

# When clowning around can be serious business

**I**T WAS Charlie Chaplin who made slapstick a hit and Britain has been laughing at the typically high-octane, madcap style of comedy in theatres, cinemas and on television ever since.

Now a new workshop promises that trying slapstick yourself will not only make you smile but will also give your confidence a boost.

Which is why I find myself standing in a small club in London's Covent Garden with six other people, wondering if the one year I spent doing drama aged 12 will help me survive the course.

This workshop, led by 35-year-old Adam Milford of Theatre Workout, aims to improve your mood and wellbeing by making you laugh.

Adam says: "Research has shown that active participation in theatre and drama can build communication skills, boost confidence levels and create a sense of achievement and pride. Slapstick is all about the comedy,

The UK's first slapstick comedy workshop promises to boost communication skills, brighten people's mood and increase confidence. **SOPHIE DONNELLY** signs up

creating characters and becoming an exaggerated version of someone.

"This class is designed to get a group of adults to play, laugh and interact with one another in the same free-spirited way that children do."

Chartered psychologist Dr Jane McCartney can see the benefits.

"Laughter releases endorphins, the feel-good hormone," she says.

"Anything that induces laughter will give you contentment. Doing something that makes you feel good about yourself will have a positive effect, as it will give you a template for a can-do attitude."

Back in the club I am eyeing up a small wooden stage bordered

by ruby-coloured velvet curtains. I feel daunted by its presence because in less than an hour I'm going to be up there performing in front of the whole class.

We warm up by standing in a circle playing a game Adam has named "zip, zap, boing".

We have to send these sounds around the circle by pointing at the person we want to pass them to and shouting out our chosen phrase.

I send a "boing" Adam's way and without a second's hesitation he fixes a surprised look on his face and sends ripples through his body as if he's just walked into a glass window.

He sends a "boing" back at me and I try to shudder but burst into laughter at how ridiculous I must look.

"This exercise is designed to get participants into a relaxed place where they can go with the flow," says Adam.

"The looser you are the less likely you'll be to censor your reaction. It also warms you up mentally, physically and vocally.

"Actors use the same amount of energy in a two-hour stage production that you

average person uses during a typical day so they need to be in the right frame of mind."

Watching the other class members shed their inhibitions, my own self-consciousness melts away in time for the next task.

While walking around the room we have to spot something we think no one else has noticed, such as a rip in a curtain or scuff on the floor and conjure up an elaborate story surrounding it.

"Children have the ability to make up a story on the spot and run with it," says Adam. "As we enter adulthood we forget how to play and become too aware of the social situation we are in. As a result we start self-censoring our

behaviour and actions. This task encourages creativity."

I spy a small gold grille embedded into a wall an inch above floor level. I decide to tell the class the year is 1942 and I imagine Winston Churchill crouching over a map of Germany, too busy talking with his advisers to notice the pair of spying eyes watching from behind the grille.

"Stop," shouts Adam, before asking the man next to me to tell his story. This guy beckons us over to the far wall and comes to a halt in front of a tiny hole.

He explains the hole is the gateway to the future, which is filled with unicorns.

Suddenly I realise my "fantasy" scenario is too rooted in reality. I need to loosen up. I decide to put my all into the next section, learning to fake-punch someone.

Facing Adam, the first thing I do is extend my punching arm to make sure it won't actually come into contact with his face.

Placing my other hand on my chest, I practise tapping it against my breastbone to make a hollow, pounding noise.

I swing my fist towards Adam's nose and beat my chest for the sound effect.

As Adam gasps and cups his nose in his hands, cheers and whistles come from my class members behind me and I know I've nailed it.

For the grand finale we have to harness all we have learned and develop a two-minute silent slapstick routine. We separate ourselves into three character types: the dominant one, the follower and the childlike, slightly dopey personality.

Once we've decided who is who (I'm dopey) we sketch out a storyline, which involves trying to open a portal to this unicorn-filled future we discovered earlier.

While the other two members of my group try to open it with their bare hands, I make things complicated by deciding to paint a wall with an imaginary paint brush.

When I bump into my fellow actors, I simply paint over them, provoking them to fake-punch

me. As I struggle to stifle the laughter building inside me, the class erupts into applause. The workshop is over and as I leave the class I'm on a high.

I am proud of the fact I loosened up enough to take part and make a vow to take life a little less seriously from now on.

● To book a workshop or for more details visit [theatreworkout.com](http://theatreworkout.com). The Three Stooges featuring slapstick humour is available on Blu-ray and DVD on February 11.



**SHOWTIME:** Sophie in the thick of the action and, inset, slapstick king Charlie Chaplin

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