

The La Ronde Long Form Improv Format



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The history of La Ronde in improv has two intertwined threads:

1. the **original 1897 Arthur Schnitzler play**, *Reigen / La Ronde*, whose structure inspired the form, and
2. the **1990s Los Angeles improv adaptation**, where performers translated that theatrical structure into a clean long-form improv format.

Below is a full, sourced, multi-angle history.

1. The theatrical origin (1897–1920s)

The improv form takes its name and structural inspiration from **Arthur Schnitzler’s 1897 play *Reigen* (French title: *La Ronde*)**. The play consists of **ten interlocking two-person scenes**, each featuring one character from the previous scene, forming a full circle.

Key historical points:

- **Written in 1897**, privately printed in **1900**.
- Public performance was banned for years due to its sexual themes and class commentary.
- First public staging occurred in **Berlin in 1920** and **Vienna in 1921**, provoking intense controversy and antisemitic attacks known as the “**Reigen scandal**.”
- The play’s structure—each character appearing in **two consecutive scenes**—is the direct template for the improv form.

This “round dance” structure is the conceptual backbone of the improv version.

2. The improv origin (1990s Los Angeles)

The *improv* La Ronde was **first developed by Craig Cackowski** in the **mid-1990s** after he watched a film adaptation of Schnitzler’s play. He introduced the structure into **Frank Booth** rehearsals, where it was used as a rehearsal exercise for over a year.

Key developments:

- **Craig Cackowski** formalized the improv version:
 - Two-person scenes
 - One character carries forward
 - The next performer enters as a new character
 - The chain continues until the circle closes
- The form later became the backbone of shows such as **Calendar Girls** and **Cinco de Bob**.
- **Miles Stroth** also used the structure in classes focused on story mechanics, eventually adopting it as a performance form.

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This LA lineage is the direct ancestor of the La Ronde used today in long-form improv theaters.



3. How the improv form evolved

Early versions were strictly exercises:

- Players stood in a **back line**.
- Two-person scenes occurred with each performer playing **only one character** for the entire run.
- After each scene, one performer was tagged out and replaced.
- After everyone had done two scenes, performers moved to the sides and continued freely, still maintaining character consistency.
- Often all characters existed in a shared location (e.g., a town), culminating in a communal event (e.g., a pie-eating contest).

Over time, theaters simplified the structure into the modern version:

- A clean chain of scenes
- One character carries forward
- The circle closes with the first character returning

This streamlined version is now widely taught as a relationship-driven long-form.



4. Why La Ronde became influential

The form spread because it:

- Is **easy to teach**
- Forces **strong character work**
- Creates **natural narrative closure**
- Works well for **small ensembles**
- Encourages **emotional continuity** across scenes

Its simplicity and elegance made it a staple in improv communities across the U.S., especially in Chicago, LA, and New York.

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Definition of the La Ronde:

La Ronde is a long-form improv structure built entirely from **a chain of two-person scenes**, where **one character carries over from each scene into the next**, forming a loop that eventually returns to the first character. It's one of the cleanest, most elegant relationship-driven formats in long-form improv.

Core Idea (the quick answer)

La Ronde is a **daisy-chain of paired scenes**: Scene 1 has **A + B** → Scene 2 has **B + C** → Scene 3 has **C + D** → ... → Final scene brings **the newest character together with A**, closing the circle.

How the structure works

- **Scene 1:** Two performers establish Characters A and B.
- **Scene 2:** Character A exits; Character B stays. A new performer enters as Character C.
- **Scene 3:** Character B exits; Character C stays. A new performer enters as Character D.
- This continues until the final scene, where the last new character meets **Character A**, completing the loop.

Most ensembles use **4–8 performers**, resulting in **4–8 scenes**, each typically **3–7 minutes** long.

What La Ronde teaches (and why improvisers love it)

La Ronde is a **character-consistency workout**. Because each performer plays the same character in multiple scenes with different partners, the form forces:

- **Strong character commitment**
- **Relationship-driven scene work**
- **Emotional continuity across contexts**
- **A portrait of an interconnected community**

It's also a great teaching tool because performers can't rely on group games or ensemble support—the **two-person scene is the entire engine**.

Why the circular ending matters

The final scene—where the newest character meets Character A—creates:

- **A satisfying narrative loop**
- A sense of **community interconnectedness**
- A payoff that shows how characters have evolved across the chain

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This “closing of the circle” is one of the most beloved features of the form.

Variations you might encounter

Several communities play with La Ronde’s structure:

- **Themed La Ronde** — All scenes revolve around a shared topic (love, betrayal, power).
- **Location La Ronde** — All scenes occur in the same physical place but at different times.
- **Timed La Ronde** — Strict time limits (e.g., 2-minute scenes) to keep momentum.
- **Two-Wave La Ronde** — A first round of scenes, then a major offstage event, then revisiting the same pairs to show how relationships changed.

How it compares to other forms

- **Close Quarters** (which you asked about earlier) uses parallel scenes in different rooms.
- **Harold** uses group games and thematic patterning.
- **La Ronde** is simpler, cleaner, and entirely relationship-driven.

Game-based improvisers sometimes find La Ronde “mechanical” because the scene order is predetermined, but for character-driven players it’s a dream format.