

## **Titanic test of comedic skill**

### **Auditions for improv groups find NU's funniest**

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By Sarah Sheridan

Eight people enter a room and are instructed to run around in a circle. Some keep pace with the others, some hop, some gallop erratically, theatrically tripping and landing in contorted heaps.

They gather in the center of the room, form a huddle and let out eardrum-piercing screams when they make eye contact with another person in the human circle.

And that's only the warm-up of the Titanic Players audition.

"I can't imagine coming into a room and being told to do this," said Peter McNerney, a Communication sophomore and director of Titanic's incubator team, the training squad for first-year comedic improvisers.

About 100 students tested their skill -- or lack thereof -- at unscripted comedy Friday and Saturday as they auditioned for Titanic and Mee-Ow, Northwestern's long-form and short-form student improvisation groups.

After whittling down the finalists in a Sunday callback session, Titanic chose nine students to form a new incubator team and Mee-Ow added three performers to its existing cast.

"The only thing scarier than coming into an audition is coming in without anything prepared," said Joanna Simmons, a Communication junior and assistant director of the incubator team.

Communication freshman Trisha Sealy had never tried improv before, but she decided give it a shot, tackling her first audition at Northwestern.

"I was really nervous when I first got out there," Sealy said. "But my mind and body got used to the format really quickly and I ended up having a lot of fun."

Both long-form and short-form improv usually start with a single suggestion from an audience member. It's the improv team's job to explore that suggestion through a series of connecting scenes, games, songs and monologues.

At no point do the improvisers stop to plan or discuss what is happening or what will happen during the performance.

"It takes genitalia to do this," said Mike Abdelsayed, Titanic's director and a Second City cast member.

Time accounts for the big difference between styles. Titanic Players use teamwork to gradually set up a punch line during performances that last anywhere from 15 minutes to an hour.

Mee-Ow also focuses on relationships between characters, but cast members deliver more instant zingers during cast-written sketches and five- to 10-minute improv games.

"It's basically like comparing 'Seinfeld' to 'Whose Line Is It Anyway,'" Communication sophomore Jonathon Lynch said at the audition. "Short form has more games, moves faster, and doesn't really develop relationships between the characters."

Sporting an orange T-shirt with a grid of yellow dots on the front, Education senior Debbie Rosmarin delivered a one-minute monologue on the social history of polka dots.

"People prefer the circle to any other shape," Rosmarin said. "I believe it begins with the mother and being breastfed. When you get to kindergarten, you can't color inside the lines, but you can draw one damn fine circle."

The auditions ran more like a workshop than a competition, with Abdelsayed offering feedback after each performance.

Voice inflection, gesticulation, pacing, emotion and overall stage presence were critical factors in determining which actors would receive Sunday callbacks, according to Abdelsayed.

Perhaps the most important quality improvers could possess was a distinct identity, accompanied by the ability to mesh with other actors.

During an exercise called "Round Robin," students morphed into characters found in a high school setting, including a stressed-out chain smoker, an overzealous male cheerleader, a sharp-tongued Catholic nun and "Janitor Jim," who spent three years at MIT.

"At this point, pretty much everyone is a good actor," Abdelsayed said. "Generally we don't take two people who play similar characters because we like to mix up our shows."

Titanic came to life in 1994 when over 200 people auditioned for Mee-Ow, then NU's only improv group. Abdelsayed co-founded the group and recruited his fellow Willardites to provide more improv comedy training at NU.

Though members of both groups joke about the great schism, they maintain no rivalry exists between Titanic and Mee-Ow because of mutual respect for each group's different approach to improv. Some actors even belong to both companies.

"We're all friends," said Bridget Moloney, a Communication junior and member of Mee-Ow. "In fact, one of our members is currently seeing one of their members naked."

Last May Mee-Ow performed with alum and former "Saturday Night Live" cast member Ana Gasteyer during the actress' Alumni Speakers Series speech, and this year the troupe celebrates its 30th anniversary. It will present a preview show early winter quarter, then invade McCormick Auditorium for a mainstage extravaganza.

Titanic Players plan to perform at every dorm during munchies and other social events in the next months to acquaint students with long-form improv. But that's only the beginning: many Titanic graduates have gone on to perform in comedy troupes like ImprovOlympic, Second City and Boom! Chicago.

"When people leave Northwestern, they're absolutely the best improvers for their ages," Abdelsayed said.