

A new crew of Titanic performers

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The audience at Northwestern's Titanic Players first improvisation show of the year only filled about a fourth of the McCormick Tribune Center forum Tuesday night. And most of the audience were newly inducted members learning from the veterans and waiting to make their debut.

The audience size didn't matter. With heavy rain and the second presidential debate keeping crowds to a minimum, Titanic used the night as a party to welcome its new members into the "biggest name in college improv," said team coach Mike Abdelsayed, the group's founder and a professional comedian. Since leaving NU in 1998, Abdelsayed has performed in Improv Olympics and Second City before coming back to coach the team at NU.

During the long-form group's improv show, a team takes a one-word suggestion from the audience and creates a 30-minute show. The troupe consists of four teams of students that stay together until the last member graduates. Formed in 1994, the group's alumni have been featured at Second City and on Saturday Night Live.

The current members have taken on and defeated the house team in a competition at Chicago's Comedy Sportz improv theater and performed in the Del Close Marathon in New York City over the summer, where 150 groups performed in a nonstop, three-day show. "Northwestern is clearly the most improv-intensive university in the country," Abdelsayed said. "Titanic is the envy of a lot of professional organizations, a lot of professional theaters," he said.

A lot of that jealousy comes from the way the dynamic formation of the four teams lets the students grow together as performers, Abdelsayed said.

Working with the same people over time means the members can start to anticipate each other's moves, said Dave Collins, a member of the third-year team and co-coach of this year's new recruits.

"You're with a group of people trying to get in the same spot, trying to get on the same page for 20 minutes," the Communication junior said. "It's the most fun you can have because you can do whatever you want and the more you do it the better it gets."

Team members also become good friends, said Collins, who has lived with teammates the last two years.

Titanic started out as a one-time show called "The Titanic Players or Everything But the Kitchen Sink." According to Abdelsayed, the play on words referred to the doomed ocean liner. They got requests for more performances and the name, for better or for worse. Now "Titanic" is more of a reference to the size, he said.

Last year's oldest team won the first National College Improv Tournament held at Loyola University. The tournament has expanded to include an East, West and Midwest regional competition with a final televised national competition planned for November. NU will host and defend its title in the Midwest tournament Oct. 18, Abdelsayed said.

The size comment also applies to the Titanic brand itself.

Taking their cue from the NU group, the University of Wisconsin created a troupe two years ago and the University of Illinois formed one this year.

New members at U of I are borrowing the long-form improv style, the team setup and even NU's coach, Abdelsayed, said inaugural group member Ali Murphy, junior French and cinema major at U of I.

"We're big fans of Titanic," she said. "It's an exciting opportunity and we're eager to learn from the Northwestern group."

The Titanic Players is first about training and secondly about performance, said Eric Siegel, one of the founders of the U of I group. For the fifth-year education major with dreams of performing at Second City, a bit of professional instruction can make a big difference, he said.

"It's hard when you're on your own and you don't have a director," Siegel said. "Mike is absolutely brilliant. I really trust what he has to say."

U of I currently has a team of upperclassmen and a group of underclassmen, but there will eventually be four teams like those at NU, Murphy said.

And when the members of the newly-formed "Team Raw" come up against NU's veteran "Matador Now" team at next week's improv competition, they might look like rookies, but they are coming ready to learn and compete, Murphy said.

"We come from comedic backgrounds but we're new to this kind of improv," she said. "It might be hysterical in a not-intentional way."

New members Kelley Abell and Caroline Goldfarb, Communication freshmen, met the rest of the group they'll be with for the next four years at the show.

Watching the "well-oiled machines" of the other groups was a little intimidating, Abell said. But she's excited about being part of such a dynamic group.

"We're going to have a rocking good time," she said.