

The Rising of Titanic

Titanic Players Improv Group Brings Comedy from Campus

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By Natalie Bortoli

In a dimly lit corner of Yesterday's restaurant in Evanston, amid old college sports paraphernalia and antique odds and ends, a chatty group crowds into the booth. Ordering a slew of Cokes and a few "Overload burgers," they take a minute to catch up with their regular waitress, Bev.

The practice is a ritual for the Titanic Players, a Northwestern University-based improvisation group that gathers at the restaurant after each one of its shows to discuss and review the night's performance. Eavesdroppers might overhear lively commentary exchanged between the nine members who say that sharing positive feedback after each show is critical to their success. The dedicated group is quickly becoming one of Chicago's most promising young comedy troupes.

Their show, entitled "Everything But the Kitchen Sinks," has taken the group everywhere from Loyola University in Chicago to area high schools and, most recently, to Café Voltaire, one of Chicago's leading underground theaters. Performances so far have won enthusiastic feedback from the audiences, a reward the members attribute to the innovative style of the show. The Titanic Players say their theory of comedy differs from other improv acts in that it holds an ongoing theme throughout all sketches, games and scenes, making it more like a quick-moving play.

"It's all about exploring and heightening from the last scene," says Lauren Bishop, assistant producer.

"We're the big picture," says David Asher, assistant director of the show. Unlike other improv groups which jump between random topics, Asher says the Titanic Players produce a more "cohesive environment" that heightens the audiences interest and promotes more participation.

"We take a seed from the last scene and use it in the next," he says. "It's sort of like Scrabble—like building on the letter."

However the performances are no game for the titanic Players. While they do have a great time on stage, the members say the show take serious work and dedication. Performance is quick moving and requires highly developed group interaction. "You really don't know what's going to happen," Bishop says. Performers must be ready to take on any role and run with an idea.

"The audience has no time to take a breath, and neither do the performers," says Mike Abdelsayed, the group's director and producer. "It's all about cohesion but also about giving each other space." He says the team chemistry is the number one factor in the Titanic Players' success as a show and as a business.

In group-bonding exercises, members participate in activities that range for falling off tables and trusting member to catch them, to building a cast house of cards. This bonding transfers into the necessary group chemistry that makes things happen on stage.

Indeed the group had discovered the proper formula for success. The Titanic Players have a long history of diverse participants who performed in their shows, each adding their individual ideas and shaping the style of the show. Various members brought the influences of their own improv experiences from such Chicago venues as Second City, Comedy Sportz, the Improv and several stand-up comedy locations. The Titanic Players gained real stability this past fall with the recruitment of five strong and talented freshman, and have been working with the same committed members since then.

“The chemistry started coming back,” Abdelsayed says, recalling the beginning of the 1995 school year. Abdelsayed has watched the Titanic Players progress through many phases. He formed the idea for the group during high school with the influence of a few friends. He decided to work on making the Titanic Players a reality in college after noticing the limited opportunities for improv comedians on Northwestern’s campus. “The group just got better,” he says, recounting the group’s progress over the past year.

In addition to having a rich past, the Titanic Players promise to have a full future. A busy scheduling for the spring includes hopes for Clearwater, Fla., tour in addition to visits to many Chicago venues like city hotels, theaters and area high schools. Meanwhile Chicago audiences can catch the group regularly at Café Voltaire on Friday and Saturday night beginning March 1.

The Titanic Players are headed by Abdelsayed, a sophomore at Northwestern and Eric Lindberg, a junior at Columbia University who has performed at Second City Northwest. The rest of the group is comprised of Northwestern students MacArthur Antigua, Erik Anderson, David Asher, Lauren Bishop, Liz Cackowski, Nicole Faust and Carrie Layne.

All members thrive on performing and strive to transfer their enthusiasm to their audiences.

“It’s taking all the energy we have a giving that to the audience,” Bishop says. “It’s really a release.”