

Improv making up for lost time

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Lately, it's become a lot harder to cross town without someone asking you for a genre, a common household object or a historical figure to base an impromptu skit on. A few improv comedy ensembles such as BATS Improv have been around for a good 20 years, but during the past decade the Bay Area improv scene has exploded.

"There were hardly any ensembles when I moved here in 2001, and now there are a billion," says Shaun Landry, who heads up the San Francisco Improv Festival, the San Francisco Improv Alliance and her Oui Be Negroes troupe. "We wanted to be a resource for all these improvisers who were taking classes but weren't creating. There were no venues for it. If you create a place and you give people opportunity, then ensembles will emerge."

Landry started the Improv Festival in 2004 with the San Francisco Improv Cooperative, a group she co-founded in 2001 to nurture improvised theater through workshops and weekly jams. In 2005, she split off to form the San Francisco Improv Alliance, which produced the past two festivals. The fourth annual fest is now under way, heading into the sixth of seven weeks, and each weekend has featured a three-night run of a bill combining selected out-of-town acts with local troupes. Week six features Big Yellow Bus from Chicago, Vancouver's String Theory and home team 4 in 1. The final week brings together Razowski & Clifford from Los Angeles, the Transactors from Chapel Hill and San Francisco's Un-Scripted Theater Company.

Un-Scripted is reprising its recent hit "The Great Puppet Musical" while it gears up for its next show in August, "Shakespeare: Un-Scripted." Offering a full season of shows off Union Square at the second stage of the SF Playhouse, the company is largely devoted to long-form improvised theater. But in the improv scene, where "long form" can mean anything that lasts more than 15 minutes, it bears clarification that Un-Scripted specializes in full-length improvised plays, aside from its fast-and-loose game show "You Bet Your Improvisor."

"Our philosophy is, if it has been scripted somewhere, it can also be improvised," says founding member Christian Utzman. "If you do a musical, why couldn't it be improvised? If you see a Shakespeare play, why couldn't it be improvised?"

Un-Scripted has been doing Improvised Bawdy Shakespeare shows practically since it was founded by former BATS Improv students in 2002, and Utzman cut his improvisational teeth doing street theater at the Renaissance Faire. The puppet musical was an experiment, and its largely sold-out run proved it successful. Coming in November is a holiday musical, "Let It Snow," revived from shows done in years past -- except in the sense that Un-Scripted never does the same show twice because it's all made up as it goes along.

"Before Un-Scripted, we'd been in shows where it's very structured," Utzman says. "What you say is up to you, but you're supposed to accomplish this during this particular scene. The problem with it is, you can only do it 15 times or so before you start running out of material. When you perform something great in rehearsal, an audience is never going to see it. It's not sketch comedy, so once it's done, it's done, and you can't do the same thing again."

Un-Scripted prefers to call what it does improv theater as opposed to improv comedy, because it focuses more on constructing a full story than getting a quick laugh. The company has to be very careful about how it asks for audience suggestions, so that it doesn't wind up building its structure on flimsy ground.

"Improv audiences want to say, 'Proctologist!' " says Un-Scripted general manager Tara McDonough. "They really don't want to see that for two hours, but they don't know it."

"The reason we stay away from the term is because so many other groups that are doing something so different from us are calling themselves improv comedy, so the general public seems to think that they know what improv comedy is," Utzman says. "And what they know is not what we're trying to do."

What people talk about when they talk about improv is probably more like what Big City Improv has done every Friday for two years at the Shelton Theater, right downstairs from Un-Scripted. Big City does short-form games like the kind seen on TV's "Whose Line Is It Anyway?"

"We do a series of audience-suggestion games," says Artistic Director Fontana Butterfield, who took over from founder Jayne Entwistle recently. "We change the games every week. There are a lot of long-form groups, but we do short form."

Company member Corbett Trubey has another way of looking at it.

"I think what we do is theater for people with short attention spans," he says.

The company started in 2000 as the Oakland Playhouse with the idea of bringing various kinds of theater to Oakland, but it soon settled on improv comedy, doing weekly gigs at the Black Box before moving across the bay and changing its name. It still moves around -- its big annual Berkeley show is at the Ashby Stage in two weeks. It's not part of the Improv Fest, but is participating in the July 22 SF Theater Festival, as are BATS Improv, 4 in 1 and dozens of scripted troupes.

"The more that improv is promoted, it benefits all of us," Butterfield says, "whether we're part of festivals or not."

There are nearly as many styles as there are troupes, but if the San Francisco scene is characterized by one form of improv, it's more along the long-form line of what Un-Scripted does than the short form done by Big City.

"I think storytelling structure is much more popular here than anywhere else," Landry says. "Also, stories that generally look like theater, with a beginning, middle and an end -- BATS is very known for that. Almost every ensemble I know of in this town really tries to go for the storytelling."

It's tricky to construct a satisfying arc on the fly, and the more successful a company is at it, the more it has to deal with people asking which parts were prepared.

"People often say, 'How do you not know what you're going to say?' " says Big City's Rebecca Poretsky. "I think it's so much easier than having lines you have to memorize. Then you can really mess up."

Landry takes an almost diametrically opposed view.

"We get a lot of flack from the scripted world: 'Oh, you've got it easy because you're just messing around,' " she says. "In my mind, we've got it harder. We have to create on the fly. We actually do make this look like the script that you memorized -- if it's any good."

The San Francisco Improv Festival continues through July 28 at the Buriel Clay Theater, 762 Fulton St., San Francisco. \$12-\$20. (415) 863-1076, www.sfimprovfestival.com. The San Francisco Theater Festival takes place from 11 a.m.-5 p.m July 22, at Yerba Buena Gardens, Third and Mission streets, San Francisco. Free. (415) 291-8655, www.sftheaterfestival.org. Big City Improv performs at 10 p.m. every Friday at the Shelton Theater, 533 Sutter St., San Francisco. \$15. (510) 595-5597, www.bigcityimprov.com. It also plays at 8 p.m. July 28 at Ashby Stage, 1901 Ashby Ave., Berkeley. \$15-\$20. (510) 595-5597, www.bigcityimprov.com. "Shakespeare: Un-Scripted" runs Aug. 2- Sept. 1 at the SF Playhouse Second Stage, 533 Sutter St., San Francisco. \$10-\$15. (415) 869-5384, www.un-scripted.com.

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