

Improv Junior Olympics

by Joshua Siegal

The Improv Olympics' Student Show, entitled "SpinOut", was a tour de force in terms of bravery, but not in terms of quality. In two acts, distinct troupes performed somewhat-arranged improvisational sketches based on themes given by audience members.

Although both acts featured plenty of baffling moments and a few genuine laughs, the ensemble must be lauded for its cohesion and esprit de corps, even while grasping desperately for coherence, at times.

The first act was based on the offered theme, "dentist's office", and included some good comedic moments, especially when only two or three cast members were on stage at a time and were thus not battling one another. Though they were generally gracious with the spotlight, cast members in this group had a habit of interrupting one another, and not with the timing or grace that can make improvisational comedy work. They did get a fairly good plotline going, however, one involving a scheme to murder Santa Claus and install the tooth fairy in his place. And it must be noted that members of this troupe who were not having good nights knew it and had the good sense to get off the stage quickly. Also, the tooth fairy herself had a certain wan, disinterested presence that was very funny in its own right.

In the second act, it seemed that there had been more planning among the cast before the show, or maybe it was just more transparent. The audience-generated theme, "freak out", led to a nice device of singing disco tunes to clear scenes (le freak, c'est chic), but the ensuing skits, dealing with gardening and homosexuality, seemed a bit disconnected from the theme. One particularly funny moment occurred when one character turned to another and exclaimed, "it seems we have a lack of communication!" This caused several other improvisers in the wings, realizing the truth, to start laughing aloud.

The space itself was conducive to both improv and to a class performance. It was dark enough in the house to preserve the feeling of being in a theater, but not so dark that the

performers couldn't connect with the audience. The staging was fairly professional, a bit theatrical for a comedy club and too commercial for theater (*eg*, the wet bar and advertising to the left of the stage).

It might have been part of their training, but this particular group of actors did not use props, instead using their bodies to represent objects. This produced a couple of funny moments, as well as one disturbing series of events when a cast member walked through an ongoing scene just to high-five a hand that was actually supposed to be a plant. Then another member of the troupe repeated the action, hopefully attempting to give it some legitimacy. The poor prop flower, however, had no idea what was going on and actually broke "character" to look up and see who was slapping his petals.

It was heartening, though, to see the support that the cast members gave one another when they weren't on stage. Members of the first group took seats in the house to watch their compatriots in the second act perform; indeed, they were among the more raucous members of the audience. And there was genuine relief and gratitude on the faces of those performers who were bailed out in the nick of time by their fellow actors (there was ample opportunity for this).

Despite moments of real discomfort for both audience and cast, there was a palpable desire in the small upstairs studio at Improv Olympics. Perhaps not all of the performers harbored dreams of one day being in the cast of Saturday Night Live or Mad TV (despite the surprising amount of "borrowing" from these shows), but they were clearly, each one of them, fired up about being on stage. Also, when they stepped on each other's train of thought or cut off each other's lines, there was no animosity between them. However they struggled to get their ideas enacted on stage, they were consistently and credibly supportive of one another.