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The Bear Pack and the art of improvisation

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It's stand-up without a set. It's a sketch with no script. It's an intellectual trapeze act without a net. Welcome to the world of improvisation, where every show has never been seen before and will never be seen again.

Every time Steen Raskopoulos and Carlo Ritchie get together as the Bear Pack for one of their long-form, improvised plays, they walk on to the stage empty-handed. "We have no idea where a show is going to go," says Ritchie. "We have no idea what the genre is or who the characters might be."

It's up to the audience to set the parameters, explains Raskopoulos. "We get the audience to give us a location and a word. The location sets the foundation scene and within that scene, one of us will tell a story. It's like two characters conversing, one starts telling a story to the other character, then we cut out of that and start performing the scene and that effects both the storytelling and the scene, back and forth, for around 50 minutes."

Before any of this can happen, however, Raskopoulos and Ritchie have to get into their zone. "Before a show we just lie down for a few minutes with no talking," says Raskopoulos. "Then we just get up and do it. I like to go on with nothing in my head. You have to be so clear and you can't go on with 15 characters and plot lines already in your head. It pays to have a great short-term memory for an hour but after that, I can't remember any of what we did up there."

Raskopoulos says there are disciplinary differences between Theatresports, which has strict time limits and set challenges, and the wide-open impro practice of The Bear Pack.

"You have less time to develop something in Theatresports and so the shows tend to be joke-heavy," he says. "It's still really enjoyable but Carlo and I wanted to branch out and have less restrictions on the way we can be creative with each other."

The Bear Pack shows don't have to be funny, explains Raskopoulos. "Some shows are really funny but I think the strongest scenes have emotional pull. The audience wants to be taken up and down, be made to laugh or feel confused. They want to be on the edge of their chairs. For us, there is always heart behind the work."

Whether in long-form storytelling by The Bear Pack or in the short-form competitive arena of Theatresports, impro is expanding beyond a niche entertainment. The Bear Pack sell out the Giant Dwarf venue on Cleveland Street while every year, The Cranston Cup, the holy grail of team-based competitive Theatresports, pulls big crowds to the Enmore Theatre. There are regular impro nights at the University of Sydney's Manning Bar and in pubs such as Glebe's The Roxbury and The Hive Bar in Erskineville. This year's Sydney Comedy Festival program features several improvising comedians, including Rob Johnson and Harry Milas (who perform as Mantaur) and Edan Lacey.

Sydney's burgeoning and increasingly diverse impro scene has been 30 years in the making, says Marko Mustac, actor and artistic director of Impro Australia.

"It really started at Belvoir in 1985," Mustac says. "On Sunday nights, when there were no other shows on, actors would come to do Theatresports. It just grew exponentially and now there are so many different styles of impro out there."

Theatresports has the trappings of competition, Mustac says, but that's when you look at it from the outside. "For the performers, it's just playing. We play up the competition element but really the players are all supporting each other like mad. It works best when we are just working together and it's a great way to learn the ropes."

Cale Bain, artistic director of Improv Theatre Sydney (ITS) based at Giant Dwarf, says the Sydney scene has changed a lot in recent years. "There has been a big influx of new styles," he says. "There are hubs around the world where people go to learn impro and the biggest is Chicago. It used to be that everything was very Theatresports, with lots of structured exercises. The Chicago style is more about the exploration of ideas, playing longer and deeper commitment to characters."

Oliver Burton, creator of the Poste-Haste Players, runs a long-form impro show called Bard to the Bone, which takes one suggestion from the audience and then creates an off-the-cuff Shakespearian play. "It is the most alive theatre possible," Burton says. "It is invented purely in the moment but the players really have to know their Shakespeare."

Working mostly in Parramatta, Ivan Chew takes a different approach. His show, Sketch, uses art as a prompt. "An artist brings something they have made and we also ask the audience to do a doodle before the show," he says. "From there we improvise on whatever comes to mind. We've had jewellery, sculpture and paintings. If it's an all-red canvas, we might invent a love scene, or a murder or we'd get angry. It can be whatever you want."

National Theatresports Champion Edan Lacey's Sydney Comedy Festival solo show, Like the Underpants, offers another spin on the impro experience. "My show is more character based in that I perform with established characters in mind [a Spanish Elton John impersonator, a Bolivian housewife, an English toff] and I get members of the audience to come up and help me on whatever adventure I find myself on."

Bringing a non-performer to the stage opens up a world of the unexpected, Lacey says. "When you invite someone up you are giving them permission to affect the direction of the show. I try to guide them with various tricks I've learned but sometimes they don't go where you want them to. All you can do is hope they are open to the adventure."

Cindy Tonkin, who runs Likewise Spontaneous Theatre, a regular Wednesday night impro show at the Hive Bar in Erskineville, is inspired by Del Close, the American comic actor (who died in 1999) who co-authored the book Truth in Comedy, which outlines many of the techniques used in long-form impro. "He said to always treat the audience like they are geniuses and poets," Tonkin says. "The audience is just as smart as we are and if we are smart and interesting and vulnerable and available then the audience will respond because that's what they want to be, too."

Tonkin is also interested in challenging the gender imbalance in the scene. "We have women as time keepers in Theatresports, they are often judges or hosts, but I am sick of seeing casts of 12 with only two or three women on stage," she says. "Part of my aim is to get more women to play. I want to get women doing this because audiences want to see women on stage."

An increasingly diverse audience ("from 60 year-old ladies to 14-year-old kids," says Raskopoulos) and an upswing in the numbers of women attending impro classes suggest the gender disparity won't last.

"You have Amy Poehler and Tina Fey as role models now and some of the best impro teachers and performers I've ever worked with are female," Raskopoulos says. "It's exciting to have more women feeling like they want to do this."

Anyone who gets involved in the impro scene, regardless of gender, will be struck by the sense of community, says Edan Lacey. "It's pretty tight knit in that you'll know just about everyone on stage and at least half the audience but these are great people to be around, whether you are performing with them or just watching," he says. "When you improvise you have to be present and be alive in that moment. So in terms of feeling alive it's actually a pretty good thing to do."

What's On

Steen Raskopoulos: Character Assassination, Factory Theatre, Marrickville, May 8-10

Mantaur (Rob Johnson & Harry Milas), Enmore Theatre, Enmore, May 9

Sketch: Art Inspired Impro, Parramatta Artists Studios, May 9, May 16

The Bear Pack, Giant Dwarf, Redfern, May 13-14

Edan Lacey: Like the Underpants, Factory Theatre, Marrickville, May 12-15

Improv In the City, Metropolitan Hotel, Bridge St, city, May 13

Improv Theatre Sydney: Soap Opera and The Bear Pack, Giant Dwarf, Redfern, June 3

Improv Theatre Sydney: Faculty Show (featuring Cale Bain, Steen Raskopoulos, Carlo Ritchie, Susie Youssef and Edan Lacey) Giant Dwarf, Redfern, June 22

Theatresports, Manning Bar, University of Sydney, every Thursday 1pm

The First Thursday Impro Club, Roxbury Hotel, Glebe, first Thursday of the month

LikeWise Spontaneous Theatre, The Hive Bar, Erskineville Hotel, Erskineville, every Wednesday night

The Golden Goose Award, For the Best new Impro Show by Young Artists (Under 25) 5.30pm, May 9, Factory Theatre

Celebrity Theatresports, Enmore Theatre, Enmore, August 15

The Theatresports CRANSTON CUP season, Sydney's biggest impro season, The Factory, Marrickville, every Sunday night, September 6-November 22

The Cranston Cup GRAND FINAL, Enmore Theatre, Enmore, November 28

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