

Chicago Reader

Funny Business

Where to go for a laugh

By Ryan Hubbard

➡ SKETCH/IMPROV

John Belushi, Bill Murray, Mike Myers, Vince Vaughn, Tina Fey, Steve Carell, Amy Poehler, and Stephen Colbert were all trained in comedy in Chicago, and primarily at one or both of the city's two most famous comedic institutions: [Second City](#) (1616 N. Wells, 312-337-3992) and [I.O.](#) (3541 N. Clark, 773-880-0199), formerly ImprovOlympic. Second City, often considered the originator of improv, had its roots in a University of Chicago student group called the [Compass](#), whose core members founded Second City in 1959. Since then it's become synonymous with improvisation, though what you find on its two main stages is more often sketch comedy.

Legendary improv guru [Del Close](#) taught at I.O. in the 80s and 90s, and improvisation still takes center stage—particularly the long-form variety, which stresses the development of characters and themes over the quick, gamelike style. You'll find that at **ComedySportz** (777 N. Green, 312-733-6000), though it also has a long-form show, [The Hot Karl](#). If you see one sketch show all year, see [War! Now in Its 4th Smash Year!](#) at Second City. It's worth the \$18-\$24 ticket. If you see one improv show, go to [T.J. and Dave at I.O.](#) It's been running late on Wednesdays for over four years now, for \$5. Dave Pasquesi, half of the duo, can also be seen on stages such as the Goodman and Steppenwolf and recently appeared in the movie *Strangers With Candy*.

But those aren't your only options for sketch and improv. Here's a short list of venues featuring regular, consistently solid shows: **Playground Theater** (3209 N. Halsted, 773-871-3793), **Cornservatory** (4210 N. Lincoln, 773-865-7731), **Stage Left Theatre** (3408 N. Sheffield, 773-342-3575), **The Spot** (4437 N. Broadway, 773-728-8933), and **Annoyance Theatre** (4840 N. Broadway, 773-561-4665), where on Thursdays you can see one of the city's most accomplished performers, Susan Messing, in *Messing With a Friend*. Lots of colleges feature student sketch and improv groups, notably the University of Chicago's Off-Off Campus and Northwestern University's Titanic Players. Last but not least, watch our listings for two big annual comedy festivals: **Sketchfest** (chicagosketchfest.net) in January and the Chicago Improv Festival (cif.com) in April.

Both offer loads of sketch and improv from local groups and troupes from around the world. For more check the *Reader's* comedy listings in Section 2 for prices, locations, and what's playing where.