

TUESDAY, JUNE 17, 2003

For the  
unscripted,  
Unexpected  
Theater



GETTING LOOSE: Actors from the Unexpected Theater Company warm up in the basement of the Warwick Art Museum before the show.

# It's pure improv

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**S**HOW TIME APPROACHES. The cast collects. They joke. They smile. They laugh.

You wonder why.

They don't know their lines. What's more, they don't have costumes or props.

But the cast of the Unexpected Theater Company isn't worried. They can always turn to founder and artistic director Tim Hillman.

"I don't have any idea what we're going to do," he says.

Wing it. Nothing else is allowed. There are no prepared skits or jokes. This is improv — all ad lib all the time.

The 16-member company divides and conquers. Each team improvises for an hour, producing two one-act, stream-of-consciousness, hard-to-believe and hard-not-to-laugh plays.

"Our goal is to be funny," says Tom Reedy. "That's why we bring you here."

Shakespeare it ain't. Actually, the actors prefer to call their performance Morris.

"It's a complete non sequitur," Hillman says.

Free-association reigns. Go with your gut. See where it gets you.

Flash forward.

The show begins:

Actor Greg DeSantis has a secret: a Batman tattoo across his chest.

You must be Batman, cast member Brian Perry says. Um, okay, I'm Batman, DeSantis says. And Perry wants to know how he, too, can become a super hero.

Milk.

Drink lots of it, DeSantis says, but never, ever drink milk while driving. Golly, that's good advice Batman.

SEE **YOU NEVER KNOW, G-3**

WARWICK



FREE REIGN: Members of the Unexpected Theater Company perform at the Warwick Art Museum each Sunday. Above, Brian Perry, left, and Greg DeSantis. At left, Marialaina Abbene and Andrew Mendillo.

JOURNAL PHOTOS /  
GLENN OSMUNDSON



# It's never never

## You never know what you'll see on stage at Unexpected Theater

Continued from the cover

Keep up. Nick Mendillo enters stage left. He's a TV commercial director. Smile Batman. Hold up the milk. Look at the camera. Tell kids not to operate cars or heavy equipment while under the influence of dairy products.

Kids are dumb. Actor Andrew Mendillo convinces us. All he remembers of the commercial is Batman saying don't drink milk.

Flash forward again.

Batman is taking us to his childhood. He's 9, and learning from a friend's father, actor Justin Lang, the finer points of adulthood. Basically this involves drinking beer and smoking cigarettes.

"It's so much more fun to make stuff up," Hillman says.

It was in January that Unexpected Theater Company came back to life. The organization was born in 1986 in Los Angeles, the brainchild of Hillman, who grew up in Rhode Island and took a job teaching high school theater in California.

Shortly after his arrival in California, Hillman went to an improvisational theater. He liked what he saw. So he went back,

only to be disappointed.

"The second time wasn't as funny as the first time," he says. "There was so much scripted material hidden in the improvisation."

Hillman, an improvisation purist, wouldn't tolerate that. He took an improvisation class, joined a company and then started his own: Unexpected Theater.

When Hillman and his wife left California and moved to Tennessee, the performance company died, Hillman says, but its spirit didn't. Last year, Hillman returned to Rhode Island. This year, he got the company going again, finding a pool of actors largely culled from colleges.

"It's best to come to this young," Hillman says. "Then they don't know how hard what they're doing is."

Before Unexpected Theater put on its first Rhode Island performance in March, it practiced for three months. Hillman taught his actors improvisation, which sounds like a contradiction, practicing being spontaneous.

"I teach them how to support



JOURNAL PHOTO / GLENN OSMUNDSON

SETTING THE SCENE: The Unexpected Theater Company performs at the Warwick Art Museum. On stage are Greg DeSantis, left, and Brian Perry.

each other and how to find things in their subconscious to work with," he says. "We're all funny somewhere inside. We have to find a way to let that out."

"Audiences want to see us be human," Hillman says. "I think that's what they often miss in scripted theater; everything is so tight."

Faults are funny.

"It's okay to screw up,"

Hillman says. "The audience kind of likes it."

In improv, actors will sometimes forget each other's names, use their hands while they're supposed to be holding something and say things they didn't intend to. On this night, "tasty treats" becomes "tasty streets."

"We make that part of a scene," says Frank Fusaro. "If

someone drops an accent, we'll call them on that."

Every Sunday since March, Unexpected Theater has performed at 7:17 p.m. (just to be different) at the Warwick Museum of Art. And numerous times since, they've practiced their improvisation.

"Why would an improv group practice?" Andrew Mendillo says. "We learn each other's tendencies. We know how each other will respond."

The golden improv rule is don't deny. If one actor says he has a skunk on his head, the other actors need to acknowledge the skunk.

"We have to really hear what each other is saying," Hillman says.

Improvisational actors, Hillman says, must be open to themselves and to others. Trust instincts. And pay attention.

Hillman, who performs in his company, encourages his actors to remember small details introduced in a skit and reintroduce them later, giving a greater sense of cohesion to a piece.

"You have to find out what's happening and go with it,"

Andrew Mendillo says.

Most often, improv goes to the absurd.

"We don't go for a joke," Tom Reedy says. "We find the funny in a situation."

You know an improv performance goes well when people don't believe it's improv.

"They say 'Oh, come on. That was scripted,'" Nick Mendillo says. "I love to hear that."

What you'll see with Unexpected Theater is two or three actors go on stage and start talking. They'll just make stuff up and see how far they can go with it. When actors on the sides of the stage sense a scene has gone as far as it can, they step in to redirect it.

"We fly without a net," Hillman says. "That's the joy of it."

But if something is funny or otherwise enjoyable, and you can remember it, why not script it and recreate it? Because, Hillman says, it would no longer be an organic art.

"You discover something new and exceptional," he says. "Something comes to life and then it's gone."