual identity and acceptance. Although her stand-up primarily focuses on the LGBTQ lifestyle, she prides herself on having an equal-opportunity comedic style where everyone has a chance to be made fun of.

With the advent of cable channels such as Comedy Central, stand-up is thriving. These channels feature films, sketch shows and stand-up specials such as “Comedy Central Presents.” Comedy has also seen a boom of popularity online. Video sharing websites like YouTube have entire channels dedicated to stand-up comedy, as well as comedic video production. Websites dedicated to humor like Funny or Die—produced by Will Ferrell, Adam McKay and Chris Henchy—also afford comedians a venue to share their art.

The Marx Brothers’ work in Animal Crackers exemplifies their unshakable standing in the history of Western comedy. Throughout the entire play you can see influences of past comedic styles and the beginnings of entirely new genres: Animals Crackers contains nuances of commedia dell’arte characterization with John and Mary as the stock character young lovers; echoing the tradition of Restoration comedy, the brothers satirize Mrs. Rittenhouse’s wealth and stature with quick wit and repartee; Ravelli and the Professor pay homage to farce as they perform wild chase scenes; and Captain Spaulding essentially performs a stand-up act in his recounting of his African adventures. As the Marx Brothers illustrate, comedy in any age tips its hat to its predecessors, without which countless laughs would never have been heard.

Questions for Discussion:

What is your favorite type of comedy? What similarities does it share with other genres of comedy?

What makes something funny to you? How does this differ from how your classmates defined comedy and humor? Why do you think that is?

Who is your favorite comedian and why? In your opinion, can comedians use the stage as a social platform for change? Why or why not?
**The Marx Brothers: Pun Masters**

Puns are jokes that rely on ambiguous language. Punsters use words that either have multiple meanings or sound like another word to give multiple interpretations to a sentence. As you now know, the Marx Brothers were pun masters. And received high Marx from their pun instructor.

There are two primary types of puns: homophonic and homographic. Homophonic puns find humor in substituting a word into a phrase that sounds exactly like the expected word but does not mean the same thing (“Seven days without laughter makes one weak”). Homographic puns find humor in one word’s multiple meanings (“I had dinner with a duck last night and he made me foot the bill”).

Pun humor often relies on a slew of words with multiple meanings, all related to the topic of the sentence: “The roundest knight at King Arthur’s table was Sir Cumference. He acquired his size from too much pi.”

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**For the Pun of it**

*Write Your Own!*

Look at both of the examples below, noting whether they are homophonic, homographic or a combination of the two. Notice that the punning requires stylistic consistency so that plays-on-words do not seem out of place. Next, write a dialogue between two characters of your choosing from *Animal Crackers*. Try to make the audience do a double take when they realize what you’ve done in your puns!

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**Example One:**

HIVES. Someone you wish to see?

JOHN. Yes, is Mrs. Rittenhouse in?

HIVES. I’ll see. *(takes up gold tray; extends it to JOHN)*

JOHN. That’s very nice. Yours?

HIVES. May I have your name?

JOHN. Parker, John Parker.

HIVES. Of the Massachusetts Parkers?

JOHN. No.

HIVES. The Southern Parkers?

JOHN. No. The Central Parkers. The bench at 72nd Street.

HIVES. I see. I’ll tell Mrs. Rittenhouse you’re here. *(Exits.)*

JOHN. Thank you.

**Example Two:**

CHANDLER. Tell me Captain Spaulding, you’ve been quite a traveler, what do you think we ought to do about South America? It is a big problem, South America. I really don’t know what to do about it.

SPAULDING. Say, you’re in a nasty fix.

CHANDLER. As a matter of fact, I’m going down there very soon.

SPAULDING. Is that so? Where are you going?

CHANDLER. Uruguay.

SPAULDING. Uruguay? Well, you go Uruguay and I’ll go mine.

CHANDLER. But what about Guatemala?

SPAULDING. Well, that’s totally different problem. Guatemala every night or you can’t Mala at all. Of course, that takes a lot of Honduras. How did this ever start anyhow? Let’s talk about something else. Take the foreign situation. Take Abyssinia. I’ll tell you what. You take Abyssinia and I’ll take a butterscotch sundae on rye bread. No make mine the same. Pardon me, my name is Spaulding. I’ve always wanted to meet you. Let’s see what the boys in the back room will have.
Developing a Comedic Persona

Part of the Marx Brothers’ enduring popularity is the instant familiarity of their personas. Though their birth names were not Chico, Harpo, Groucho and Zeppo, hardly anyone who is not an avid fan could tell you what they were. (Does the name Julius Henry Marx ring a bell? That’s Groucho.)

Early in their career, the Marx Brothers billed themselves using their given names—but when a producer overheard them calling each other by their nicknames, he persuaded the Marxes to start using them onstage as well. “Chico” was a reference to his fondness for young women, or “chicks.” “Harpo” was the most obvious: he played the harp. The rationale for Groucho’s name remains unclear but was generally associated with his grouchiness—though Groucho himself denied this.

The origin of the Marx Brothers’ names perfectly exemplifies the meaning of a persona. For example, Julius Marx adopted the persona of Groucho long before he played the parts of Captain Spaulding or Rufus T. Firefly. Regardless of the specific character in a film, the name Groucho on a marquis promised audiences unrelenting one-liners, hysterical clowning and infectious irreverence. His persona persisted throughout most public appearances—be it in an interview or feature film, Julius Marx was forever Groucho.

One recent comedian who has embraced a comedic persona is Larry the Cable Guy. Daniel Whitney is the mastermind behind the character and rarely appears in public as himself. He has worked in film, television and radio with his persona, and is identifiable because of his heightened southern drawl and cut-off plaid shirts. Another comedian, Stephen Colbert, shares his name with his comedic persona. Colbert issues the daily news on Comedy Central’s The Colbert Report not as an accredited news correspondent, but as a heightened persona of a conservative political pundit. In his personal life, Colbert is an outspoken Democrat, but on his show he is known for his vehement conservative standpoints. His caricature of political media coverage results in tongue-in-cheek newscasts full of witticisms and satire.

Developing a persona is a high art. Given the complexity of the task, one can’t help but be impressed by Goodman actors Molly Brennan (The Professor), Jonathan Brody (Emanuel Ravelli) and Joey Slotnick (Captain T. Spaulding). After all, in the Goodman’s production of Animal Crackers, the actors are not only playing their characters, but they are also adopting the Marx Brothers’ personas. While simply inhabiting Harpo, Chico or Groucho would be impressive enough, layering additional characters on top makes for quite a feat!

Get in Character

Create your own comedic persona. Write a monologue as this character.

Things to keep in mind when creating your persona:
1. Are you a member of a demographic that is misrepresented or underrepresented?
2. Are there stereotypes that you fit or don’t fit?
3. What about this persona is exaggerated or ridiculous? What makes you funny without being degrading?
4. What do you wear?
5. How do you move?
6. How do you talk? What do you talk about? What do you think about?

Now perform your monologue for your class. As you watch the monologues think about what makes an engaging character. What makes you care about a character?
Activity: The Line Between Humor and Hurt

Many comedians flirt with insult in order to provoke audience response. Some people argue that such humor is subversive and political, forcing audience members to think critically about social issues. Others argue that engaging in this kind of material is inherently offensive, regardless of the artist’s intent to challenge injustice. Where do you draw the line between questioning the status quo and alienating communities?

Controversial Comedians

1) Research and explore the work of a controversial stand-up comedian. Use Youtube videos, other web resources, comedy albums, your school library, etc.

2) Identify the following aspects of that comedian’s work:
   a.) What communities does the comic target? Which communities does the comic spare?
      i.) Examples: race, gender, sexual orientation, class, religion, ability, ethnicity, age, size, etc.
   b.) Does the comic highlight his/her own community? How does the comic self-identify?
      i.) How does the comic relate his/her community to the audience? In a self-deprecating manner? Aggressively?
   c.) What does the comic imply about targeted communities?
   d.) How does the comic target these communities?
      i.) Examples: voice/dialect, anecdotes, physicalization, etc.
   d.) Does the comic challenge injustice with his/her humor? How can you tell?

3) Share your findings with the rest of the class.
   a.) Compare and contrast uses of the comedians’ material.
   b.) Can you come up with rules about who can say what? Is anything off limits?
Only Margaret Dumont could match the Marx Brothers’ fast-paced comedy. Dumont was called the “fifth Marx Brother” by Groucho Marx himself. She played alongside the wild quartet from 1929 to 1941. This first lady of the comedic foil was featured as the bewildered dowager in many of the Marx Brothers’ feature films, including the character of Mrs. Rittenhouse in *Animal Crackers*. In other words, one of the best “straight men” in the history of comedy was, in fact, a woman.

Margaret Dumont was born in Brooklyn, NY, in 1882 as Daisy Juliette Baker. She first took to the stage at the age of 20 when she traveled to Atlantic City to perform in vaudeville. Five years after her debut, she took on the stage name of Margaret Dumont. Dumont played the role of the wealthy widower in seven of the Marx Brothers’ films, including *The Cocoanuts* (1929), *Animal Crackers* (1930), *Duck Soup* (1933), *A Night at the Opera* (1935), *A Day at the Races* (1937), *At the Circus* (1939) and *The Big Store* (1941). Her success continued with her haughty characterizations alongside other notable comedians such as Abbott and Costello, Laurel and Hardy and Danny Kaye. When she passed away in 1965, Dumont left behind over 50 films and the celebrated legacy of the fifth Marx Brother.

Margaret Dumont’s character in Marx Brothers’ movies exemplifies the comedic foil in a double act, or two-person routine. In a double act, the “straight man” (foil) remains staid and calm, while the comic plays jokes off of the foil’s composure. This comedic structure emerged in vaudeville acts out of necessity—the straight man would repeat the comedian’s jokes loudly over the boisterous crowd in order for the joke to be heard. Recent successful comedic partners include Mike Nichols and Elaine May, Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis, and Cheech and Chong.

Dumont took the idea of the comedic foil a step further as she molded characters who did not understand her partner’s sense of humor. Groucho’s quick wit paired with her unabashed naiveté made a wonderful comedic marriage. This was so apparent that many Marx Brothers fans falsely assumed that Dumont and Groucho Marx were, in fact, married.

The butt of many of the brothers’ comedic riffs, Dumont often finds herself missing insinuations about marriage, age or her thickset build. Groucho frequently flatters Dumont’s character and then, with a quick change of wit and wording, turns the joke back on her. Dumont’s trademark response was one of utter confusion. Her prowess as one of the most reputable actresses of her era is only heightened by her mastery of comedic timing, as evidenced through her work with the Marx Brothers.

**Questions to Consider:**

Can you think of other characters in the media who are double act comedians? Give examples from sitcoms, talk shows, and cartoons.

Dumont’s tenure with the Marx Brothers and beyond resonates as particularly impressive given the current under-representation of women in comedy. How do you explain this under-representation? Who are some of your favorite comedic actresses and female comedians?
Reaching Womanhood
Female Coming-of-Age Ceremonies Across Cultures

Arabella Rittenhouse is wealthy, young and single. As a member of high society, she has little choice but to include herself amongst the exclusive elite, secure a “suitable” husband and raise children, who in turn will be expected to do the same. While the Marx Brothers and others have found the customs of the social elite to be rewarding fodder for mockery, we must examine Arabella’s case in a larger cultural context. The prejudice and pretense of such arbitrary customs run the gamut from repulsive to ridiculous, but nevertheless, the first steps Arabella takes as a woman into her culture reflect a global tradition.

Many cultures celebrate a young woman’s transition into adulthood. In Arabella’s case, a debutante ball would have most likely marked her coming of age. Stemming from older European traditions, debutante balls introduce young women (usually 17 or 18) to society. While many debutante balls have historically included exclusively white families, black organizations such as the Original Illinois Club (OIC) of New Orleans, LA (founded in 1895) have made debutante balls a staple of black high society. Whether at the OIC in the Big Easy or at the Idlewild Club of Dallas, debutante ceremonies follow similar traditions. Outfitted in white dresses, multiple debutantes stand in a line on stage before being paraded before the audience by their fathers. After their formal introduction to the audience, the young women are officially on the market—the games have begun.

Prior to the invasion of white settlers, the Powhatan tribe practiced similar traditions on the same ground on which European descendants currently practice their debutante balls. After a woman showed signs of puberty, the wife of a priest would determine that the young woman had reached the age for her huskanasquaw. Originally misconstrued by observing English settlers as a child sacrifice, the ceremony marked a woman’s eligibility for courtship and ability to rear children. Depending on a woman’s standing within the tribe, the huskanasquaw could call for an invitation to dignitaries from other tribes within the Powhatan Nation to attend major festivities.

At her huskanasquaw a Powhatan woman would choose a new name for herself (it was at one such ceremony that a young woman named Mataoka took the name, Pocahontas). Once the huskanasquaw guests departed, the young Powhatan woman was expected to set her mind to finding a partner.

Other cultures celebrate a woman’s adulthood without implying the need to partner and procreate. Though originally descended from Aztec culture, the quinceañera tradition of Latin America also has roots in 19th century France. An infamous Francophile, Mexican President Porfirio Díaz (1830-1915) incorporated elements of a French coming-of-age ritual into the existing ceremony, a blend between Native American customs and the traditions of the Catholic church. While the ceremony represents a hodgepodge of cultures, the dominant factor in most Latin American quinceañeras is Catholicism—the ceremony serves to affirm a young woman’s faith in Jesus Christ. On her fifteenth birthday, the young woman will commence her “quince” by attending Mass. Following the service, the quinceañera party will proceed to a reception hall—the quinceañera’s court. The quinceañera will typically receive gifts, mainly religious in nature, before dancing with her chambelan, a young man who serves as her date for the festivities. This dance frequently precedes a waltz between father and daughter which culminates in the exchange of flat shoes for a pair of high heels, symbolizing womanhood.

An abundance of other cultures celebrate both its male and female youth’s transition to adulthood. Arabella, however, belongs to a society in which the arrival of a young woman on the social scene bears disproportionate significance. While her introduction to “polite society” appears particularly involved, perhaps it would comfort Arabella to know that she is not alone.

A picture of a debutante at her Coming Out dinner, held in 1849. Courtesy of Photographic Services and Permissions, the New York Public Library.
What’s the Difference?
Non-Traditional Casting Onstage
BY JAKE COHEN

A definition of traditional casting best illustrates the significance of its opposite. Traditional casting matches an actor’s identity (sexual, racial, etc.) with that of his or her character. For example, we infer that the Danish Hamlet is a white man, so he is traditionally portrayed on stage and screen by a Caucasian male. Similarly, playwright Federico García Lorca tells us that his protagonist in La Casa de Bernarda Alba is a Spanish female, so Bernarda Alba is most frequently performed by a Hispanic or Latina woman. Non-traditional casting, therefore, refers to the decision to cast an actor whose identity does not match that of the character as suggested in the play’s text.

Given that white males dominate the Western theatrical canon, the notion of theatrical “tradition” is inherently biased. Non-traditional casting most frequently refers to the casting of an actor of color in a traditionally white role or a woman in a male role. However, it should be noted that George Chakiris’ portrayal of Puerto Rican Bernardo in West Side Story, Laurence Olivier’s blackface performance of Othello and countless other staged incongruities of identity have never been deemed non-traditional casting.

Gender and race (along with ethnicity, age, size and often ability) are signifiers—of similarity, of difference, of history, of experience. Directors can use actors’ physical signifiers to either heighten or lessen the emotional, physical or experiential difference between characters. This device in the director’s toolbox inspires many casting decisions. While Paula Vogel writes Lil’ Bit of How I Learned to Drive as a woman, what would it mean for Lil’ Bit—a girl sexually abused by her uncle—to be played by a male actor? While Lorraine Hansberry inarguably intends for the main characters in A Raisin in the Sun to be black, what would it mean for the “assimilated” African-American George Murchison to be white? And while the original production of Animal Crackers featured the male Harpo Marx and the white Margaret Dumont, what does it mean that, in our production, the Professor is played by a woman and Mrs. Rittenhouse by a black actress? This perceived distancing between characters via non-traditional casting choices can operate on several levels.

Most basically, audiences perceive gender and race visually. Never mind that William Shakespeare describes Othello as dark-skinned—even when Caucasian actor Patrick Stewart embodied the tragic hero and stands before an all-black cast in a 1997 production at the Shakespeare Theater in Washington, DC, the distance between pariah and populus remains. In Chicago playwright Tracy Letts’ August: Osage County, a narrative devoid of explicit racial overtones, director Anna D. Shapiro’s casting of African-American Phylicia Rashad as Violet Weston smartly distanced the matriarch from the rest of the white family. (Perhaps even more so for audience members who knew the role was originally played by a white woman.) Two distinct skin tones read as separate—if not, sadly, opposing—pieces of information on stage. Even though the transmission of such messages may subside during performance, not unlike distinct colors in a costume designer’s palette, an audience reads an actor’s race the moment he/she steps on stage. Skin is not a uniform, but skin color functions, on a purely visual level, as a signifier of membership in or exclusion from a group.

Gender operates in a similar way. When Lois Smith played Gonzalo in director Tina Landau’s 2009 production of The Tempest at Steppenwolf Theatre, her identity highlighted Gonzalo’s individuality from her male counterparts. Perhaps Gonzalo should appear distinct from the rest of the group given his unique benevolence or perhaps his individuality reflects the secrets he keeps from his compatriots. Regardless, Landau’s choice heightened the schism between one character and the rest. This is not to say that non-traditionally cast roles enjoy a brighter spotlight than their scene partners; without qualifying the separation of one character from another, the audience will inevitably perceive a rift between the traditionally and non-traditionally cast performers.
Race and gender in performance can also function beyond the visual level. Whenever an actor who is not white, male and able-bodied takes the stage, s/he brings with him/her a sense of otherness—for centuries, these men and women have been deemed “different” by a white, patriarchal society. This is not to say that these actors rely upon the connotations of their personal identity in order to act; frequently, the history of an actor’s identity remains well below the radar. However, non-traditional casting allows productions to emphasize the legacy of a specific population in order to make a narrative particularly powerful or subversive. For example, when a black man plays Henry V, the actor’s identity serves as an additional layer of metaphor for the storytelling; once dismissible, the resilient Henry finally earns respect and power.

Non-traditional casting can also serve a more specific purpose in a work—differing identities on stage can deepen a particular relationship. For example, in a production of Big River: The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn a director might cast a woman (of any race) as the runaway slave, Jim. While subjugated groups are by no means interchangeable with one another, a woman portraying a black man in search of freedom and justice brings her own historical truth to the role. Also, if a male actor plays Huckleberry Finn, then the two characters are still forced to communicate over a boundary of difference—this upholds the essence of the relationship while altering its specific meaning. Non-traditional casting can add significance to characters, relationships and narratives.

Given all of the potential implications of non-traditional casting, what does it mean that Henry Wishcamper cast Molly Brennan as the Professor and Ora Jones as Mrs. Rittenhouse? Also, what is the significance of black actor Stanley Wayne Mathis playing both a butler and a Czechoslovakian immigrant who passes for an American millionaire? It doesn’t have to mean anything; Wishcamper cast Brennan and Jones for their talent. Brennan is a phenomenal clown and Jones is indisputably a formidable actress. As Wishcamper’s choice illustrates, a director’s casting is frequently straightforward logic—certain actors simply inhabit certain characters, regardless of gender, race or ability. Theatre artists frequently refer to this approach as “colorblind casting.”

However, a director need not harbor a social activist agenda for his or her casting choices to resonate on any or all of the layers previously discussed. Most audience members remain color-conscious and will receive whatever information they will receive, regardless of a director’s intent. Given this inevitability, how do you read the work of these actresses given their identities off-stage? Unlike his companions, the Professor doesn’t speak—did Brennan’s gender heighten this difference? Mrs. Rittenhouse holds the most power of anyone on stage as she is the host of the gala—did Jones’ race highlight this distinction? If you feel that you didn’t think about these issues, what differences exist between this production and others in which you have focused on race or gender?

Lastly, how long will we, as diverse artists in a diverse world, deem multiculturalism on stage to be “non-traditional”? What will you do to help bring change?

Read about August Wilson and Robert Brustein’s debate on the cultural power of theatre.

Ora Jones performs the role of Mrs. Rittenhouse in Animal Crackers.
Much of the criticism regarding the casting of Ora Jones, a talented African American actress, as Mrs. Rittenhouse has centered on the place of African-Americans in society during the late 1920s, the setting of Animal Crackers. Critics have cited as fact the absence of people of color with the wealth and connections of the character at that time. In reality, there was—in New York especially—a well-heeled and well-connected African-American community that not only lived in houses on the scale of Rittenhouse Manor but also owned newspapers and businesses like Mr. Chandler, the other character played by an African-American actor in our production.

The first self-made female millionaire in this country—a millionaire by her own work and fortitude, not through familial inheritance or marriage—was Madam C. J. Walker. Born Sarah Breedlove in 1867, Madam Walker created a line of hair care products and cosmetics for African Americans in the early 1900s. Started when she began losing her own hair, Madame C. J. Walker’s Manufacturing Company quickly became the largest business owned by an African American by 1917.

After turning over the day-to-day operations of her company to trusted employees in Indianapolis, Walker and her only daughter A’Lelia moved to the bustling community of Harlem. The urban setting of rapidly developing Harlem provided a venue for African Americans of all backgrounds to appreciate the variety of black life and culture, and they quickly became known for their cultural salons, their patronage of the arts and their philanthropy.

Harlem was considered the great Black metropolis in the early 1900’s. The great migration of African Americans to northern cities, the experiences of black troops in France during the World War I—and their subsequent shameful treatment upon returning to America—and the influence of industrialization over an agrarian society all helped set the stage for a cultural response to the great social changes taking place in America in the early 20th century. This Harlem Renaissance was an artistic and intellectual movement that kindled a new Black identity. It was not defined by common literary style or political ideology, but included visual arts as well as poetry, essays, fiction and drama. What was common to the art and the artists, however, was a commitment to giving authentic artistic expression to the African-American experience. It was the physical and cultural manifestation of what Alain Locke, philosopher and educator, presaged as the coming of age of the “New Negro.”

In 1915, Madam Walker commissioned Vertner Tandy, the first registered black architect in the state of New York, to build a mansion in the wealthy community of Irvington-on-Hudson near the estates of John D. Rockefeller, the American industrialist and founder of Standard Oil, and George Jay Gould, whose father was a railroad pioneer and the ninth richest man in America. Dubbed Villa Lewaro by one of her many guests, the famous tenor Enrico Caruso, the Italianate house cost an estimated $250,000 to build in 1916 and was a center for Black cultural and political society. The house became a National Historic Landmark in 1976.

A’Lelia Walker inherited both her mother’s considerable estate and her love of culture and politics. An only child, A’Lelia hosted one of the most memorable salons of the Harlem Renaissance. At “The Dark Tower,” a converted floor of her elegant New York townhouse, and at Villa Lewaro, she entertained Harlem and Greenwich Village writers, artists and musicians, as well as visiting African and European royalty. Her parties—as well as her regal African beauty, lavish clothing and glamorous lifestyle—inspired poets, painters and sculptors. Zora Neale Hurston outlined a play about her and her mother. White writer and photographer Carl Van Vechten based his Nigger Heaven character, Adora Boniface, on her. And Langston Hughes, the teacher, poet and activist, called her the “joy goddess of Harlem’s 1920s.”

It appears they had a lot in common with Mrs. Rittenhouse.
In Animal Crackers, Mrs. Rittenhouse encourages her daughter, Arabella, to make an impression upon Mr. Wally Winston, the New York gossip columnist. Stressing the prestige of Wally’s column, Rittenhouse reminds her daughter, “Everybody reads it, and everybody who is anybody is in it, and that’s where you got to get.” The character of Wally Winston is based on noted gossip journalist Walter Winchell from the New York Evening Graphic. Winchell made a name for himself in the mid-20th century by divulging scandalous information of Broadway stars on his daily newspaper column and his weekly radio broadcast. As Animal Crackers illustrates, sometimes gossip press beats no press.

You don’t have to go far to find the latest celebrity gossip. While tabloids and gossip columns have been sold in supermarket checkout aisles for decades, in recent years tabloid news has crept closer still: in a world already saturated with information, the Web brings celebrity commentary to our fingertips. Not only do we enjoy access to entertainment news on our every whim, but also, we are incapable of exhausting this information given the frequency with which it’s updated.

Tabloid stars such as Perez Hilton post celebrity gossip news online with up-to-the minute updates. Hilton gathers coveted information and photographs of public figures, from press releases to personal documents. While he runs what is considered to be Hollywood’s most hated website blog, Hilton was recently named the number one Web Celeb in 2007 by Forbes Magazine. He also was given the honor of being named one of the “Fifteen Most Influential Hispanics in the US” by People en Español.

Hilton prides himself on being the first to break news stories such as deaths, drug usage and sexual escapades, regardless of the information’s accuracy. Most recently, Hilton reported on the day that Michael Jackson passed away that Jackson was feigning illness and “dragging his heels” as a result of mounting his comeback tour. After the news broke worldwide of Jackson’s death, Hilton attempted to defend himself by deleting his blog post, but the damage was done. While the website has been a source for breaking news, it has also been a source of countless civil lawsuits. Hilton posts private photos of celebrities daily for public consumption. Even though Hilton is an openly gay man and an outspoken LGBTQ rights activist, he has been known to “out” people on his blog who do not identify as homosexual to the public. Several celebrities, record labels and photographers have sought legal action against the infamous blogger for items ranging from copyright infringement to defamation.

The boom in popularity for celebrity gossip news has moved the tabloid industry from the internet to television. The creators of the online tabloid blog TMZ (an acronym for “thirty mile zone” in Los Angeles, home to the most movie studios per capita in the USA) expanded their empire by taking celebrity photos, scandals and videos clips to the small screen. TMZ on TV aired the first internationally broadcast celebrity gossip series in 2007. The show has no plot or storyline as it simply follows the TMZ employees gathered around Executive Producer Harvey Levin as they share the news of the day. Since the tabloid has taken to the television, there seems to be no end to the amount of information that one can find on their favorite celebrity.

While the digital age allows for unprecedented generation and circulation, tabloid-worthy journalism has thrived for centuries. Nearly 450 years ago, the scholar and churchman John Foxe published Foxe’s Book of Martyrs in 1563. The text celebrates noble English Protestants, while simultaneously recounting instances of God’s wrath inflicted on non-believers. In his work, he relates the story of a 12-year-old girl who blasphemes before being immediately struck by lightning. Some journalistic scholars attribute Foxe as being the first known tabloid reporter, given the wide circulation that his sensationalist stories received.

Our love of gossip has thrived for centuries, but the word “tabloid” is a fairly new invention. The word “tabloid” traces back to the Burroughs, Wellcome and Co. pharmaceutical company in 19th-century London. The company was the first corporation to manufacture “tabloid pills,” which were compressed tablets of medicine. The word quickly came to mean anything of reduced size—it was readily applied to condensed journalism that related stories in an easy-to-absorb format.

One significant incarnation of the easy-to-absorb tabloid was the Penny Paper in New York City in the 1830s. These lap-sized booklets of sensationalist news quickly reached a daily circulation of over 20,000 copies. By the early 20th century, the New York Daily News represented the nation’s most established publication in tabloid format, though its content was more polished than its gossip-driven predecessors.
With the tabloid columns moving from syndicated publications into their own printed form, journalists focused more on articles with sensational stories than those with accurate information. In a break from tabloid papers of the past, these newer publications made their way to readers via weekly magazine distribution as opposed to the daily circulation of traditional newspapers. This structural shift reflected a larger schism at work as cheaper print publications embraced journalistic integrity and the tabloid press headed straight for the gutter.

Tabloid news earned a name for itself in the mid-20th century as “junk food news” or “the gutter press,” with publications such as the *Enquirer* leading the way. In 1954, marketing mastermind Generoso Pope Jr. purchased the *Enquirer* from the *New York Enquirer* and took the newspaper form in another direction. Intrigued by the piece of human nature that makes us “marvel at auto accidents,” Pope initiated a new era of incredulous reporting. Since Pope’s takeover of the tabloid, both the *Enquirer* and its competition have continued sparring, answering the vulgar with the obscene and the exaggerated with the false. The bar was lowered further when, within the realm of celebrity coverage, claims became slightly more believable and therefore all-the-more dangerous. Countless allegations of celebrities’ infidelity and movie stars’ attempted suicides have made such drama the norm within tabloid journalism. No public figure is out of bounds: even the President of the United States became a target when, in 2005, the *Enquirer* alleged that President George W. Bush was “drunk and acting erratically.”

For centuries tabloid journalists vied for the next scandalous story for publication. Not unlike John Foxe, Generoso Pope Jr. and Perez Hilton have defamed public figures and the common man alike with scandalous stories, disregarding accuracy.

### Gutter Press Questions:

In your view, what information is sacred? If you are a public figure, is your private information automatically public domain? Where does our hunger for knowledge stop, and our common decency step in?

### How far is too far? A Case Study

You are the editor of a leading supermarket tabloid called *Celebrity Planet*. A photographer on your team has captured illicit pictures of a prominent political figure in an affair that will certainly defame and destroy his/her career. This political figure is headed into a major campaign for your state. Do you print them in tomorrow’s issue of *Celebrity Planet*?

### HOLDING ART HOSTAGE

Although the case of the missing Beaugard ends happily in *Animal Crackers*, art theft and forgery is actually a serious and costly offense. Art crime became such a problem in recent decades that the FBI formed the Art Theft Program in 1992 to track and recover stolen art. The program includes its own special Top Ten list, similar to the famous “Most Wanted List” for fugitives.

### FBI’s Top Ten List of Art Theft

- In 1969, Caravaggio’s “Nativity with San Lorenzo and San Francesco” from Palermo, Italy.
- In 1990, twelve paintings were stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, including Rembrandt’s “The Storm on the Sea of Galilee”.
- In 1995, Davidoff-Morini’s Stradivarius violin was stolen from a New York apartment.
- In 1999, Cezanne’s “View of Auvers-sur-Oise” was stolen from Oxford’s Ashmolean Museum.
- In 2000, two Renoirs and one Rembrandt painting was stolen from Sweden’s National Museum.
- In 2002, two Van Gogh paintings were stolen from Amsterdam’s Vincent Van Gogh Museum.
- In 2003, Leonardo Da Vinci’s “Madonna with the Yarnwinder” was stolen from Scotland’s Drumlanrig Castle.
- In 2003, 7,000 to 10,000 Iraqi artifacts were looted and stolen from the Iraq Museum.
- In 2003, Benevenuto statue “Cellini Salt Cellar” was stolen from Vienna’s Kunsthistorisches Museum.
- In 2004, Munch’s “The Scream” and “The Madonna” were stolen from the Munch Museum in Oslo.

John and Mary’s conversation in *Animal Crackers* paints art and cultural crime in an inconsequential, frivolous light. When Mary suggests that John forge the Beaugard, he exclaims “Gee, that’d be great!” and then the two engage in a song about their romance. In reality, art crime is far from romantic. It is instead an underground world of black market dealing resulting not only in billions of lost dollars per year, but also, perhaps more importantly, the loss of significant artistic and cultural achievements.

**Question:** Other than the basic fact that stealing someone’s property is a crime, why is it important to prevent art and cultural crime specifically? In other words, where would the world be if we had never recovered “The Scream”?
Writing Your Response Letter

After you have seen the show and discussed your responses in the classroom, it’s time to let us know what you thought! Your response letter plays an important role at Goodman Theatre. All of the letters we receive are forwarded to our artists, and you may get a response!

Pick one of the artists involved with Animal Crackers whose work was particularly memorable to you—an actor, designer or the director—and write that artist a letter describing your experience at the show and your feedback about his or her work. Be honest and ask any questions that are on your mind.

Send us your letter within one month of seeing the show, and we’ll forward it on to that artist!

Important information to include:

- Your name, age and school
- Your mailing address (where a response may be sent)

Including these things will make it easier for our artists to respond!

Send your letters to:
Education and Community Programs
Goodman Theatre
170 North Dearborn Street
Chicago, IL 60601

Here are two great student letters we received in response to Rock ‘N’ Roll last season:

Dear Ms. Fisher,

I must congratulate you on your portrayals of Eleanor and Esme. I don’t remember the last time I have been so touched and influenced by a character of any kind. It is one thing to write the lines for an actor—they are the roots from which a great character sprouts. But the roots aren’t enough, for what is a tree that lacks external beauty? Your performance is the leaves and the branches and the spring buds that ornament the tree, without which we could not admire it for what it eventually becomes.

Eleanor to me was the strongest of all. You managed to breathe so much life into a death-fated character! I admired her ability to tell people off just like that, to fight for what she wanted her ability to never give up (even when she knew that the end was so near), and your ability to make me respect all that.

I will be honest and say that for the longest time I did not know that you also play the role of Esme—your ability to morph into a completely different person completely stunned me. What I admired most about Esme is that she is so youthful, and yet so able to see things from a more grown-up perspective.

Although both Eleanor and Esme are fictional characters, there is a whole lot of truth to them. You can meet either of them almost anywhere and everywhere, but to see someone actually purposefully portray and perfect such traits is amazing. Your profession never fails to amaze me. Congratulations! I wish you the best on your career path. Lastly, although I should be saying ‘Sincerely,’ I believe a different phrase is more fitting.

Rock on,
A CPS student

Dear Amy J. Carle,

I am writing to you to applaud you for your brilliant performance as Lenka in the Goodman Theatre’s production of Rock ‘N’ Roll. Yesterday my humanities class from Sullivan High School went to see the production and your character attracted me from the start. Her sympathetic, maternal and yet at times provocative nature really made me enjoy her character. Her complex relationship with Max and her comical yet glukopikros relationship with Eleanor as her mentor and competitor with Max made me enjoy and root for her character. It seemed as if I should have been supportive of Eleanor’s character because of the tragic ordeals she was going through, but your high style of acting and the magic you put into your performance manipulated me into wanting Lenka and Max to be a happy couple. Your performance and pathos allowed me to relate to the tempestuous times of the 1960’s and how the Czech Republic was going through this rough period in history. Thank you so much for allowing me to enjoy a play that was really hard to digest at first but came down with ease when you arrived and essentially “saved the day.” Your performance had a great impact on me!

Sincerely,
A CPS student
Reading Your Ticket

As a patron of the theatre, it is important to know how to read your ticket and find your seat. Generally, seats for all performances in the Goodman’s Albert Theatre are assigned seating, so be sure to know how to be able to find your seat. When you come with your school, you will be ushered to a section where you and your fellow students can sit and enjoy the play together.

Below is a seating chart—a map of all the seats in the Albert Theater—and an explanation of how to read your ticket. If you have any problems, ask an usher for help. They’re here for you!