

Great Find

in

Santa Clarita Improv at the Rep

by Kevin Grant

So, what did you do last weekend? Dinner and a movie? How original. Who wouldn't enjoy a good movie: pay your \$10, fasten your shoes to the sticky floor, breathe in the odor of stale popcorn and enjoy the furious clicking of teenage text messaging. Then sit back and suffer through 90 minutes of overpaid celebrities demonstrating their acting prowess honed via paparazzi-documented tantrums at Hollywood hotspots. Sounds good.

Movies are easy and predictable. But spending a valuable night out to see a film that will hit cable in about 40 milliseconds is hardly a good use of your precious leisure time. Oh, if your idea of impulsive spontaneity is to visit the Elephant Bar without a reservation, that movie might be enough. But what if you yearn for something interesting to discuss at the water cooler weekend recap? There's got to be something better.

Opera? Dressing up and falling asleep to foreign-language singing is a little too much culture for most of us. Skydiving? Too risky and the dry cleaning bills can be overwhelming. Mountain climbing? Too strenuous. We need something more involving than simply letting entertainment fill your mind like a baby chick waiting for a regurgitated meal, but not so hazardous that the health insurance company will call with some difficult questions. What to do?

Improv, that's what. Santa Clarita Improv at the Repertory East Playhouse.

Isn't improv just stand-up comedy with bad outfits? Oh no. Improv is to stand-up as helicopter skiing is to a machine-groomed slope. There's more risk, but the rewards are greater, too.

Think about it. Why do people go to NASCAR races? It certainly isn't to watch 30 nearly-identical cars make left turns for two hours. They go for the crashes, or at least the risk of a crash. Without that danger,



The Santa Clarita Improv includes Kirby Heyborne, Corbin Allred, Adam Johnson, Eric Artell and Lincoln Hoppe. Photo by Tyler Garns.

NASCAR is no more exciting than a kiddie carousel with pitstops.

Typical comedy club fare is hardly more than a movie with a two-drink minimum. The comedian recites material written six months ago while he watched his great-nephew compete for second runner up at the Bakersfield Bowl-o-Rama invitational. Tonight's show won't differ from last night's; the comedian knows what works and what doesn't. Unless you're lucky enough to catch a Michael Richards-style meltdown, chances are you'll see nothing new.

"That's the beauty of improv - you see comedy as a
RAW, RISKY and UNIQUE
experience shared with
the audience."

Santa Clarita Improv is different. Working Los Angeles area actors formed the eight-performer troupe about a year ago. Most members have some connection to the SCV, either living here or working in our studios. Improv is short for improvisation - the entire show is written in real-time, with no rehearsals and no preparation. The group works from audience suggestions, pulling funny sketches out of the air as they react to the audience and each other.

Co-founder Lincoln Hoppe says improv is like "driving without seatbelts and knowing you're going to hit something - only the other actors can save you from hitting the windshield." And like a car wreck, Hoppe notes, not everything is funny.

But that's the beauty of improv - you see

comedy as a raw, risky and unique experience shared with the audience. When it works, it's sublime. When it doesn't, the audience still laughs. Most movie outtake reels are funnier than the actual movie because the humor is real, not scripted. The ephemeral nature of improv enhances the humor's power. What you see won't be repeated tomorrow. It's the ultimate inside joke.

Hoppe is quick to point out that the shows are "kid-friendly." They're not geared toward youthful audiences, but the actors don't rely on the crutch of profanity to get a laugh. Though Howard Stern proves that shocking the audience can generate millions without the need for talent, the troupe's show generates laughter through sharp, witty comedy, not inappropriate language.

The shows last about an hour and 45 minutes. In that time you'll see a number of sketches, all based on audience input and simple premises such as the scene replay, in which a particular scene is performed in different genres. Maybe a love scene in science fiction, then re-done in horror style. Or the "half-life" game, in which a scene is performed, then replayed more quickly. Each iteration requires the actors to cut half the run time, resulting in hilarious changes.

in

Visit www.santaclaritaimprov.com for more details. The next shows are Friday, June 22; Saturday, July 28; Friday, August 10; and Saturday, August 11. Tickets are \$12 for adults and \$10 for students. All shows at the Repertory East Playhouse, 24266 San Fernando Road, Newhall. Call the box office at 288-0000 for tickets.

great find **July 2007**