

Activity

The Art of the Mishap

Use this physical comedy activity to explore the art of slapstick (safely) while learning a theater-based technique that makes audiences guffaw!

Materials Needed: an open space for movement

1. Tell students: "Slapstick is a style of physical comedy! The word 'slapstick' comes from a device used long ago in Italian comedy. It was made of two wooden slats that, when one actor hit another actor with it (using very little force, of course), it made a loud SLAP sound effect. It was all about the illusion of pain and chaos." As an example, screen three short video clips that demonstrate clear slapstick techniques (see video suggestions on the next page). After watching, ask students questions like: *What made those clips funny? Where did you see slapstick?*
2. Teach and practice one of slapstick's foundational techniques: the trip. Lead the full group, practicing slowly first, then adding a bit of speed by saying, "Walk forward confidently, then catch your toe on an imaginary obstacle. Let one leg shoot forward while your arms windmill for balance. Practice the exaggerated reaction and 'freeze frame' at the moment of impact, never actually falling to the floor." Students may choose to add accompanying foley (or sound effects). In pairs or small groups, ask students to practice this technique multiple times. **Note:** *To support this exploration, watch [How to Learn Slapstick: Trips and Wobbles](#), featuring Joe Dieffenbacher.*
3. Explain that slapstick takes ordinary activities and turns them into extraordinary events. Brainstorm a list of everyday activities together, such as making a sandwich, getting dressed, walking the dog, watering plants or doing homework.

Words to Know:

Slapstick is a style of physical comedy based on exaggerated actions, mishaps and harmless violence carefully choreographed to be safe.

Foley refers to sound effects created live to match the action on stage or screen, named after sound effects artist Jack Foley.

4. Ask each group to choose an everyday activity from the scribed list and explore how to turn it into a slapstick scene by adding in "the trip," reminding them that their scenarios should consist of three parts:
 - Entrance:** A character enters and starts their activity with confidence.
 - Mishap & Escalation:** Things go wrong, getting progressively sillier as they use the slapstick technique they practiced.
 - Exit:** The character either succeeds despite the chaos or gives up in exaggerated defeat, then exits.
5. Remind groups they can assign roles like performers, foley artists or directors. Give groups 10 – 15 minutes to rehearse their scenes, building from their everyday activity into a structured comedic moment.
6. Finally, invite each group or volunteers from the class to perform their slapstick scene. After each performance, lead applause and celebration of their comedic chops.

Reflection Questions:

*What surprised you about performing slapstick?
Was it harder or easier than you expected?*

How did timing and exaggeration help create the comedy in your scene?

Why do you think physical comedy is so popular?