

DOORS OPEN ON THE RIGHT. Second City, Mainstage Theatre, Chicago. 15 July 2004.

INVASION FREE SINCE 1812. Second City Toronto, Mainstage Theatre. 31 July 2004.



Figures 1, 2 and 3. Second City Mainstage Ensemble performing *Doors Open on the Right* at Chicago's Mainstage Theatre. Photos: Michael Brosilow.

Veering away from the weighty satirical targets that defined its early years, improvisational comedy has most recently positioned itself as the bastard cousin of standup, offering audiences glib, keenly observed and quirky snippets of everyday life experiences. Adding to this shift in emphasis is a decidedly more consumer-oriented and user-friendly presentational style, marked by the desire to please at all costs.

Adjustments in content, tone and delivery have adversely impacted critical appraisal of improv as a viable arts practice. Generally, theatre reviewers and avid aficionados of performance have tended to dismiss sketch comedy as a hobby or diversion rather than serious craft. While none of these people would refute the fact that successful improv requires advanced performance skills and razor-sharp timing, such abilities are thought to be innate, not learned. Further, an improv stage is often viewed as a stepping-stone to a career in comedy- potentially as a featured player on *Saturday Night Live*-rather than as a legitimate performance venue in its own right.

Many Chicago theatres have played a seminal role in shaping improvisational comedy traditions. Foremost among them is The Second City. Through its famed training center program, especially, the theatre has helped to promote improv of the sophisticated, not solipsistic variety. Training involves exposing students in the rules and agreements that govern the practice, and allowing them to experiment with these principles in real-world settings. In order to participate in a show on one of Second City's public venues, a student must not only demonstrate mastery of the rules but also prove to be an effective ensemble member. Achieving mainstage status (the highest program level) signifies a wealth of training and performance experience.

Doors Open on the Right, the ninetieth revue offered on Chicago's flagship mainstage theatre reveals just how remarkable the skills of highly-trained improv performers tend to be. The hour and a half-long show featured an ensemble of six actors (three male, three female) who utilized a bare stage and minimal props to enact vignettes of "everyman" activities and attitudes. The individual skits that comprised the revue mainly focused on domestic drama. A majority of scenes, for example, delved into the messiness of marriage, the conflicts of parenting, the confusions of sexual and gender preferences and the trappings of chemical addiction. Local and national politics, as well as celebrity adulation and conspicuous consumption were also cleverly sprinkled into the mix. Consistent with the structure of most Second City shows, a comedic through-line (or reoccurring action or phrase) weaved the skits together and connected them to the central theme of the piece, in our case: the plight of the "average Joe/Jane" to combat the power and pervasiveness of American corporate culture. The grip of corporations on the lives of common citizens was reinforced by the cast's repeated characterizations of middle-management employers as dinosaurs- a well-chosen image that effectively underscored the uncivilized and hierarchical tenets of free-market capitalism.

Directorially, I found *Doors Open on the Right* to be taut, furiously paced and thrilling in parts. I especially enjoyed the few opportunities the performers had to showcase their improv talents via unscripted segments that permitted the audience to determine the subject matter and direction of a storyline. These moments (in which audience members were informed of the rules of a game and became, thus, better acquainted with game playing conventions) perfectly demonstrated the intensity and excitement of fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants improv. Somehow, knowing what the actors were trying to achieve on stage (given the parameters of the rules) made the comedy much more heart-felt, titillating and clever.

Unfortunately, the bombastic momentum driving the scripted scenes, coupled with the frenzied, desperate-to-please energies of the performers felt like intentional ploys on the part of the director, Joshua Funk, to divert our attention away from the show's rather flimsy comedic content. To be blunt, some skits tumbled headfirst into silliness, and many jokes devised to "bring down the house" clearly missed their mark. For example, the repeated activity of one cast member pantomiming various items slipping through his hands (an ode to the infamous Cubs fan who caught the ball during last year's playoff season and consequently contributed to the team's defeat) seemed too insular and one-dimensional an event to be satire-worthy.

Further, the director tended to rely on non-theatrical devices to move the plotline forward. I was particularly struck by the dominance of televisual tropes in the performance. By this I mean the constant references to television programs, the spoofs of remote-control effects (slow-motion, rewind, instant-replay and volume adjustment), the digs at infomercials and celebrity pitchman, even the lighting and music designs represented familiar TV apparatuses (such as those employed in cheesy variety shows of the late 1970's and early 1980's).

As a form of television-based theatre, the skits contained all of the markings of popular situational comedies: rapid-fire dialogue, sweet and well-meaning personality types and recognizable domestic situations. Much like sitcom plots, the show presenting the dilemmas of its stock characters in easily-to-resolve fashion. In other words, nuance was greatly lacking throughout.

Similar to television advertisers, the show's producers attempted to target their comedic product to the widest possible demographic, and in doing so, to accommodate television viewing behaviors whenever possible. The brevity of the sketches, as well as their furious pace felt as though they were meant to appease the short attention spans and fidgety behavior of the many sports fans and MTV-reared young professionals in the audience. Announcements pertaining to bathroom breaks and the availability of beverages, snacks and commemorative souvenirs for purchase during the show were even built into the narration.

Ironically, these accommodations added up to a very corporate experience (even as commercial greed was itself the subject of ridicule). On the downside, spontaneous and open-ended performer/audience exchanges-the hallmark of improv comedy- were subsumed by the mandate to sell, sell, sell. Further, how dramatically engaging can theatre-as-television be (for either the performers or spectators)? On the upside, the house was packed, the audience was engaged, and the drinks flowed. A good time was clearly being had by all-certainly a successful strategy for attracting repeat customers.

If Chicago's mainstage offering resembled a familiar sitcom, than the Second City Toronto's production, *Invasion Free since 1812*, can be thought of as a radio talk show with a decidedly retro feel. In fact, the reoccurring character in the show was a frustrated and slightly antiquated radio personality who attempted (through gritted teeth) to provide helpful and upbeat

advice for getting through the day. I liken this production to a radio talk show, not only because of this image, but due to its slow rhythm and chatty tone. As opposed to the Chicago production, nothing about *Invasion Free Since 1812* seemed rushed or particularly slick. Sketches were allowed to proceed at their own pace and performers found their footing at different moments during the course of each piece. The show required that the audience remain attentive and patient.

Again, playing on a nearly empty stage with the assistance of minimal props the cast of five (three men, two women) performed relationship-based scenarios with unusual gusto and flair. Subject matter ran the gamut from gun control awareness to “ugly American” tourist behavior. The myriad issues presented, though, were consistent in their focus on middle-class angst and social stratification.

As often the case with longer-form improv, the funniest moments of the night occurred in the most surprising and subtle places. A skit concerning a man’s right to pregnancy leave, for example, was refreshingly inventive in its depiction of a male-centered point of view that tweaked political correctness to the point of absurdity.

The Chicago and Toronto mainstage offerings shared similar themes and perspectives, but differed most noticeably on the level of performer skill and confidence. While the cast of *Doors Open on the Right* maintained a uniform level of excellence and shared responsibilities evenly on stage, Toronto’s production primarily showcased the talents of one particular actor: Paul Constable, who served the work’s central narrator, musician, muse, and lead player. Constable’s quiet wit and self-deprecating delivery imbued his everyman personas with a sad humanity; helping to fill in the details of his finely etched characters.

Unfortunately, Constable’s considerable comedic gifts shed light on the deficiencies of the other ensemble members. I noted that in the few sketches that he was not on stage, the energy all

but evaporated. In one particularly painful sequence, a female cast member simulated faux sadomasochistic activity with another male player, while a third actor (assuming the role of the man's wife) looked on with an expression that was impossible to read. Was she sad? Happy? Disgusted? Bemused? Absent of knowing who these characters were and what they felt for each other, the point of the skit was completely lost. Without Constable's presence, in other words, the production might have been much less enjoyable.

In sum, as both *Doors Open on the Right* and *Invasion Free Since 1812* firmly attest, Second City has perfected a profitable (dare I say enviable) model of theatre that can be sustained by local support. Further, by applying to North American popular tastes (in the form of television and radio formats and products) the hope is that young people, especially ones heavily influenced by media forces, will be drawn to live theatre events such as these. As a means of attracting a new generation of audience to its theatres, the company's "populist" tactics may prove to be successful in the end.

Arguably, Second City has done more to raise the profile of improvisational comedy in the world than any other theatrical establishment. It is time, though, that it hold its audiences up to the same rigorous expectations it demands of its performers and student trainees. It could start this process by doing away with lazy habits and comfortable targets, and, most important, by introducing contemporary audiences to the joy and excitement of unscripted material. By taking greater comedic risks, applying to the highest intellectual abilities of its audiences and recommitting to its original mission of satirizing mainstream beliefs and practices, rather than attempting to exploit their fiscal potential, directors of Second City mainstage revues might no longer be tempted to pursue cheap and easy laughs at the expense of more serious and relevant content.

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NOTE: This review is slated for the spring 2005 edition of *Theatre Journal* (a print-bound publication offered by The Johns Hopkins University Press). The paper is directed at an audience of Theatre and Performance Studies teachers, scholars and practitioners.

My critique of the two Second City mainstage productions supports theorist Philip Auslander's contention that, "...the general response of live performance to the oppression and economic superiority of mediatized forms has been to become as much like them as possible...evidence of the incursion of mediatization into the live event is available across the entire spectrum of performance genres" (Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture 7).