THE BLACK VERSION
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There's a Sudden Burst of Color in L.A.'s Improv Scene

And troupes like the Black Version are lighting the way

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One night at the end of August, an improv group called the Black Version set out to make an extraordinarily bad imaginary movie onstage at the Groundlings Theatre. Called *Pookie 4*, it was based on an extraordinarily bad real movie called *Rocky IV*. Just about all of the Black Version's members are black; the concept of their shows is to field suggestions of actual movies from the audience and conjure black versions of those movies. They've done this more than 70 times in the troupe's eight-year history. In previous

shows, *Silence of the Lambs* became *Why You Eatin' People?*, *Pretty Woman* became *Hot Mess*, and *When Harry Met Sally* became *When Ray Ray Boned Keesha*.

Although trying to synopsize *Pookie 4* is a fool's errand, it goes something like this: Former tae bo instructor Pookie is coaxed out of retirement for one last bout, which happens to be in Jamaica. There are misunderstandings with a hotel clerk and a battle with the living incarnation of a racial slur (though not the one you're thinking). And there are plenty of laughs, yet as entertaining as it is, a night with the Black Version can mirror America's conversation about race, with moments that are uncomfortable, complicated, and full of contradiction.

Much about the performers is impressive, from their sheer speed and timing to their musical range (the accompanying five-piece band produces ballads, hip-hop and, on this night, mariachi music on demand) to their encyclopedic knowledge of American film. Most impressive, though, is that the whole thing works as well as it does. The scenes carom off blunt stereotypes—black men loving big asses, white men tying sweaters over their shoulders—so much so that it should collapse under the gravity of its own presumption. But it doesn't. This is the dangerous game the Black Version plays, exploiting stereotypes in such a way as to get audiences to laugh at the stereotypes themselves rather than the assumptions and prejudices the stereotypes embody. It's fun.

The Black Version at the Groundlings Theatre, where they are regulars on the main stage

PHOTO BY CARLO RICCI

The underlying theme of its monthly performances is the lack of roles for black people in film and TV. The troupe always begins with a song, like, say, Bette Midler's "Wind Beneath My Wings." Sample lyric: "Did I ever tell you I'm a Negro? / And they don't write decent parts for me." The team consists of actors you've probably seen or heard before—and probably as the sole nonwhite character in the cast. Phil LaMarr voiced that one black guy in *Futurama* (and that one futuristic Asian warrior in *Samurai Jack*). Cedric Yarbrough was that one black guy in *Reno 911!* and the recent Amy Poehler-Will Ferrell comedy *The House*. Daniele Gaither is that one (possibly black) porpoise in the Netflix cartoon *Bojack Horseman*. Gary Anthony Williams has been that one black guy in so many shows and movies, his production company is called That One Black Guy.

To have so many minority actors all here together is unusual as far as any cast goes, but especially in improv, which has been mostly white and male for much of its 70-plus-year history. But the Black Version is emblematic of something new in improv: diversity. This shift is important because the great improv schools in L.A., Chicago, New York, and elsewhere feed

the casts and writers' rooms of sitcoms, dramas, late-night talk programs, films, podcasts, web series, and sketch shows. The people in the entry-level class of today may create the *Key & Peele* or *Broad City* or *Atlanta* of tomorrow, just as the creators of those shows were in the entry-level classes of yesteryear. Changes at this fundamental layer of the comedic strata will hopefully mean more kinds of people in more kinds of shows, more versions of all colors and creeds.

When did the change begin to happen? Some in comedy say improv began to diversify a decade ago, that its evolution roughly parallels the rise of social media and a proliferation of digital outlets for aspirants to put themselves out there. Some say it's really only starting to change now. What's clearer is that, like so much else this past year, politics has accelerated the push for change. "I'd say you can feel it in the air—a real, almost tangible feeling of 'Things have to change, and it's no longer going to have to be piecemeal,'" says Colleen Doyle, training center director of iO West, the Hollywood branch of the storied Chicago school. "I felt after the election that, well, we're just gonna have to put our foot on the gas."

Upright Citizens Brigade, which was founded by Poehler, Matt Walsh, Matt Besser, and Ian Roberts, has been awarding 300 diversity scholarships a year since 2009 to students attending its L.A. training center. It also hosts a weekly diversity-focused "improv jam" and monthly panels. iO West, whose original Chicago group begat the UCB founders along with *Saturday Night Live* legends like Chris Farley and Mike Myers, hired an inclusion director and created a calendar for rolling out diversity-minded initiatives. All the schools are responding to a push to reflect the world outside their doors, bringing in not just nonwhite and LGBTQ people, but the over-60 crowd and folks with disabilities. Heather de Michele has seen the changes. She's the managing director of the Groundlings, the L.A.-born improv school that trained Kristen Wiig, Phil Hartman, Ferrell, and others. "You can walk into any Groundlings audition now, and it looks very different than it did two years ago," she says. "I think it's fair to give credit to the Black Version."

Then there's the Second City, the *prima materia* of improvisational comedy, whose original Chicago ensemble birthed *SNL* in 1975. This past October, it hosted its second Diversity in Comedy Festival in Hollywood, part of an effort to attract, you know, anybody else. Over two

nights and three days, 1,200 or so people—Asian American, black, Hispanic, LGBTQ, stand-up comedians, actors, networkers, on and on—came to attend three dozen workshops, panels, and performances. During the day, people roamed the second-floor halls of Second City's quarters on good old, grimy-starred Hollywood Boulevard, recapping performances or attending one of the workshops (examples: "Real Women Have Verbs," "Hosting: Your Guide to the Basics"). At night were the bigger shows. It was the mullet approach to festival planning: business in front, party in back.

"For some people it's very empowering to be on a stage with people you share a cultural background with. It feels safer, and it feels exciting to take over this previously predominantly white stage," says UCB diversity coordinator Anna Rajo. Her Latinx troupe, Gringos, had a run of shows called "El Chisme," in which the prompts were gossip because, says Rajo, " chisme is a piece of Latinx culture in that historically our culture is made up of storytellers chatting about neighborhoods and family members." Other troupes included Spanglish and Improvisos Peligrosos, which perform sets in Spanish, using big movements and repetition to guide non-Spanish speakers in the audience through the story.

There was also Chicago's multiethnic Preach! which builds its improv off spoken word, and the troupe behind Asian AF, a popular UCB showcase in L.A. and New York that features Asian American stand-up, sketch, and improv. Asian AF resists any whiff of putting all Asians in a single box by hosting theme nights that focus on underrepresented peoples like Filipinos and Indians.

The cast of the UCB showcase Asian AF

PHOTO BY CARLO RICCI

On Saturday afternoon, Asian AF presented a panel where topics ranged from explaining comedy writing to your Asian parents to whitewashing. (That's when white actors are cast to play Asian roles. Asian AF founder Will Choi based Asian AF on his earlier showcase called "Scarlett Johansson Presents..." after the actress played the lead in the live-action version of the anime comic *Ghost in the Shell*.) Alex Song, a writer for *The Tonight Show Starring Jimmy Fallon*, weighed in on the topic of how to own race without descending into stereotype, even if the stereotype had elements of truth. "I kinda like to lean into the stereotypes," she said. "I would make the Asian joke first, not so the white folks think it's OK to say, but so they know it's mine." Sample joke: "I like Chinese food, but I just call it 'food.'"

Dwayne Colbert, a Second City instructor since 2015 and the festival's former artistic director, was running around, introducing panels. When I'd spoken with Colbert a couple weeks before, he blamed improv's lack of diversity on the improv schools. "It was always the excuse of, 'You should get out there and do it yourself,'" he said at the time. Schools didn't know how to proceed on these issues, owing to a mix of organizational ignorance and fear of trying to come

off too woke. But then attempting to represent minority voices without bringing in actual minority voices resulted in the kind of stereotypes many have said are built into entertainment. “It’s a shit show of exploitation,” Colbert said.

Now, in the midst of the festival, there was at least a glimpse of what could be. At most festivals, improv teams flee the moment their sets are done, but here, people actually hung around to support other teams, other shows. Typical of improv, the performances were a mixed bag, sometimes funny, sometimes not. But most were at least interesting and, occasionally, goddamn bananas. Colbert performed in a Saturday show at which the improvisers received a Beatles-on-Ed-Sullivan reception. “People don’t scream for improv,” he says, “and people were screaming. That was insane for me.”

The Black Version performed, too, headlining a show Saturday night. Their movie was *The Tiara Diaries*, a spoof of *The Princess Diaries*, possibly the whitest film ever made.

For some, improv is a gateway drug, a career obligation. For Jordan Black, the founder of the Black Version, it’s an end in itself. He has written for *Saturday Night Live* and appeared in shows like *Community* and *Key & Peele*, but he says, “Everything else for me pales in comparison to doing an improv show.” Black is in his forties and lean; onstage he’s wry, playfully aggressive. He grew up in small-town Illinois, moved to L.A. in 1988, and fell in love with improv. Black was what they call a main-stager at the Groundlings a decade ago, meaning he was on the school’s premiere team, and he performs there regularly still. “For a zillion years, I knew I wanted to do an all-black improv show, but I didn’t know enough black improvisers,” he says.

Over time he met LaMarr, Gaither, Karen Maruyama (who is Japanese American), Keegan-Michael Key, and Jordan Peele at the Groundlings along with Williams and Yarbrough on an improv film with Melissa McCarthy. Suddenly a troupe was possible. For Black, the concept of a “black version” of a movie seemed like a good way to do long-form comedy, to tell a bigger story. “When you do improv as long as I have, you assume no one cares about improv,” he says. But the first show was a hit. “They had to turn people away. It was crazy.”

The Black Version rarely spoofs the same movie twice. After mutating a film, the team pauses for an intermission and then comes back for random DVD extras, outtakes, and public service

announcements before ending with a group song. Maruyama, who is the director, walks among the audience, pulling suggestions and dictating what the scenes will be. She carries hundreds of movies in her brain, unspooling the scenes that keep the Black Version's plots running in basic parallel to the originals'. A teacher at the Groundlings, she has a long bio of TV appearances. "If you ask me about the Black Version," Maruyama tells me, "I'd say they're the best improv group I've worked with, not the best black improv group."

Clockwise from left: Jordan Black, Daniele Gaither, Gary Anthony Williams, Nyima Funk, Cedric Yarbrough, Karen Maruyama, and Phil LaMarr

PHOTO BY CARLO RICCI

"I have people in the show who I know I can trust," says Black, "because their body of work and their training is such that they know how to do this. They've been black improvisers for a long time before they did the Black Version. They're not going to just jump in and think like, 'Oh, this is a show about watermelon jokes and fried chicken.' We will reference those things, but I think in a more responsible way." He thinks about this. "Not that we're trying to be responsible. We're really just trying to be funny."

"We did traffic a lot in stereotype, but that was part of the gimmick," says Key, who performed in about 20 shows with the troupe before he and Peele bowed out for their Comedy Central

show. “I think it always in a very playful way bordered on stereotype and bordered on offensive.” He applied a similar logic to *Key & Peele.*

“It’s our job as comedians and artists to reflect the world—plus one. Reflect the world with heightening,” he says, using a semi-mystical improv term that has something to do with refining the chaos of the scene into something more orderly but with yet more potential for better chaos.

There aren’t numbers on how many improv students go on to work in the industry, but the consensus is that it’s a lot. Ninety percent of the Second City instructors and students are in the entertainment industry, for instance. They’re everywhere. Where you end up depends in part on your coast: Common wisdom has it that L.A. improv students tend to go on to sitcoms and studio-based shows, New York students go on to talk shows and the late-night circuit, and Chicago students can go either way. Who’s attending the schools determines what, more or less, comedy in America is.

Long before he assembled his troupe, Black often puzzled over why improv was so white. “But then I finally figured it out: It’s because if you are a black kid who wants to do comedy, generally it’s going to be be- cause you’ve watched either funny people in movies or stand-ups,” he says. “Even the funny black people in movies come from stand-up. You go, ‘Oh, I have to do stand-up,’ so you never think about improv. If you’re a black kid wanting to do comedy, all the comedy icons are stand-ups.”

Key thinks improv’s lack of diversity is more a class issue than a race one. He saw it as his career carried him west, from his early days at Second City Detroit before his move to Chicago, where he met Peele, and eventually to Los Angeles and then went on to MadTV, the Black Version, and so on.

Most people who are exposed to live improv, particularly actors, find it in college, Key argues. “What you’re dealing with is a smaller art form that was born from a certain place and a certain demographic, and another demographic was wholly ignorant of it,” he says. “You would have to be a middle-class black person…to know that it exists. And then you’d have to have the money to pay for it. That class clown in that lower-income class in Inglewood, he doesn’t know that improv exists.”

Peer pressure has been a problem as well, says Second City Hollywood's Colbert, who's been in *Silicon Valley* and *The Mindy Project*. As a kid in South Central L.A., he harbored a secret love of theater. "If you're in a depressed, poor community and you see avenues for getting out, one you don't see and probably won't see for a while is making money through comedy. And if you do, it's stand-up," Colbert says. His peers didn't look fondly on the theater. "Growing up, trying to take an acting class, I had to disguise my interests."

Money matters, too. Improv schools feature tiered classes: As you get better, you qualify for the coveted main-stage team—the elites chosen by the artistic director to represent the company's house style. As Laci Mosley, a black comic, explains, "It's $450 a pop to do classes, but at a stand-up it's the cost of a drink." She's done both.

Zeke Nicholson offers another explanation about improv's lack of diversity. He's a member of the troupe White Women, which seven black and mixed-race men launched out of the Upright Citizens Brigade half a decade ago. It was the first all-minority team to appear regularly on the theater's main stage rather than in its annex. "If improv is the machine, then perspective is the gas powering it," he says. In other words, to his way of thinking, improv is a reflection of its performers. So if "all of the references are perpetuated by white comedians," he says, "it takes on some of that" racialization.

White Women's show is called "Your Token Friend," and rather than bringing in a monologuist or requesting suggestions from the audience, members interview guests about their experiences as minorities, then run the raw material of the interview through the loom of make-believe. One night last summer at a packed house at the UCB Theatre on Sunset, Nicholson—half-black and half-white, tall, wearing a flat-brimmed hat and shirt buttoned all the way up to here—asks their guest, the musician and comic Reggie Watts, what it was like growing up black in Montana. "There were definitely times you were chased by a pickup truck," Watts says. Using stories from Watts's early days, the troupe cooks up scenes on dog-eating aliens, Nirvana cover bands, and a spelling bee with a harmonica translator (you had to be there). What White Women seems like, more than men, more than African Americans, is a bunch of comedy geeks who like making stuff up in front of an audience.

"When White Women was coming up, there weren't that many black folks on-stage," says Nicholson. "We happened to hit it, and by 'it' I mean the comedy community, when people

were hungry for a new type of thing. After us there's been a huge wave of minority comics doing sketch and improv."

If you ignore the first 500 years or so of improvisational techniques cropping up in Western theater— commedia dell'arte and so on—modern improv began around the 1940s with Viola Spolin teaching improvisational games to child actors in Hollywood. In the mid-1950s she moved to Chicago and midwifed improvisational theater with her son, Paul Sills, who created the company that became Second City, picking up actors like Mike Nichols and Elaine May along the way.

Then Del Close showed up in the early '60s. Brilliant and volatile, he coauthored the improv holy book *Truth in Comedy*, in which the art form's power is described as being the connections made between the players in the moment. Be honest, be present, do not seek jokes: "The connecting line must be truly inspired by the situation on the stage at the moment, and usually can't be planned or re-created later. It is seldom the least bit funny out of context. A laugh resulting from a connection is a classic example of a moment when 'you had to be there,' and describing what happened later can't do it justice."

Among other techniques Close developed was the "Harold," a staple of long-form improv in which multiple stories and group scenes interconnect to build a larger narrative. With Charna Halpern, he went on to create iO (née ImprovOlympics), which focused on the process of creation as the "goal" of improv, as opposed to Second City's approach where improv was seen as a means of generating sketches. All of this was based on the fabled improv tenet developed by Close and others known as "Yes, and" (or "Yes, & ..." in its original, formal designation). According to *Truth in Comedy*, conflict works for written narrative but prevents improvisers from moving the scene along. "The 'Yes, & ...' rule simply means that whenever two actors are onstage, they agree with each other to the nth degree. If one asks the other a question, the other must respond positively and then provide additional information, no matter how small... moment by moment, the two of them have created a scene that neither of them had planned."

That first wave of improv led to *Saturday Night Live* and *SCTV*, to Murray and Radner and Murphy, and eventually spawned the other major and minor companies around the world. But diversity was not among its byproducts. *SNL* was long known for having a single minority member, beginning with Garrett Morris. When the show hired Sasheer Zamata in early 2014,

there hadn't been a black female cast member in about seven years. Zamata left in 2017; at last count, 5 of the 16 players were nonwhite.

The troupe Gringos at UCB

PHOTO BY CARLO RICCI

The transforming media landscape has meant *SNL* isn't the only avenue for exposure. Comedians launch podcasts, produce Funny or Die bits, and create YouTube series. UCB diversity coordinator and Gringos cast member Rajo says that in the seven years since she graduated from high school, "I've seen a huge leap in representation in the improv community and in television and film. And I think that people creating their own content was a huge catalyst." With shows like *Broad City* and *Insecure*, which both started out as a web series before moving to Comedy Central and HBO, respectively, "people were learning how to create their own content when the gatekeepers of Hollywood had not consented to make that content." New role models have appeared, too: comedians like Aziz Ansari, who created *Master of None*; Donald Glover, who made *Atlanta*; and Kelly Marie Tran, who performed at the Diversity in Comedy Festival with her troupe and was in *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, which depicts a very diverse galaxy far, far away.

Then there's *Key & Peele*, which draws a straight line from Chicago improv to the Black Version and on to Peele's *Get Out*, the sci-fi horror-comedy about race that earned more than $250 million at the box office, a Golden Globe nomination, and Oscar buzz—and proved that America has an appetite for these tough conversations. *Key & Peele* wasn't exactly the first show of its kind. Each decade there are one or two minority-driven sketch shows that banter with the culture at large. In the early '90s, the Wayans brothers' *In Living Color* launched the careers of Jamie Foxx, David Alan Grier, Carrie Ann Inaba, and, of course, JLo and Jim Carrey. That show handed the reins to MadTV, which saw early appearances by Aries Spears, Anjelah Johnson-Reyes, and the Black Version's LaMarr and Gaither. *Chappelle's Show* came next.

But being mixed-race, the creators of *Key & Peele* had a slightly different challenge: bridging the gap between the black and white experiences and explaining, through comedy, where we went wrong. This was probably an unfair burden. The first season covered the gamut of mixed-race life, but after that the duo went further afield. "We're guys that were trying to find the best viable comedic game for every sketch we wrote," says Key. "And we just happen to have melanin in our skin. And then you let the chips fall where they may."

Good improv—and if you've ever seen any, you know it can be exceedingly rare—is, pound for pound, the most entertainment you can get. Neither sketch nor stand-up, improv that is firing on all cylinders is surprising to you and to the performers, which compounds the delight as connections are made that wouldn't have been possible in a more controlled environment. It's like watching a magic show in which the magician accidentally-on-purpose creates a trick on the spot, and the trick is also funny and insightful and offers a glimpse into the workings of the collective unconscious.

But if the collective unconscious is drawing from different points of reference, things can get awkward. Laci Mosley remembers performing with an all-white troupe one time. When the audience suggested the word "sauce," Mosley thought of the song "Too Much Sauce" by the rapper Future. This gets at what shall hence- forth be known as the Sauce Problem. "The beat I initiated had more to do with Future's voice in my head than a pizza with too much sauce. But they went to an over-sauced pizza," Mosley recalls. She riffed on "sauce" as signified in the song—"like juice, like swag" (like style). The team stumbled through and, as with a lot of improv, it landed poorly. Mosley saw the difficulty of pulling from unshared references.

“White people don’t even take certain cultural lanes I would take because they don’t understand the meaning,” she says. “People think people of color on a stage, that our brains are inherently the same as most white people’s. But it’s a different frame of reference.” After that Mosley kept the “black” stuff to herself because she didn’t want to put her teammates in an uncomfortable position.

That’s the Sauce Problem in brief: Where there’s a dominant context, minority students might not feel like they fit in. They might drop out, or not be chosen for teams by instructors who mistake the not-fitting- in for lack of talent. Thus have teams, and schools, tended toward homogeneity. It’s hard to “Yes, and” when improvisers don’t know what they’re building off of. But there’s good that can come from the differences, too, says Martin Garcia, a teacher and director at Second City Hollywood for 23 years. “If you can find a way to have a discussion of people’s points of view, you come up with even better material,” he says during a conversation I have with some of the school’s management. “It’s not just the white culture learning from the diverse cultures. My improv got better because of my experiences with them as well. If anybody gets to the place of ‘My way is the right way always,’ they’re not gonna be any good at it. And that’s if you’re white, black, gay, a woman, whatever.”

As a gay man and a Puerto Rican, Garcia considers himself a diversity “twofer,” which hasn’t always been easy. He recalls getting side-eye from overlooked white players. “On some level, there were some people who thought, ‘Who’s this guy? He got hired because his name’s Garcia?’ ” Second City’s associate artistic director Nancy Hayden picks it up: “And you’re like, ‘No, I got hired because I’m gay.’” They laugh.

The Sauce Problem—the matter of context—extends to the audience, which Hayden calls “the other member of the ensemble.” She says, “for a very long time the cast was white, and so was the audience.” People of color went with what played well to a white audience, “taking their suggestions and spewing it back to them.”

Jordan Black and his troupe are acutely aware of this phenomenon. Take the Pookie 4 show. When the players asked the audience to suggest character names, someone yelled out “Blackie.” Based on the makeup of the crowd, odds were good that a white person had suggested it. “You’ll be surprised by the things that people say who are well-educated, sophisticated people,” says Black. “You go like, ‘What? No, that’s not the definition of

blackness. No, that's just a stereotype.' People don't realize that, 'Oh, my view of blackness is based on stereotype,' because they haven't had any real black experiences."

At first, the players just rolled past it, but because improv devours everything in its path, they eventually circled back to the name, creating a minstrel-like character for Pookie to defeat. And then when another character died, they pulled Blackie's heart out and transplanted it. Or maybe they ate it. The specifics are beside the point.

If the big joke powering the Black Version is that there are too few roles for black people, there's another one that's implied: The Black Version can't exist when this is no longer the case. "People will say to me sometimes, because they know we don't repeat movies, 'Well, are you afraid of running out of movies?' " says Black. "I say, 'That would be good because that would mean there aren't any more movies that lack diversity to an extent that we can do the black version of it.' " Yes, and then they'd move on to something else.

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