

Troupes putting Valley improv on map

Scene just 5 years old but already garnering attention, loyal fans

By Nicki Escudero
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Before the Phoenix Neutrino Project got to work on its latest independent, improvised movie at the Paper Heart this month, it needed a little help from the audience.

A tin of mints, a multi-use tool and a tube of toothpaste were chucked onstage, and within seconds, the group of about 15 sprinted off into downtown to film an instant show based on those props.

"We really have to hustle," director Mark Jordan said. "Everyone runs. You've got to be going as quick as you can because if you make the audience sit and wait for another tape, it really loses some of the magic."

As soon as the team of improvisers gets three random objects from audience members, three groups start filming a mini-movie at separate locations.

After the first scene is shot, a runner brings back the tape, along with the scene's run time and what the mood was, to the video player, and the vignette is scored to appropriate music and played without skipping a beat. The scenes rotate among the three groups, who all find a way to come together in the end, making for a unique, unpredictable movie.

"The really hard part about being an actor and filming a scene is that sometimes we'll go and film a scene somewhere, and a cop will come, or you'll get someone yelling at you, or you'll get someone trying to start up a conversation with you, in the middle of the scene," Jordan said.

One take only

The actors film everything in one take, so no matter what the distraction, they have to keep performing.

The Phoenix Neutrino Project is one part of Phoenix's burgeoning improv scene, which has several troupes around the Valley showing off their stuff regularly. Phoenix improv troupes started to become prominent only in the past five years, but already loyal fans can be found at presentations.

"I think in bigger cities, Los Angeles, Chicago and New York, there are a lot of people doing the work,



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Mark Jordan, director of the Phoenix Neutrino Project improv troupe, discusses what's in store for the evening's performance at the Paper Heart with Jacquie Arend (left) of Tempe and Kimberly Large of Chandler.

"I think here (in Phoenix), we're doing it because we love doing the work, and we love trying to create the best work we possibly can. We really do believe it's an art form."

Jose Gonzalez

A member of several improv groups in the Valley

but they kind of have their eye on the prize of getting seen by a talent scout or someone who's going to make them famous," said Jose Gonzalez, who is involved in Phoenix Neutrino and several other troupes, including Galapagos, The Reminders and Dangerville. "I think here, we're doing it because we love doing the work, and we love trying to create the best work we possibly can. We really do believe it's an art form."

Let the right brains rule

Much of the improv in Phoenix is not your typical *Whose Line Is It Anyway?* style.

Long-form improv, which entails a more theatrical presentation with consistent characters, has found a

home in the Valley, especially at The Trunk Space with organizations Galapagos, Mail Order Bride and Apollo 12.

"You can't fall back on the gimmick of the game," Apollo 12 member Stacey Gordon said. "We go out there, and we let our right brains rule us. You never really know what you see. You may see the most dramatic piece that you've ever seen in your life and be brought to tears, or you can be brought to tears through laughter."

There are several formats to doing long form, ranging from focusing on one subject for the performance, to using a monologue to introduce scenes. In Mail Order Bride's case, the group plays music to set the mood.

The all-female group has been together only for a couple of months, but founding member Amy Carpenter said the group was overdue in the Valley.

"The female gender is underrepresented in improv in general, and Phoenix is lucky to have a lot of amazing women, and I wanted to even things out a bit," Carpenter said.

Making a national scene

Every member of Mail Order Bride is involved in other troupes, which is common in the Valley. Phoenix even has its own improv festival, which will see its sixth year in May.

"We're really getting a lot of recognition nationally for having a growing improv scene here," Jordan said. "We're definitely picking up steam, and I think it's going to be a definite place to go for improv in the next 10 years."

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