



▶ IMPROV PLAYERS GET CREATIVE AT THE SENIOR THEATRE RESOURCE CENTER IN PORTLAND, ORE.

RETIREMENT LIVING

Keep Your Mind Sharp With Improv

▶ **TOM GATES WORKED IN COMMERCIAL MORTGAGES FOR 31 years.** But the 66-year-old, of Geneva, Ill., considers himself “somewhat of a clown” and was always interested in comedy. Eighteen months ago, shortly before retiring, he signed up for an improvisational comedy class at Second City in Chicago. “It’s the highlight of my week—we laugh for two hours straight,” he says. “And it definitely keeps you sharp mentally.”

Tom persuaded his wife, Kathy, a retired teacher, to join him. The classmates often go out to dinner together and to comedy shows to watch their instructor perform. “We’re on our eighth session together, and we’re going to continue,” he says of his new social group.

The Gateses are part of a small but growing trend of people 55 and older who are discovering the social and cognitive benefits of improv comedy. Comedy clubs and theaters across the U.S., once focused on younger people, now offer classes aimed at older aspiring comedians.

Kerry Sheehan, president of education and training at Second City, says her theater has been offering “Humor Doesn’t Retire” classes, aimed at the 55-and-over crowd, for three years. A few hundred people have taken the eight-week classes, which cost \$225 a session. “We were getting feedback that people wanted to take classes with their peers, so we ran a pilot program first,” she says. The curriculum and teachers are the same as those for younger students. Although one student is 98, most are in their sixties and seventies.

Improv is a form of comedy made up in the moment

and performed in a group. “It feels good to work in an ensemble, and research has found that it’s helpful for maintaining a strong memory,” Sheehan says.

Teams create a scene on the spot, usually based on a random suggestion thrown out by another person. The scene development relies on active listening and building on other people’s ideas.

Key improv principles all involve supporting other team members. One such principle is “Yes and,” which means always accepting the premise set up by teammates and moving it forward. “‘Yes and’ is a skill. It forces you to listen,” says Johnny Meeks, academic director at the training center of the Upright Citizens Brigade, a comedy theater in Los Angeles. “For example, I have a dog. Yes and it’s a golden retriever.”

Another principle is to focus on the present and what is happening in the scene at the moment. Or, with “call back,” an earlier joke is referenced, so you need to remember what happened previously in the scene.

Laughter Is the Best Medicine

Bonnie Vorenberg, founder and president of the Senior Theatre Resource Center, in Portland, Ore., says improv techniques encourage “esprit de corps” among the team. “In improv, nothing is wrong, so it builds self-esteem,” she says. “You have to respond by instinct, right away. This stimulates creativity and laughter.”

Researchers are studying the effects of improv to see if it strengthens cognitive ability and mood. One study published in 2014 found that participating in improv games has the potential to improve reasoning for those who have age-related memory complaints.

At Stagebridge, a performing arts center for older adults in Oakland, Calif., improv classes are a popular offering and include an 11-week class for \$179. The center also has a 10-person troupe that performs at conferences and workshops in the Bay Area.

Anita Goldstein, 84, a retired college administrator, has been taking improv classes at Stagebridge for 11 years and is a member of the performance troupe. She has found that her improv skills carry over to her everyday life. “On a team, you make others look good, and in other areas of my life, that translates into being alert, being resilient and being aware of others,” she says.

It’s possible to take improv at theaters that don’t offer special classes for seniors. At Upright Citizens Brigade, in Los Angeles and New York, all ages are mixed together. “Our approach is anyone can do improv,” says Meeks. Beginning classes cost \$450 for eight weeks and are open to everyone. **K BETH BROPHY**