



High-Status Characters: How The Upright Citizens Brigade Stormed A City, Started A Scene, And Changed Comedy Forever

Brian Raftery

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By the early '90s, comedy was no longer cool. The stand-up bubble had burst, sitcoms had become more formulaic than ever, and Hollywood studios were pumping out soulless, star-driven schmaltz. There were signs of hope in shows like *Seinfeld*, *The Simpsons*, and *The Larry Sanders Show*, all of which favored cranky hard-truths and giddy pop-culture references over glib punchlines. But for the most part, anyone looking for a laugh had no choice but to wade through hours of predictable, risk-averse corporate comedy. Things just weren't that funny anymore.

Enter the Upright Citizen's Brigade: a sketch-and-improv collective born in early-'90s Chicago. When the group relocated to New York City in 1996, its core members—Amy Poehler, Matt Besser, Ian Roberts, and Matt Walsh (a.k.a. “the UCB Four”), brought with them a punk-meets-Python comedic sensibility unlike anything found on TV or in stand-up clubs. Shortly after their arrival, they'd turn an abandoned Manhattan strip-club into a hot downtown theater, attract big-name fans like Conan O'Brien, and amass a legion of eager students; many of whom would go on to create (and populate) a kinetic new wave of TV shows, movies, and stand-up comedy.

For more than twenty years, the UCB has been at the forefront of a slow-burn comedy coup—one that hasn't been documented until now. In *High-Status Characters*, Brian Raftery chronicles UCB's evolution from a down-and-dirty D.I.Y. comedy playground to a highly vaunted (if still scruffy) institution, drawing on interviews with more than 80 of the theater's founders, alumni, and friends, including Amy Poehler, Conan O'Brien, Ed Helms, Aziz Ansari, Aubrey Plaza, Seth Meyers, Aziz Ansari, and Janeane Garofalo. The result is a giddily exhaustive insider's look at a genuine artistic revolution, replete with on-stage meltdowns, off-stage hook-ups, and some unexpected celebrity cameos. It's a comedy with no shortage of drama.

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