

Oops!

What do you find funny? A pie in the face? A squirting flower?

Someone walking into a wall? These are examples of physical humor, one of the most popular forms of humor, and the basis of many comedy acts.

Physical comedy is the world's oldest form of comedy. Anthropologists say that it was performed in ancient Egypt, almost 5,000 years ago. In ancient Greece and Rome, clowns and mimes would dress up in padding and push each other around. Sometimes they even used sticks, which is where we get the word "slapstick."

Slapstick comedy was popular in vaudeville halls in England and America during the 1800s. Comedians would smack each other, bump into things, and slip and fall to get the audience to laugh. These physical antics translated well to film when movies first began. Actors like Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin perfected their slapstick acts on screen. Because early films were silent, physical comedy was the best way to translate humor to the audience.

One of the most iconic physical comedy gags is slipping on a banana peel. When and how did this joke originate? Bananas first became widely available in New York City in 1866. At the World's Fair in 1876, bananas wrapped in foil were sold for ten cents. Soon, bananas became a common and

favorite fruit in the United States. They were often sold as street food, and people ate them for snacks as they walked around the city.

In those days, there were not trashcans on every corner. People threw their banana peels into the street. And, you guessed it, people slipped. It became such a problem that some cities wrote laws against disposing of banana peels in the street.

Some experts say that these laws about banana peels actually referred to horse manure, which was common in the streets because of horse and carriage travel. Historians say that banana peels were used in comedy acts to represent horse manure because they were easily visible to the audience, and because no one wanted real horse manure on stage!

The first comedian to use the banana peel gag as physical comedy was “Sliding” Billy Watson. He became famous for sliding onto the stage, and his entrances often involved a yellow peel. The first film to feature a banana peel was Charlie Chaplin’s movie *By the Sea*. Charlie played a tramp who threw a peel on the floor and later slipped on his own litter.

The banana peel joke, and other acts of physical comedy, still draw laughs today. It may seem mean to laugh at another’s misfortune, but it’s in our nature to laugh at human mistakes. Comedic actors have ways to keep from getting hurt when performing their physical comedy. So sit back and



enjoy the gags on screen and stage, but make sure you throw your peels in the trash can!



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NAME: _____ DATE: _____

1. Which of the following is NOT an example of physical comedy?
 - a. Pie in the face
 - b. Slipping on a banana peel
 - c. Bumping into a wall
 - d. Telling a joke

2. Who first used the banana peel gag?
 - a. Charlie Chaplin
 - b. Billy Watson
 - c. Ancient Egyptians
 - d. Buster Keaton

3. Why do you think silent films used physical comedy?
 - a. Because the audience couldn't hear verbal jokes
 - b. Because people like to laugh at human mistakes
 - c. Because it was a traditional form of humor
 - d. All of the above

4. Why do historians think that banana peels may have represented horse manure?
 - a. Because horse manure was a problem in the streets
 - b. Because banana peels were more visible to the audience
 - c. Because comedians couldn't use real horse manure on stage
 - d. All of the above

Instructions for teachers:

These questions can be used to assess understanding of the reading passage.

The item in bold is the correct answer for each question.

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