





SECOND CITY TAKES TOKYO

America's premier improv comedy school is yukking it up in Japan. Will the jokes translate?

BY ROD O'CONNOR • ILLUSTRATIONS BY RAMI NIEMI

T'S A CRISP Saturday morning in Tokyo's sprawling Shinjuku entertainment district, and the area's nightclubs and pachinko parlors are quiet. Then, suddenly, incongruously, bursts of laughter echo down a narrow alley that slices through the cluster of shanty bars known as the Golden Gai. At the end of the block, in a no-frills classroom within a concrete compound that once housed an elementary school, 16 of Japan's top comedians are huddled together, getting a crash course in a new type of funny (for them, at least), compliments of Second City, the legendary Chicago improv institution.

Marc Warzecha, a veteran performer and writer-director for Second City, steps into the center of the room. Burly, shaven-headed and pushing six-foot-two, the 37-year-old towers over most of his students. Warzecha arrived in Tokyo less than 48 hours ago and knows as much about Japanese comedy as his students do about improv—which is to say, next to nothing.

"I need one person to come to the middle and start making a repetitive motion and sound," he says, introducing an icebreaker exercise called "Make a Machine."

An interpreter translates in rapid-fire fashion, but no one comes forward. There's a Japanese expression: *The nail that sticks up gets hammered down*. Even among accomplished performers like these, there's a reluctance to stand out from the crowd. Finally, a lanky guy with spiky hair saunters up. He swings his right arm forward and back like a pendulum and emits quiet beeping noises—mimicking, perhaps, the world's most polite robot.

Warzecha asks for more volunteers. A 20-something man in a red plaid shirt glides up and stands face to face with his robot-aping classmate, mirroring his actions in perfect unison. Next, a slightly older fellow wearing baggy cargo pants squeezes his stocky frame into the few inches of space between the two performers. He emits deep, gong-like sounds—*BONG! BONG!*—and bounces up and down like a human accordion. A waifish woman ambles over and contributes an open-handed side-chopping motion.

"OK, someone shout out a name for this machine. Remember, any answer is right," Warzecha says. In improv classes in the U.S., comics typically jump at the chance to toss out suggestions that

can inspire the direction of a scene. Here in Tokyo, the group remains silent.

The purpose of this exercise is to encourage the would-be improvisers to adopt a group mindset, with each player becoming a part of the whole. It requires a willingness to relinquish control. The problem is, spontaneity—the foundation of improvisation—is a foreign concept in Japan. Even in the world of comedy here, there's an emphasis on precision. But, under the tutelage of Warzecha, the lightbulbs are starting to flicker.

The American instructs the performers to go faster. They pick up speed but stay in synch, like animatronic figures atop a clock tower. Next, Warzecha tells them to imagine the machine is breaking down. The guy in the red shirt, sensing the opportunity for a joke, drops and starts writhing on the ground, feigning a wildly over-the-top nervous breakdown. The class erupts with laughter.

"It's like we're teaching football drills to people who have never seen a game of football," Warzecha says later. "It's going to be interesting to see how this plays out."

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TODAY'S STUDENTS COMPRISE one of three groups of comedians handpicked by the Japanese entertainment conglomerate Yoshimoto Kogyo as part of a cultural exchange of comedy. The company's primary business is television production—mainly in the form of variety and game shows—but it also owns live comedy theaters, sponsors a popular international film festival in Okinawa and operates a comedy

theme park on the Japanese island of Hokkaido. For millions, Yoshimoto is synonymous with comedy.

Its partnership with Second City is the latest in a series of moves Yoshimoto has recently made beyond its home turf, which include deals with reality show producers in Hollywood. But while the 102-year-old firm is looking to go global, the comedy it is best known for—a vaudevillian brand of stand-up known as *manzai*—is highly parochial and hasn't changed much over the centuries. The routines in *manzai* consist of two-person acts—a wacky character and a straight man—and rely on gags, puns, slapstick and broad observations about daily life. For Americans, the closest parallels are the comedy duos of the 1930s and 1940s, like Abbott & Costello.



FUNNY FACES

This page:
Second City
instructors
Masi Oka and
Marc Warzecha;
opposite page:
the comedy
teachers at a
Tokyo improv
class



"MUCH OF JAPANESE TELEVISION HAS BECOME STAGNANT. YOSHIMOTO WANTS AN INFUSION OF NEW ENERGY, AND IMPROV COULD BE THAT THING."

According to Aki Yorihiro, CEO of Yoshimoto Entertainment USA, bringing Second City to Japan is part of an effort to diversify the company's offerings. Hopefully, it can also bring a more sophisticated form of comedy to a country known around the world for its cutting-edge approach to other areas, from fashion and food to electronics and anime.

"Japanese *manzai* is very narrow," Yorihiro says, adding that the company's partnership with Second City "opens up possibilities for our comedians to learn a different skill set. We want to turn them into improv talent."

The idea of bringing Second City to Japan was originally floated by Masi Oka, the U.S.-based actor best known for his role on the hit show "Heroes." Oka serves as a consultant to Yoshimoto on its cross-cultural TV initiatives, and he's teaching the improv classes with Warzecha. "Much of Japanese television has become stagnant," he says. "Yoshimoto wants an infusion of new energy, and improv could be that thing."

The question is, can Second City's irreverent brand of improvisation take root in a country where discipline, self-control and deference to your elders are embedded in the national psyche?

FOUNDED IN CHICAGO in 1959 (with outposts in Toronto and Los Angeles), Second City popularized the script-free, collaborative comedy that's performed across the U.S. today. It has launched the careers of countless North American superstars, including Bill Murray, Mike Myers, Tina Fey and Steve Carell, and it remains a talent pipeline for the television institution known as "Saturday Night Live."

While its foray into Japan isn't the first time Second City has exported its brand of comedy—the group has performed in Europe and conducted improv training in Mexico—its relationship with Yoshimoto marks the first effort to produce a full Second City experience in another language. According to executive vice president Kelly Leonard, the ultimate goal is to open a Second City-branded theater and comedy school in Tokyo.

Currently, the only viable path to a comedy career in Japan is admission into one of the country's existing entertainment management agencies, called *jimushos*, of which Yoshimoto's New Star Creation is among the largest and most prestigious. Those lucky enough to be admitted receive a salary upon graduation; in exchange for the stability and support, they pony up a percentage of their earnings to Yoshimoto for the duration of their careers.

The training that comedians receive reinforces many of the hallmarks of Japanese behavior. Oka, who moved to the U.S. as a child, says that after observing one of Yoshimoto's comedy classes he was struck by the contrast between Japanese training and the instruction he received at Second City in Los Angeles. "I visited one of their schools, and I thought, 'Wow, they really don't teach comedy here,'" he says. "It's less about teaching the basics and more about evaluating." In other words, you do your thing and a coach tells you whether it's funny or not. If it's not funny, you try to come up with a new thing.

Currently, Yoshimoto has a roster of nearly 700 comedians, each of whom hopes to get a slot in one of the company's live shows, TV productions or online videos. Perhaps you've seen a hilarious YouTube clip from Japan where men compete on a game



show, and, if they can't recite a tongue twister correctly, they're kicked in the crotch by a device known as the "Penis Machine"? The segment is from a show called "*Gaki no Tsukai ya Arahende!!*" ("This Ain't Kids Stuff"), and the "contestants" aren't regular people competing for prizes but comedians trained to react to pain in amusing ways, and who are on Yoshimoto's books.

"We call them comedians, but really they're entertainers," says Yorihiro. "They might be hired to do corporate promotions, events, radio shows, digital content." Oka calls this "the utility" of being a comedian in Japan.

When I ask the bespectacled and mop-topped Yasunori Oshimi, one of the Japanese A-listers participating in the improv training, what it feels like to make audiences laugh, he doesn't speak of living out his dreams. "I feel excitement when I'm onstage," he says via translator. "But I have a family, so I really do this as work."

"EVERYONE IS EQUAL inside this room," Oka repeats during the sessions, but it doesn't quite ring true—hierarchy and seniority are deeply woven into the fabric of Japanese life, a fact exemplified by the pervasive *senpai-kōhai* system, which stresses the complex and rigid sets of protocols that are observed between mentor and protégé.

"Whether it's a company, school or club, you're always thinking, Who has been doing this longer than me?" says Rochelle Kopp, the Silicon Valley-based founder of Japanese Intercultural Consulting. "Who should I be looking up to and taking their advice? And who started out after me that I have a duty to mentor, but maybe I can boss them around a little bit, too. That is very typical in Japan."

This behavior is evident when, during one of the early training sessions, a charismatic comedian—a 20-year veteran and a major Japanese television star—begins instructing the younger comics where to line up during exercises. His attitude sets the tone for the entire class: When he's enthusiastic, the rest of the group follows; when his attention fades, the group loses focus.

"The elder-younger dynamic is definitely something I haven't experienced before," says Warzecha a few weeks later from his

home in L.A. "It seemed like the biggest hurdle culturally was getting the performers comfortable playing together as an ensemble of equals."

Despite some initial challenges, the Japanese appear plenty game to push past their cultural tendencies. During an exercise called "Ad Game," Warzecha explains the concept of "Yes, and..."—a fundamental tenet of improv that calls for performers to build on each other's ideas. To demonstrate, he asks the group to suggest a product that two performers can describe to the audience. A guy in a hoodie shouts "vacuum cleaner," which serves as the jumping-off point for a riff on a device that not only cleans the house but also sucks up bad news.

"My girlfriend broke up with me, but the vacuum made the bad feelings go away," says a guy in red pants and a polka-dot shirt.

"Yes, and I didn't even mind when it sucked up my wallet," adds a young woman with pink bangs.

Warzecha steps in to compliment the duo. "This is an example where comedy comes from improvisation," he says. "It doesn't come from planning everything out. It just comes from following the guidelines of 'Yes, and...' The result was"—he pauses—"sometimes it was funny."

As the workshops proceed, it becomes increasingly clear that improv could help trainees with more familiar forms of comedy. In particular, the physical schtick so popular in Japan seems to be well suited to improv's anything-goes format. This is especially evident during a training game called "10 in 100," where each comedian has to come up with 10 different characters over the course of 100 seconds.

Oka, who continues to bounce around the room despite the rigors of three days of comedy training, pushes the button on his stopwatch, and Kenji Matsuya, a compact fellow wearing a *Star Wars* T-shirt, throws himself onto the dusty concrete floor, beginning a performance that includes a hunched-over old man, a timid woman praying and an over-the-top gangster. Finally, Oka rings a bell and Matsuya collapses in his seat, exhausted from a routine that would make Robin Williams look subdued.

After the session, Matsuya—who plays the funny man in his *manzai* duo—tells me he felt liberated by breaking free from his usual format. "Usually, the straight man is the one who signals when it's time for the audience to laugh," he says. "I enjoyed performing without the straight man—and still getting a laugh."

For his part, Oka believes that if Second City-style improv can find a place in Japan, the biggest impact might not be on the performers but on the people watching them. "There's something magical about improv—the audience is invested in the journey with you," he says. "They are there helping that creation."

Oka is quick to point out that nobody here is suggesting that American comedic forms might replace or outshine the age-old Japanese routines. "The point of this is to find common ground so we can create something new," he says. "Hopefully, with the chemical reaction between these two cultures, we'll be able to do that."

Chicago-based writer **ROD O'CONNOR** hopes he never gets kicked in the crotch by a device known as the "Penis Machine." He writes for *Travel + Leisure*, *Chicago magazine* and others.
