

Improv Theater Was Invented to Help Immigrants Assimilate

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What does Saturday Night Live have to do with the Great Depression? The former wouldn't have existed without the latter. In 1939, an actress and educator named [Viola Spolin](#) became a drama supervisor for the [Works Progress Administration \(WPA\)](#) Recreational Project in Chicago—an effort made possible by [the New Deal](#), Franklin D. Roosevelt's groundbreaking response to the Great Depression. Spolin worked primarily with children and recent immigrants to the United States, most of whom knew very limited English. Luckily, Spolin had learned to teach from Neva Boyd, who taught that simple play could ingrain children with lessons in language, cooperation, socialization, and other important skills. Since lectures and other traditional teaching methods were useless with people who couldn't understand her, Viola Spolin turned her acting lessons into games. According to her website, Spolin once recalled, "The games emerged out of necessity...When I had a problem I made up a game. Then another problem came up, I just made up a new game." From these groups emerged the first improvisational theater performances, replete with scenes based on audience suggestions.

Spolin moved to Hollywood to establish the Young Actors Company in 1948. Her son Paul Sills stayed in Chicago, where he opened The Second City in 1959. (The now-legendary theater was a training ground for many of Saturday Night Live's most celebrated cast members.) He invited his mother to teach workshops at his new theater, and the rest is history