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by Jeff Kubik

Canned ham and improvisation

Nomadic improv troupe takes its ad-lib comedy to movie theatres and bars

It's a place where audience members find themselves seated alongside a bell and horn while canned ham is doled out to the brave few willing to join in the fray. A place where the scripts have been abandoned and the audience has paid \$5 each to see four members of the Curiously Canadian Improv Guild on the nigh-midnight stage of the Plaza Theatre.

Inexpensive live theatre and the opportunity to win canned meat? It's true, improvisation can be delicious as well as entertaining.

"Once you get used to working without a net, it's a really big thrill," says Guild member Rob Mitchelson. "Improvisation is like base jumping for actors.

"I wet my pants onstage twice," he adds.

"And we expect that," deadpans Rick Hilton, director of the fledgling troupe and a 25-year improv veteran. "It's all part of the laughs."

First conceived in the parking lot of the Stampede grounds less than a year ago, the group has already expanded its core from six members to a larger, more loosely integrated network of performers, recently adding Dirty Laundry's Nicole Zylstra. While tied in many ways to the currently homeless Loose Moose – Mitchelson is an active member while Hilton worked with co-founder Keith Johnstone during the company's early days – the Guild remains an independent organization of improvisers devoted to developing their skills and exploring new venues. Their shows range from familiar improv fare to Johnstone's unique Life Game, in which an audience member's life is played out onstage, with the person guiding the improvisers using a bell and a horn and receiving a canned ham in return as a prize.

The guild has already performed on four Calgary stages, including SAIT's Orpheus Theatre, the Uptown's Kaboom Room and, most recently, the Plaza Theatre and Brew Brothers Taproom. As a relatively new troupe, this nomadic existence has been a challenge for the Guild.

"It's always tough to generate an audience when you move to a new venue," says Mitchelson. "You've got to try to get people to come back week after week. So that's a little tough, (as) we have moved three times. We're not trying to be a touring group, we just are."

However, the Plaza has recently seen a stream of regular performances from the Guild, marking the first time the theatre's stage has seen live performance since the 1980s, when the original owner, Flemming Neilsen, also used the movie house as a venue for late-night theatre. Although films now push the Guild's performances nearly to midnight, there is a distinctly urbane pleasure in walking through the theatre's doors long after the sun has gone down on a Saturday night.

"There's kind of a cult feeling to a late-night show," says Mitchelson. "I don't want to say it's more confrontational, but it does have that kind of 'liveness' to it. Generally speaking, it's people who have sort of discovered the show and are willing to come back. More than you do in other types of shows, you develop a core audience."

With the Dirty Laundry soap parody on summer hiatus and its venue, the Brew Brothers Taproom, looking to fill its Sunday nights, the troupe was able to appropriate another space, adding an 8 p.m. Sunday show to its repertoire. The support of the Plaza and Brew Brothers have been integral to the Guild's existence, lowering the cost of performances already built mainly on the manic energy of its creators.

"The great thing about improvisation is that it costs us nothing to do the show," says Hilton. "It's just about putting out a little advertising, paying for equipment, things like that."

"Everything else is Salvation Army and sweat," adds Mitchelson.

It is the sweat, of course, that makes or breaks improvisation. The efforts and talents of the performers as they act without scripts or rehearsals ensure that even loyal audiences will never see the same show twice – although a single moment may emerge that lasts long after the show has ended.

"Sometimes something will happen that you just couldn't have planned," says Mitchelson. "It seems perfect and predestined. It's a comedy show, so I don't want to say beauty..."

"We're no Chekhov here," assures Hilton.

"But there are things that happen during the course of the show, even a tiny little show where you're just having fun for the sake of yourself, you just don't ever foresee," continues Mitchelson.

"It seems, for that ethereal moment, perfect, and then it's gone," says Hilton, finishing the thought.

With growing support from venues and local performers, it seems unlikely that the Curiously Canadian Improv Guild will prove as ethereal as those perfect improvised moments. But now, the question is whether the group's improvisation will be able to survive a summer run in Calgary.

"In other cities, the comedy clubs run all summer," says Hilton. "Their audiences certainly dip a little, but it's possible in every other cosmopolitan town in Canada (and) it should be possible here. There's nearly a million people in this city and if we can't put 50 bums in the seats, then you've got to wonder."

The Curiously Canadian Improv Guild performs at the Plaza Theatre at 11:30 p.m. every Saturday night and at the Brew Brothers Taproom at 8 p.m. every Sunday night.

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