

The Harold - Long Form Improv Game

By Wade Bradford Updated April 29, 2017

The Harold is a "long form" improv activity first developed in the 60s by theater director/teacher Del Close. Long-form improvisational activities allow actors more time to develop believable characters and organic storylines. Whether the performance is a comedy or a drama is entirely up to the cast members.

Long form improv can last from 10 to 45 minutes (or beyond)! If done well, it can be absolutely mesmerizing. If done poorly it can elicit snoring sounds from the audience.

It begins with a suggestion from the audience.

- "Can someone name an object?"
- "Okay, people, choose an emotion."
- "What is an activity you did yesterday?"
- "Name your favorite / least favorite word."

Once selected, the word, phrase, or idea becomes the centerpiece for the Harold. There are limitless ways to begin the improv. Here are a few possibilities:

- Each cast member delivers an impromptu monolog.
- A word association game is played.
- The cast does an interpretative dance based on the suggestion.
- Each cast member recaps a personal (or fictional) memory connected with the audience's suggestion.

The Basic Structure:

During the opener, cast members should listen intently and utilize some of the material in later scenes.

The opening scene is usually followed by:

1. Three vignettes related to the theme.
2. A group theater game (involving some or all cast members).
3. Several more vignettes.
4. Another group theater game.
5. Two or three final scenes that pull together the various themes, characters, and ideas that have been developing throughout the performance.

Here's an example of what might happen:

The Opener:

Cast member: (Speaking cheerfully to the audience.) For our next scene, we need a suggestion from the audience. Please name the first word that comes to mind.

Audience Member: Popsicle!

The cast members might then gather around, pretending to look at a popsicle.

Cast Member #1: You are a popsicle.

Cast Member #2: You are cold and sticky.

Cast Member #3: You are in a freezer next to the waffles and beneath the empty ice cube tray.

Cast Member #4: You come in many flavors.

Cast Member #1: Your orange flavor tastes like orange.

Cast Member #2: But your grape flavor tastes nothing like a grape.

Cast Member #3: Sometimes your stick tells a joke or a riddle.

Cast Member #4: A man in an ice cream truck carries you from one neighborhood to the next, while sugar-starved children chase after you.

This can go on a lot more, and as stated above there are many different variations of the Harold beginning. Typically, whatever is mentioned in the opening might become a theme or a topic of an upcoming scene. (That's why having a good memory is a bonus for Harold participants.)

Stage One:

Next, the first set of three brief scenes begins. Ideally, they might all touch upon the theme of popsicles. However, the actors may choose to draw out other ideas mentioned in the moderator's monolog (childhood nostalgia, dealing with grown-ups, sticky food, etc).

- Scene A1: Hyperactive children pester their mother for a popsicle, but first they must do their chores.
- Scene A2: A popsicle discusses life in the freezer with his friends Mr. and Mrs. Waffle.
- Scene A3: A trainee experiences her first day at the Popsicle Factory, working as a writer of lame jokes to be placed on the popsicle stick.

Noises, music, cast member gestures, and interaction can take place throughout, helping to transition from one scene to the next.

Stage Two: Group Game

Whereas the previous scenes may have involved several cast members, Stage two typically involves the entire cast.

Note: The "games" used should be organic. They might be something often seen in improv shows, such as "freeze" or "alphabet"; however, the "game" could also be something spontaneously created, some sort of pattern, activity or scene structure that one cast member generates. The fellow cast members should be able to tell what the new "game" is, then join in.

Stage Three:

The group game is followed by another series of vignettes. The cast members may choose to broaden or narrow the theme. For example, each scene might explore "The History of Popsicles."

- Scene B1: Popsicles during Cavemen Times
- Scene B2: Popsicles during the Middle Ages.
- Scene B3: Popsicles during the Old West.

Stage Four:

Another game is in order, preferably involving the entire cast. This one should be very lively to build the energy for the final portions of the Harold. (In my humble opinion, this is the perfect spot for an improvised musical number -- but it all depends on

Stage Five:

Finally, the Harold concludes with several more vignettes, hopefully calling back to several of the topics, ideas, even characters that have been explored earlier in the piece. Possible examples (although it seems counter-intuitive to give written out examples of improv ideas!)

- Scene C1: Caveman experiences world's first case of brain freeze.
- Scene C2: Mr. and Mrs. Waffle decide to see other people; she visits the fridge.
- Scene C3: The Ice Cream Man is on his death bed, and his life flashes before his eyes.

If the cast members are clever, which I am sure they are, they could tie the ending with material from the beginning. However, the Harold doesn't need to tie everything together to be fun or successful. A Harold might begin with a specific topic (like popsicles) but drift away to too many different subjects, themes, and characters. And that's fine too. Remember, any improv game can be changed to suit the needs of the cast and the audience. Have fun with the Harold!