



Improv Safari

Take a trip with these actors. But be warned, they make stuff up.

By Lisa Takata

Experiencing improvisational theatre is like receiving a gift in a box that could contain just about anything imaginable. Clown poacher conspiracies? Dinosaur attacks? The strange regulars who inhabit a local Waffle House at 2 a.m.? An impromptu fencing match (complete with safety vests and orange construction flags) in the Central Avenue construction zone? All of these possibilities come alive onstage in this wacky universe.

Improv is a spontaneous combustion of ideas, referencing childhood memories, imagined futures, political satire, pop culture or ancient history. It tweaks your mind, transforming from sublime to ridiculous and back again in a split second. Onstage ensembles create a supportive environment, and performers are unafraid to go out on a limb because they know the rest of the troupe and the audience will go there too.

Although improv is often funny, don't confuse it with comedy. The performers grab hold of a small nugget of truth and stretch it to its limits, until it explodes into something raucous or poignant. It can be recklessly physical or deeply introspective. The choices made on stage moment by moment drive the performance -we go offroad and back again, navigating precarious twists and turns, unable to see the end of the road until, with a screech, the lights go off and we realize we're there.

In 2002, a local improv group called The Barrow Gang brought improv to non-traditional theater spaces and artspaces in downtown Phoenix, presenting the Scattershot Tour at the Paper Heart and Modified Arts. Performer Jose Gonzalez recalls, "After Scattershot, Scott Sanders offered us the opportunity to perform a monthly show at the Paper Heart, which continues to this day on every 3rd Saturday with Galapagos."

Other arts venues quickly jumped on. Jose recalls, "When Stephanie Carrico and JRC



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established the Trunk Space, they graciously asked Galapagos to be part of their regular performance schedule. They've been awesomely helpful and supportive to us and the whole Phoenix improv scene, hosting performances by Apollo 12 and Catorce and occasional one-off shows by the Remainders musical improv group and other groups. Four White Walls hosted the Originals' first regular performances and Galapagos pops up every once in awhile at Modified. The collaboration continues to grow and spread!"

"The exciting thing about performing downtown is that we get curious audience members," Jose says. Downtown music patrons, artists and performers who usually attend only art and music events may devote a night to checking out improv. "We try to keep our ticket prices reasonable so that we remain accessible to everyone," Jose says. "We also encourage out of town audience members and improv performers to check out and patronize local businesses, events and venues. I'm in Chicago right now for an improv festival, and plenty of people who participated in the Phoenix Improv Festival told me how much they dig what's going on with downtown Phoenix, which is really encouraging and great to hear."

"We were excited about the support and potential in downtown Phoenix and moved the Phoenix Improv Festival (PIF) to the Paper Heart in 2003," says Jose. "There were some amazing performances to sold-out crowds in a really

distinct performance space, so we were pretty hooked on performing downtown." PIF just completed its fifth year, and brings a top lineup of improv groups from Chicago, Los Angeles, Detroit and Austin to perform alongside Arizona's local talent. Out local improv community collaborates to put this festival together; visitors from as far away as Norway have traveled to see the PIF shows.

Just as a single art gallery can't possibly represent all visual arts, improv too takes a variety of forms. The Neutrino Project presents an almost live movie format, with three teams racing around outside the theater filming precisely timed improv segments. Runners sprint these segments back to the theater, and after quick edits and dubbing by the technical crew, the segment goes onscreen minutes later. The entire performance takes a little over an hour, with the three storylines converging in a final sequence that involves all three teams. The teams return to the theater in time to enjoy the finale along with the audience.

Some improv groups rely on music of physical acrobatics to tell their stories. Men in Shirts, a duo from Detroit, are guys who would not have hesitated to volunteer for human cannonball duty in another lifetime. They leap off of chair backs, block with the force of a football linebacker, scale 12 foot walls with bare hands. Yet they dare to take their signature physicality completely out of play in another set, collaborating with a Utah

continued on back page...

Improv Safari (*continued*)

duo to perform in complete darkness, with only their voices and a supply of sound effects to back them up. Other ensembles invite a live musician onstage to provide mood music for their sets. A festival favorite were the “Bingo Jam” sets: performers and audience throw their names into a hat, then perform improv on the spot with a team they’ve never met before. Finally, daytime classes and workshops hosted by visiting improv artists complement the evening performances.

The success of the Phoenix Improv Festival can be measured by its enthusiastic audiences, thriving performer networks and a healthy exchange of ideas across state lines. Phoenix improv performers are well connected with their counterparts in America’s other major cities, freely exchanging talent for festivals, performances and workshops to strengthen the improv scene as a whole. Several local Phoenix improv performers are building a national reputation, representing Phoenix at invitation-only festivals. It’s worth considering what other local visual and performance artists and organizations might learn from these examples.

“In improvisation, it’s essential to trust that possibilities in any given moment, scene or show are greater than any limitations,” Jose explains. “Choosing to see possibility

where others might just see limitations and actively pursuing that possibility fully becomes a strength both on stage and off. At the very least, something interesting will happen that couldn’t otherwise be achieved from sitting back in negative judgment. I think that’s certainly true of Artlink - a small handful of people found strength in each other when many only saw Downtown as a place to be avoided.”

We are fortunate to have so many of Phoenix’s improv performers actively partnering here with local artspace, participating in gallery shows, volunteering for Artlink and supporting the visual arts community in countless ways. We can reciprocate by continuing our support of improv as an essential element of local culture.

To check on the latest local improv news, shows and classes, visit www.galapagosimprov.com www.apollo-12.com and www.phoeniximprov.com.