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MARCH 2010

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# AUSTIN'S IMPROV COMMUNITY SOMETHING FOR EVERYONE: A COMEDY TONIGHT

By Siobhan Welch



Courtesy Photos

It's hard to be funny. It's even harder to be funny when it's off the cuff and in front of a live audience. Improvisational comedy or "improv" is the art of using different acting techniques, like character development and dialogue, to create a spontaneous performance.

Big cities like Chicago and LA are known for improv troupes that churn out the stars we see on *SNL* and Judd Apatow films. These days, along with barbecue, breakfast tacos, and abandoned downtown condo projects, Austin is making a name for itself in the comedy world, with the Out of Bounds comedy festival and several small theaters that are serious about showcasing the art of improv.

Every burgeoning scene has its key players, and Austin has attracted improv talent from all over the country. "Austin doesn't have one particular style that defines it, which is something that's very liberating. It allows improvisers to learn from various teachers who have different backgrounds," said Kareem Badr, who performs regularly and is one of the owners of The Hideout, a theater dedicated to producing accessible, affordable improv.

With theaters like The Hideout, Coldtowne Theater, The New Movement, and MerlinWorks putting on shows most nights of the week, it's easy to catch a good mix of comedic styles. Each theater is home to different troupes that put on wildly different shows. (Plus, no two performances are ever the same). Each theater also gives classes in improv. You don't need a background in theater or comedy to enroll; anyone can join. Advanced students

often get to perform with their teachers, which is the best way to really learn the craft.

Chris Trew, who has appeared on Comedy Central and has his own Wikipedia page (which says it all), has helped bring national attention to Austin. He has either established or had a big hand in projects like Thursday Night Awesome, The Austin Improv Collective, the Out of Bounds comedy festival and various stages at SXSW, Fun Fun Fun Fest and the Alamo Drafthouse. He runs The New Movement Theater with his partner Tami Nelson, where they teach and perform.

"We want to make our students feel comfortable. We want them to feel like they can headline a huge comedy festival one day or they can finish that script. And if it's not about a career for them, we want to make sure they are getting what they want out of our classes," said Trew.

Like everything else in Austin, students of improv run the gamut of old and young, introverted and extroverted, accountants and stand-up comics. What they all have in common is a willingness to play. Regular performer, Jericho Thorpe recalls how he got his start.

"I've behaved this way my entire life. I never had a name for what I did to make my family laugh. We would all hang around making fun of people and doing impressions of them going to the bank or whatever," he said. "Fast-forward to 2007. Everywhere I went, my friends in Austin theater were talking about this place called Coldtowne. I'd decided to get back into performing and signed up for classes. I loved it. On a lark I went to Coldtowne's

student troupe audition and got cast in what would become Midnight Society."

Luckily, Austin is just the right size to be able to catch the fever and actually perform, a freedom the bigger cities don't offer. "It's not hard to get on stage here," said Trew.

Asaf Ronen, who has published a book on improv and teaches on the national circuit, is grateful for the varied opportunities to perform in Austin. He moved here from New York in 2007 to be part of the improv community. "I've been doing improv for about 19 years now but I wasn't doing any in New York. It's very cutthroat. You have to go through their school systems or you have to be on TV. Before I moved to Austin, I'd already had invitations to teach and perform down here."

Of course, you don't have to get onstage to be a part of improv. Improv is a collaborative art where performers not only play off each other, but rely on the audience for energy and suggestions that guide the performance. And unlike a painting or a script that can be revised or revisited, improv is immediate and temporal. "All improv is completely made up in front of the audience and will never be seen again," said Ronen. "And I'm okay with that. It's about finding the truth in the moment."

It's also about getting to laugh your butt off at skits that are often hilarious and push the boundaries of what is funny.

"Shows are cheap and generally about an hour long," said Thorpe. "And you'll experience a hell of a lot less buyer's remorse than you do after going to most movies. It's a large group of people doing something that they love very much – that happens to be so funny sometimes that you might pee your pants."

#### THEATERS:

The New Movement <http://newmovementtheater.com/>  
The Hideout <http://www.hideouttheatre.com/>  
MerlinWorks <http://www.merlin-works.com/>  
Coldtowne Theater <http://coldtownetheater.com/>  
Salvage Vanguard Theater <http://www.salvagevanguard.org/>  
Café Caffeine <http://www.cafe-caffeine.com/>

#### TROUPES

Chris and Tami  
The Plagiarists  
Girls Girls Girls  
Parallelogramophonograph  
The Editors  
The Frank Mills  
Midnight Society \*



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