



## **Comedy Imagination Retreat**

**August 19-21, 2016**

**Philadelphia, Pennsylvania**

### Participants:

**Aisha Alfa**, actress and comedian (Second City, *My Awkward Sexual Adventure*)

**Cindy Caponera**, actress, writer and producer (*Nurse Jackie*, *I'm Dying Up Here*)

**Scott Dikkers**, founder of *The Onion*, and its longest-serving editor-in-chief

**Marie Forgeard**, a psychologist at McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School

**Elizabeth Hyde**, Research Specialist, Imagination Institute, Penn

**Scott Barry Kaufman**, Scientific Director, Imagination Institute, Penn

**Kelly Leonard**, Executive Director, Insights and Applied Improvisation at Second City Works

**Anne Libera**, Director of Comedy Studies at The Second City

**Bob Mankoff**, cartoonist and former Cartoon Editor of *The New Yorker*

**Martin Seligman** Director, Positive Psychology Center, Penn

**Eric Spitznagel**, Executive Writer at *Men's Health* Magazine

**Larry Wood**, poverty lawyer, seven-time *New Yorker* caption contest winner

*Report prepared by: Eric Spitznagel*



Stop us if you've heard this one before. A Second City director, a *New Yorker* cartoonist, an *Onion* editor, and a positive psychologist walk into a bar. The positive psychologist asks the other three, "Why can't you tickle yourself?" Nobody knows, but it leads to an intense and spirited debate about the true nature of comedy in which (ironically) nobody laughs.

No? Not ringing any bells? Okay, so maybe it's not the most impressive set-up for a joke. But it proved to be great fodder for the Comedy Imagination Retreat, a gathering of some of the brightest minds in comedy, who huddled together around a table in the lower lobby of the Sheraton hotel in downtown Philly, determined not to leave until they had cracked the code of comedy. Or if not that, at least finished a few bottles of wine.

The group included a wide range of ages and experiences, from a 30-something stand-up comic from Toronto to a 72-year-old cartoon editor from New York City. Actors and producers and teachers and writers and editors, from stage and screen to the printed word and cartoons, almost every medium was represented in one roundtable. There was a lot of discussion—as Martin Seligman observed, compared to the other fields they'd invited to similar retreats, "You are the fastest group. The mathematicians, the psychologists are much slower"—and many, many questions posed during the three day event. Questions like, why do we laugh at Charlie Chaplin even when he's not being especially funny? Are drugs necessary to be funny? How about personal demons? Why can't robots tell a good joke? Did Trump get elected because he knows how to use



comedy to manipulate a crowd? Why are there people who still think women aren't as funny as men? If you're interviewing the Dalai Lama, should you maybe not ask a smart-ass question about living in the moment? Is Bill Murray even writing any of his Tweets?

We're not going to answer all of those questions. Instead, we've broken it down into four essential questions, the pillars of any serious dissection of comedy, which perfectly represents what we learned (and sometimes just argued about) during this ground-breaking weekend.

## **1. Where Does Comedy Come From?**

Seligman brought up Isaac Newton, one of the most famous examples of spontaneous inspiration. "The story about Newton and the apple turns out to be true," he said, referring to the legend of how Newton first came up with the law of gravity, supposedly while sitting under an apple tree and getting conked on the head by a falling apple. The real story, said Seligman, is likely a little different than the myth.

*"He's sitting at his desk and there's an apple on his desk. The moon rises behind the apple and it subtends the same visual angle, the apple blocks the moon, and Newton thinks, 'Could it be that what draws the apple to the earth is the same thing that holds the moon in orbit?' Now that's a measure of fantastic talent, but it's a sudden thing. He didn't gradually get there, he got it."*



Not everybody was enamored by theories of Newton’s “a-ha” moment, even if it didn’t occur under a tree. “All of these apocryphal stories of what Newton did, we have no idea that that’s the case,” Bob Mankoff said. “That’s just a narrative, that’s some story that somebody told at some time or that he told.” True or not, it did spark a conversation about whether comedic genius comes in a flash of inspiration, or if it’s slowly built over time. Kelly Leonard and Anne Libera told stories of Second City alumni like Steve Carell and Stephen Colbert, who took very different trajectories in their career. Carell took several years to come into his own as a performer, while Colbert seemed to arrive fully cooked in his comedic abilities.

Whether a performer is born with innate talent or has to slowly develop it, neither will reach great comedic heights—in which their sense of humor is capable of creating complex ideas and concepts intuitively—without practice. “We always think we don’t need to practice creativity or practice intuition,” Leonard said. But improvisation, the hallmark of the Second City in Chicago, “does just that,” he said. “If you were working without a script, time after time after time after time, you’re going to get better at being able to figure out what is the environment I’m in, and who are the people who are in my environment, and what am I seeing that can possibly be next?”

Performers at Second City go on to great success on TV and in the movies not just because they’ve got immense talent, but because of the rigorous schedule at the Chicago theater. “They do eight shows a week with improv sets afterwards,” said Libera. “They are in front of very different audiences over and over.”

Scott Dikkers claimed there is a similar work ethic at *The Onion*. It isn’t about showing up and being instantly great at comedy, but having the willingness to put in the



work. “It’s not magic,” he said. “It didn’t come out of nowhere. They developed it and they practiced it, and they became masters. When you do something...if you do it for 10 years obsessively, you’re going to be a master. I’ve seen that over and over with people.”

Dickers’ creative philosophy, in a single sentence: “I believe the consistent practice can create talent.”

There are two myths about comedy, Dickers explained. “The first myth of comedy is that the genius sits down and writes brilliant comedy *without* (first writing) 19 jokes that failed. The second myth is completion, that the people who succeed in comedy are the ones with the talent. Not true. The people who succeed in comedy are the ones that complete it.”

## **2. Does Being Funny Lead to Happiness?**

One of the oldest cliches about comedy is that the more brilliant the comedian, the bigger their personal demons. There are plenty of examples to back this up: Richard Pryor, Lenny Bruce, John Belushi, Robin Williams, Bill Cosby, the list goes on and on. (As Jim Norton writes in his eulogy for Robin Williams in *Time Magazine*, “So many comics I know seem to struggle with the demons of self-hatred and self-destruction.”) But aside from a few iconic examples, just how common is it for working comedians to be grappling with depression? And if it is common, what role does that depression play in their creativity?

Sometimes the cliches aren’t always true. Second City, the world-famous improv theater in Chicago, has “such a history of drug induced famous stars,” said Leonard,



citing examples like the late John Belushi and Chris Farley. But Second City alumni of the modern era, like Colbert, Carell, Tina Fey and Keegan-Michael Key, didn't have the same issues. "None of those people use drugs," Leonard said. "None of those people are living in that sort of dangerous area and yet they are the cutting edge comedians today. They have other kinds of damage and other things going on, but one of them is not drugs."

So why have so many comedy icons turned to drugs? As Libera explained, "The addiction creates an ability to let go of a self-consciousness that keeps you from creating and then ultimately, you think you can't create without the addiction."

Addictions aside, comedians or comedy writers in every medium (print or TV or stage) do predominantly suffer from some level of personal depression. "Four or five years ago, we were doing a PSA for a group talking about social anxiety," Leonard says. "I got asked to email all the people at Second City to see if anyone had experience in social anxiety, (and) roughly 70% of the performers at Second City suffered from social anxiety."

Dickers claimed that writers for *The Onion* dealt with similar issues. "Most of *The Onion*'s writers over the years have been on some kind of antidepressant medication and many of them were very serious chronic people with social anxiety just off the charts," he said.

Even Aisha Alfa, who admitted to being mostly happy, said that depressive moods sometimes inspired her most creative moments. "I went through a really bad breakup and it was horrible," she said. "I kept having to go and do these jokes and I hated everything about it. One day, I just went on and I was like, 'I'm just really fucking



sad, everybody. Deal with that,’ and went on this rant. Everyone is like, ’This is good. Now here’s the real good stuff.’ Then you realize that that absolute failure in my mind was really what the juicy stuff was.”

What do we do with this information? It’s not enough just to say, “Most comedians seem to be sad a lot. That must be hard.” As Seligman explained, “I’m interested in the subset of truth that supports human well-being.” He pushed the group to ponder how humor might be used (if indeed it could be used) to help people—non-comedians in particular—be happier. In other words, if the ability to look at the world from a comedic perspective is inspired by misery, does it lead to something better? Does humor alleviate some of the stress and anxiety of being alive?

For some, a sense of humor was a source of coping. “I grew up with an auditory learning disability and I felt like it caused me to be the class clown,” Scott Barry Kaufman explained. “I was always in detention for it but the only way I could cope with the situation was making all the other kids laugh, and I felt like it was the only way I could have control of the situation in my environment.”

Marie Forgeard said she took her first improv class in preparation for running a therapy group for people with social anxiety. “I felt like I had way too much social anxiety to be doing the social anxiety group,” she said. “So then I took an improv class, (and it was) very helpful.” Leonard shared the story of a *Saturday Night Live* writer, Katie Rich, who turned to improvisation as a way of coping with her anxiety. “When she’s improvising with another person, she’s forced to be in that moment, not thinking of the past, and not thinking of the future,” said Leonard. “The job of the person across from her was to save her, that’s what we teach in improvisation. That was the only place

But other than a temporary relief, is humor actually accomplishing anything? Or is it no different than a drug addiction, providing a temporary relief from the strain of anxiety or insecurity? Leonard suggested that if Seligman was looking for connections with positive psychology, "I don't know that you're going to find it in comedy," he said. "I'll tell you where we're going to find it: it's in improvisation. Because the practice of improvisation is everything you're talking about. It is entirely (about) getting people unstuck, getting them to unlearn all the bad practices, the bad listening, not being others-focused, a lack of empathy."

Dickers enthusiastically agreed that it was improvisation, not just humor, that could have a positive, lasting impact. "An amazing thing I've seen about improv is people go into it being very awkward and they come out of it being very comfortable in their own skin and being very sociable," he said. "That's a valuable skill."

Kaufman elaborated on what humor, and our understanding of how humor works and its usefulness, could contribute to the field of positive psychology. "There's this emerging thought called post-traumatic growth that's a part of positive psychology," he said. "The whole point of it is that every trauma, every tragedy, you try to find meaning and you try to build it off in a positive way."

Leonard and Libera both agreed with this idea. "It's not that it's better," Libera said. "It's that by doing it—" creating comedy, or comedic improvisation, from the ashes of your tragedy—"you embrace it and make something of it." Leonard elaborated: "I would say rather than coping with what's wrong, it's *using* what's wrong. *Using* failure. That's the benefit."



“That failure and what’s wrong is part of our condition, so we are weirdly celebrating it,” Libera continued.

“It’s a model for what comedy is,” said Mankoff. “We celebrate failure because that’s what we do all the time to achieve anything. We don’t look at it as wrong.”

The question of what inspires comedy, and what good it provides, is essentially a chicken-or-the-egg question. Is somebody depressed and therefore they create great comedy? Or is there great comedy, and that provides relief from depression? “A lot of researchers are interested in how mood affects our creativity,” said Forgeard. “In comparison, there is little research on how creativity affects mood, which is really strange given that it’s intuitively, a really important question. I just want to summarize 40 years of research on the relationship between mood and creativity. It’s basically a mess. Every study produces contradictory results.”

We got similarly contradictory results from the comedy creators in attendance. While they all had stories of themselves or their comedy collaborators suffering from emotional and psychological issues, they all seemed eager to bring more positivity into their lives. “Your book *Learned Optimism* reinforced for me a lot of my own positive attitude and stuff,” Dikkers told Seligman. “I used to think a lot more negatively, and I realized it was a choice. I could think negatively and tell negative stories about myself or I could tell positive stories. It really does help to tell the positive story or to think that way.”

Kaufman posed this question to the group: “Do you guys find you’re funniest when you’re at your most optimistic mood, or when you’re in your ‘All this world sucks’ (mood)?”



“No difference for me,” Dikkers said. “Maybe even more funny when I’m depressed.” Libera doesn’t believe that bad feelings or negative emotions necessarily inspired comedy, but comedy can take “a bad thing and put it into perspective. I don’t know that I’ve ever laughed harder than the night that my mom died and we sat in a room and just complained about how my father was just driving us all up the wall.”

This led to a spirited round-table discussion on how the death of a parent sometimes inspired some of the most healing humor. Mankoff, Eric Spitznagel, and Cindy Caponera all shared stories about the death of their parents, and how jokes often relieved the weight of grief.

### **3. Is Laughter a Necessary Component of Comedy?**

Kaufman asked the group, “What is the sacred cow of comedy?” What, in other words, is the ultimate goal? Libera had a simple answer: “If everybody laughs, then it works. Now, we play with that. There’s times when you get too many laughs and then the end of the thing falls flat.” But aside from the comedy minutiae of how many laughs is enough laughs, the general consensus of the room was that comedy doesn’t exist without laughter. “It is not comedy unless someone is laughing, period,” Leonard said.

But Dikkers suggested that laughter may be how we identify comedy, but its purpose may be more complicated than just eliciting involuntary spasms. “As a humorist or as a satirist, my sacred cow is I want to change the world,” he said. “I want my comedy to make a difference. I want it to change people. I would never say that out loud in my work because I want people to enjoy the work. Once you start doing that, you’re a



preacher, and you're not a comedy writer anymore. I would find it to be a pretty empty life to just be doing comedy and just making people laugh, but not feeling like I was communicating something that was going to make the world a better place. Maybe that sounds crazy."

Interestingly, for a medium devoted to creating laughter, comedians and comedy writers don't spend all that much time laughing. "I don't laugh much," Dikkers admitted. "I can count probably on one hand the times I've laughed out loud at humor that somebody wrote and prepared for me." When people in social situations try to impress him with a joke or funny line, "it annoys me," he said. "Give me the information you have to give me, I'm not at work."

For Mankoff, who evaluates the comedic potential of thousands of cartoons for the *New Yorker* every week, genuine laughter from him is rare. "I don't laugh at any of those cartoons," he said. "It's not that I don't know that they're good, or I say 'This isn't great, this is working, this is not.' Anybody who is a professional in this, after you're out in the office and you're fooling around and improvising with your friends and whatever and creating skits on the floor, you'll be laughing. But when you're evaluating humor it's automatically diminished." Dikkers added that people who don't make their living in comedy often don't realize that "it's a boring intellectual process."

"Why laughter?" Mankoff asked the group. "Why this response? What is laughter doing?" He proposed that laughter is actually an "emotional regulation mechanism that has to do with conflict." Look at the way children laugh, he suggested. It begins as a fear response which then evolves into laughter. "You're creating some sort of either cognitive or emotional conflict," Mankoff said.



Comedy is an especially interesting form of communication, Mankoff argued, because laughter serves as a sort of punctuation. “Laughter *ends* the comic event,” he said. Once laughter has been achieved, it’s clear that your ideas have been relayed successfully. What other form of human interaction works in quite that same way, where the listener responds in a very specific way that assures the communicator, “Okay, I’ve been heard and understood correctly?”

“Now sometimes the joke goes on (after the laughter),” Mankoff said. “But when you think about how (a joke works), there’s this sort of confusion or disturbance in your brain as you put the things together, and then you laugh and then it’s over. It’s almost like the brain is getting rid of this thing that doesn’t make sense. It doesn’t quite make sense and then we conceptualize it.”

Mankoff also noted the similarities between laughter and crying. “They’re both emotional regulation responses,” he said. “An involuntary response in regard to some sort of conflict.” They’re so close, he said, that it may explain why comedy is so closely linked to depression.

Seligman brought up an especially intriguing example of how laughter may not in fact have anything to do with whether something is funny: Khrushchev’s secret speech in 1956, a closed session of the 20th Party Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, which Seligman described as “one of the great comic moments in history.” Khrushchev criticized the Soviet regime, denouncing the late Joseph Stalin and outlining his numerous human rights violations and atrocities. What was so funny about that? Seligman explains:



*“From the back row, someone shouts out, ‘You were there. Why didn’t you say anything?’ Everything was in the balance now. Khrushchev says, ‘Who said that?’ Silence in the hall. ‘Now you know.’ Is that comedy? No one laughed.”*

Both Leonard and Libera agreed that it was an absolutely funny and comic moment, and still worked despite the lack of laughter from the audience. At least in this situation, fear might be an explanation for why nobody laughed at Khrushchev’s clearly hilarious line. It’s also easier for us to laugh when we’re hearing this line from the other side of history. “I’m seeing it with a layer of distance,” Libera said.

The final observation on laughter came from Seligman, who asked the group if anybody was familiar with laughter-induced syncope. “It’s when you faint, right?” Mankoff asked. Seligman clarified, “It’s when you think you’re going to die laughing and you actually pass out. It’s happened to me twice. You actually fall down, your heart (momentarily) stops and then you find yourself falling to the ground. It turns out it’s not dangerous but it is the most unconscious I’ve ever been.”

His explanation was the only time this group of comedians was actually rendered speechless.

#### **4. Do You Need an Audience? (i.e. If a joke falls in the forest and there’s nobody there to notice it, is it still funny?)**

To some extent, comedy absolutely needs an audience, especially when the point is to evoke laughter (hopefully without killing them), or to make a connection with



another human or humans. “As a comedian, you put yourself out in front of an audience to see whether or not (the joke) works,” Libera said. “You can spend forever crafting the perfect joke but you really don’t know whether it’s funny until you put it out there.”

But just recognizing whether a joke “works” isn’t necessarily the point. The presence of an audience provides more than just evidence of humor’s technical effectiveness. It can also elevate humor to something more, a unifying link between the performer and a dark room full of strangers. “Primarily, its function is social,” said Mankoff. “Either to bond us together or to separate us from others, but that’s constantly happening.”

“When I tell a story that you laugh at, it is because you know what I know,” Libera explained. “You understand me.” As an example, she mentioned comedy performances she directed for various cruise ships. “We had an audience that was half Spanish and half German and didn’t speak English,” she said. “So I’m out there on the ship with a bunch of actors trying to figure out what we’re going to do to make this audience laugh. You know what made them laugh? Stuff about being on a cruise ship.”

Alfa pointed out a slightly different goal of comedy, not just to unite people who already feel the same, but to bridge the gap between those who think (or believe they think) differently. “You laugh and all of a sudden you’re like, ‘Oh, you’re laughing too?’” Alfa said. “You’re a racist and I’m ... *not* a conservative. It brings people down to our base levels.”

But audiences aren’t always on the comedian’s side. Sometimes they don’t laugh. “From a stand-up perspective, honoring the audience is really important,” Alfa said. “I hate comedians who say, ‘You’ll get that later.’ You guys just don’t understand



and I'm like, 'They just don't like the joke. Move on.' Or like, 'That usually gets a bigger laugh. I'm blaming the audience.' You know what I mean?"

But what if an audience has the wrong reaction? By wrong reaction, we don't mean not laughter. What if they laugh at a joke for the wrong reasons, or with a different intent than the writer or comedian hoped for? The classic Mel Brooks 1974 Western comedy *Blazing Saddles* is a perfect example of this. Filled with satire aimed at racism, the script's frequent use of the N-word slur has attracted many fans who misunderstand the comedic intent by Mr. Brooks. They laugh at the flagrant racism rather than recognizing that the joke is *at the expense* of racism. Has the comedy therefore failed?

Dickers calls this the "wrong kind of laughs. I'm not going to work on a show that's getting laughs by conservatives because they think I'm making fun of black people. That's a wrong laugh." His goal as a satirist and comedian has always been "to change (the audience's) mind. I want to make them think like I think." You can't accomplish that if your audience is celebrating the thing you intended to make fun of.

"There have been studies about whether or not satire changes people's minds," Libera noted. "What I really believe is that it doesn't change us but what it does do is *reveal* that we have changed. Something like (the character) Archie Bunker (from the 70s sitcom *All In the Family*) is probably not going to change people's minds. But at the right point in history, you look at it and go, 'Oh right. That's crappy.'"

Spitznagel recalled a recent interview he'd done with *All in the Family* creator Norman Lear, who was certain that no racist ever watched *All in the Family* and didn't get the joke. "Lear told me they got lots of letters from people saying 'Archie Bunker is a hero by the way you're a fucking fag Liberal Jew'," Spitznagel said. "They always



knew what he was doing. They loved Archie Bunker but they knew (the show) was making fun of them.”

Obviously the relationship between an audience and the joke teller is complicated, but it gets even more complicated when you take the audience out of it. Seligman asked the group to think about comedy in an especially challenging way. “Why,” he asked, “can’t you tickle yourself? Why can’t you tell yourself a joke?” If you take away the audience—if, say, you become the only audience of your own joke-telling—why does it never seem to work? You can’t really make yourself laugh by telling yourself a joke, can you? Why is that?

Mankoff had several theories. One, tickling is a “benign violation that something has to be wrong and right at the same time,” he explained. “When you’re being tickled by someone else ... it’s both an aggressive act and a friendly act. It’s not like you’re going to laugh no matter who tickles you. A stranger comes up and tickles you, you’re not going to laugh. So you have to look at the social context.”

His other explanation boils down to one word: Surprise. “We can’t surprise ourselves, right?” Mankoff said. “We can’t tickle ourselves in that way.” Seligman agreed, adding that “You have to not know what’s going to happen next. The point of tickling ... and I think the point of a joke is importantly surprise. You can’t tickle yourself because it turns out you know what you’re going to do next. The surprise is absent.”

Seligman brought up Andy Clark, a professor of philosophy and Chair in Logic and Metaphysics at the University of Edinburgh in Scotland, who has a theory that Seligman said proves the tickling hypotheses. “It basically says that what the mind is



about is predicting the future, and that’s what we’re doing all the time,” he said. Trying to predict the future and succeeding—especially with a joke that you created, where you already know the punchline—eliminates surprise entirely. Our need to know what happens next makes telling ourselves a joke, or making ourselves laugh, pretty much impossible.

But, Libera pointed out, this basic human need to predict the future is exactly what makes comedy work at all. “We determine things based on our past expectation, and then (because of a joke) we discover we’re wrong,” she said. “Our training, the training that we do in improvisation in particular is to limit that need to control the future. It’s really not about going to the future, it’s about limiting your need to control it, and instead building off of what’s happening in the moment towards that future.”

You can’t tickle yourself, and that may be exactly the riddle that explains how humor operates. It’s not about being silly, or satiric, or especially clever. It’s about manipulating our basic human need to predict the future, and denying that impulse. It’s surprise, sure. But the surprise is more satisfying when it veers sharply from what our brains and our past experiences tell us *must* be true.