

# Slapstick!

## *A Brief History of Physical Comedy*

Whether it is Charlie Chaplin wobbling into awkward situations, Victor Borge falling off his piano bench, or Jim Carrey contorting his rubbery face and body, this type of broad physical comedy is often called *slapstick*.

The phrase comes from a prop that was invented in the 16th century, but physical comedy has probably been around as long as there have been people. There are records of clownish performances in Egypt from 2500 B.C. and in China from 1800 B.C..



In ancient Greece, festivals began with a parade of masked characters, and ended with a comedy. In these comedies, characters wearing lots of padding would get laughs by performing larger-than-life mock violence. The word *zany* comes from *zanni*, the Greek word for these performances.

In the Middle Ages, companies of fools traveled around Europe to juggle, dance, perform magic, walk the slack rope, or present funny business. Even religious plays had humorous bits between Biblical stories or within them. And the *court jester*, perhaps the best known fool of all, would joke, sing, dance, or tumble for kings, queens, nobles, and their guests.

With the Renaissance came *commedia dell'arte*, a stylized form of theater that presented stock characters in absurd situations who often performed physical antics. *Arlecchino* or Harlequin was one of the characters, typically wearing a mask and multi-colored tights. One of his favorite props for causing comic mischief was the *bottacio*, a paddle made of two wooden slats. When he pretended to hit something, such as the rear end of another character, the slats would slap together and make a loud WHACK!

The paddle was still being used in the 1800s when clowns in circus and variety shows performed knockabout comedy and physical stunts. This type of comedy was very common in the English music halls and American vaudeville theatres of the late 1800s. It was around this time that the paddle and the humor associated with it became known in English as *slapstick*.

The silent films of the early 1900s often relied on visual humor such as madcap chase scenes and the outrageous antics of comedians like Buster Keaton, Charlie Chaplin, and the Keystone Kops. Then came sound films with the physical and verbal humor of the Marx Brothers, Abbott & Costello, Lucille Ball, and many more.

Today, movies and television continue the tradition of silliness. Fools keep fumbling and falling, reminding us all that we are only human.

