

Bleeding for theater

Three NU alumnae take jabs at the news media and America

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By Mackenzie Horras

When pigs, trumpets and breakfast cereal unite, the product is bound to be a comedic Triple-threat.

Triplette, a Chicago-based improv group composed of three Northwestern alumnae, opened its second sketch comedy show Wednesday. Triplette's sophomore effort, a dramatic farce entitled "If it Bleeds it Leads," opened Wednesday at the Playground Theater in Chicago. The show pokes fun at the news media and Americans' obsession with negative current events.

"We were kind of inspired by the idea that people are really intrigued by the worst possible things that could happen," said Triplette member Heather Simms. "We really wanted to do a show with that theme behind it."

Throughout "If it Bleeds it Leads," the audience witnesses several strange news reports -- everything from house pets that attempt to reinvent their personalities to breakfast cereal that inspires fear in its consumers.

To heighten the performance's feeling of absurdity, Triplette uses puppetry, masks and sound effects to blur the distinction between sketch comedy and performance art.

"We use puppetry and masks -- but don't let that scare you," Simms said. "It's definitely a comedy show and it's much less academic than it sounds."

"There are some bizarre moments," Triplette member Laura Grey said. "I play the trumpet very badly, which is one of my favorite parts."

The members of Triplette met in 1998 when Rebecca Fox, Grey and Simms were undergraduates at NU. Grey and Fox, both freshmen, met Simms, a junior, when they were cast in The Titanic Players improvisation group. A professional relationship between the women grew from their work in Titanic, and when Simms graduated in 2000 the three continued to perform together at comedy venues around Chicago.

After Fox and Grey graduated from NU in 2002, they reunited with Simms to form Triplette, an improvisation group that combines humorous relationship-based scenes with characters charged with familiarity and realism. As the women of Triplette performed together at improv venues, they began to plan a comedy-based stage show.

Triplette hoped to create a scripted play that would incorporate traditional improvisation with some of their favorite characters and personalities from past work. After compiling script ideas for several months, the women produced their first play, "The Lady Troubles," in late 2003. A comedic social commentary about life as a woman in the 21st century, "The Lady Troubles," ran at Chicago's Playground Theater and ImprovOlympic until February 2004.

Simms said Triplette's combination of traditional theater and sketch comedy was inspired in large part by its members' diverse range of theater training at NU.

"My acting coach (Professor Cindy Gold) was wonderful," Simms said. "She had a lot of background in improv and sketch comedy and she was always really supportive of that. Laura was in Mee-Ow so that's how she started writing sketch comedy. Plus she was a creative writing major so she likes to write anyway."

Grey said NU provided her with the well-rounded experience needed to succeed in professional theater.

"The opportunities that we had at NU, in terms of the richness of theater opportunities that were offered, helped push us in the direction that we have gone in," Grey said.

According to Simms, she and her partners collaborate on the entire creative process from scriptwriting to directing and producing. The three women also share an apartment in Chicago which they use as rehearsal space.

Fox attributed her experience at NU with helping her form a creative partnership with Simms and Grey.

"Our friendship stems from working together at Northwestern," Fox said. "If Northwestern were not around, Triplette would certainly not exist."

Simms also said performing together as part of the Titanic Players gave the women a special connection.

"Ever since we met in Titanic, we just kind of knew that the three of us would end up working together," Simms said.

After "If it Bleeds it Leads" finishes its run at the Playground Theater, the show will complete a second run at Second City Chicago. Simms said Triplette also plans to perform the show at a Los Angeles festival. After all is said and done, Simms said she hopes Triplette might some day return to NU.

"We would love to do a show at Northwestern," Simms said. "It would be great to get back up there and perform again."

Triplette runs at the Playground Theater, 3209 Halsted St., Wednesdays, Oct. 13 to Nov. 17, 10:30 p.m. \$10 general admission, \$5 with WildCARD.4

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