

Comedy on a whim

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By Jennifer Leopoldt

Even though the actors in Northwestern's Titanic Players exhibit quick wit and spit-fire ideas, their brand of improvisational comedy takes time to perfect.

"You can't get up, tell your fart joke, have people laugh and sit down," group member Sarah Graber said. "You have to be able to sustain the comedy and humor throughout a longer scene."

The Titanic Players, a student comedy organization divided into three teams, specializes in long-form improv. From a single audience suggestion, actors create scenes nearly 20 minutes long with a variety of themes.

The group's team of second-year actors, nicknamed "Big Texas," entertained nearly 300 people at the Chi Omega Make-A-Wish fund-raiser Tuesday night in Ryan Auditorium at the Technological Institute.

The group opened for ComedySportz, a professional improv team from Chicago, "because it offered more of a campus connection," said Jennifer Su, a Medill senior and a member of Chi Omega.

But because of the group's structure, only one-third of Titanic Players' members performed.

Titanic Players divides actors into three groups of nine actors that focus on different goals each year. New members join as part of the "incubator team" to learn the basics of improv comedy. Second-year actors perform in most of the group's shows, and third-year members work on experimental projects.

Throughout the years, Titanic Players actors work only with the same people in order to foster trust, group member Jenny Brown said.

"You know what you can expect from people," said Brown, a Communication sophomore. "You know they won't leave you out there (on stage)."

Titanic Players started in 1994 when NU student Mike Abdelsayed and his friends decided to bring long-form improv to campus. Although Abdelsayed has graduated, he remains Titanic Players' executive creative artistic director.

Despite the improvised nature of the group's performances, members rehearse twice a week to perfect their comedy.

The second-year team usually begins each practice with stretching and warm-up games, which require members to focus and work together. Then Director Justin Koh gives the group a single word, which they must use to create scenes.

"I'm trying to hone their ideas, so their eyes can see the themes and they can play them more effectively," said Koh, McCormick '02, who performed for Titanic Players while at NU.

In addition to instruction from the director, coaches from Chicago's ImprovOlympic and The Second City will come to NU this year to help actors build on their improv skills. The six-week sessions will consist of one three-hour class each week.

The classes will allow students who did not earn a spot on the incubator team to polish their technique before next year's auditions, Koh said.

Although preparing for performance requires hard work, Brown said she does not mind putting in time to practice.

"It's going and playing for three hours," she said. "You're surrounded by really funny people, so it's hard not to have fun."

Actors have a good time at shows, but being on stage can be nerve-racking, Brown said.

"I was scared out of my mind the first show we did," she said. "You're going up there and you have no idea what you're going to do. You don't have lines, so you can't forget them ... but you also have no idea how it will turn out."

However, the Big Texas team at least knows what it wants to accomplish. The team hopes to tour the East Coast during Spring Break and bring comedy teams to NU for a Midwest college improv festival, Koh said.

After moving up from the incubator slot, Big Texas team members have the opportunity to travel to St. Louis on Nov. 16 for the Laughupalunga comedy festival, Koh said.

Before then, the team will perform Nov. 5 at The Gathering Place in Norris University Center.

"The goal is to have one group mind," said Salvia, a Communication junior. "When that's in place, you can just take off."