



Serious about comedy

BIGFORK COMMUNITY PLAYERS

BACKSTAGE

Improvising Summer



James Vale and Barbara Langlois.

Some people are born with a talent to act and can realistically portray a character on stage or on camera, relying only on their natural talent. But the vast majority, for whom this skill is not part of their innate repertoire, can learn how to do it. And everyone who does it, naturally or as a result of training, can learn to do it better. That's why the Bigfork Community Players (BCP) hosted an acting workshop this summer: to help everyone who's interested to become a better actor.

As initially envisioned, the workshops were intended to give everyone a chance to act and receive feedback. In a relatively low-risk, low-key, low-commitment environment, participants would have the opportunity to select and perform one or more scenes from several plays, including plays slotted for production this year and those under consideration for future production. And some scenes were presented for critique in this manner. But, from the beginning, improvisation games and exercises were incorporated into the workshops and, as time progressed, the improv became virtually the whole of the workshop.

Improv serves a number of purposes. Done well and with considerable talent, it can be entertaining. Performed by those less experienced, it can serve as training, helping actors learn to feel more natural on stage and to move more spontaneously, and on not infrequent occasions still be entertaining. But it also has a valuable side benefit, as eloquently expressed by one of the participants: "This is fun."

Twice a month over the summer, a group of about a dozen met to participate. Each session was divided into two parts. They began with improv games. Freeze Tag was a popular one. In Freeze Tag, two participants begin to improvise a scene. Any scene, but it should involve significant physical movement and it was essential that each of the players accepted unconditionally the observations of the other. If, for example, one were to say, "It's really cold here in outer space," the other would be obligated to continue with that context, perhaps offering, "And it would be really hard to breathe without this heavy space suit."

The twist to Freeze Tag though was that at any moment anyone from the audience could then say freeze and tag one of the players out. He or she would then assume the physical position of that player and begin a new

scene with an opening line. “The wheat in this field looks really dry,” would instantly yank the scene from space to dust bowl Kansas, and the improv would resume.

Other popular games were Props, in which an actor drew or was given a prop from a box and had to describe or make a sales pitch for the item as anything but what it actually was. Slide Show involved a narrator describing slides of a trip or event and other actors acting out the slides. It was generally amazing how quickly the first hour could pass.

The second half of the workshop was devoted to what were called scenario improvs. Scenarios, such as the two following, were given and volunteers improvised them.

Barbie or Ken (2 actors): Supervisor Terry is called upon to conduct a disciplinary interview with Kelly, who has been responsible for assembling 2,000 Barbie dolls with Ken heads. Terry’s job is to determine if it was an honest mistake and if Kelly can be trusted to never let something like this happen again. Kelly’s objective is to avoid getting fired.

Bowled Over (2 actors): Jody loves to bowl and is so thrilled to have just had a her first 100 game. She approaches Dana to see if she can be on his team. Dana and his teammates have an average in the mid to high 200s, which Jody is pretty sure will compensate for her more modest contribution.

Sometimes the results were funny and entertaining. Sometimes they were not. But they were generally fun and appeared good exercise for improving general stage presence.

The summer workshops ran for six evenings over the summer and will probably return next summer. If you want to attend, either to watch or to play, please see the website www.bigforkcommunityplayers.com for dates.



Michele Shapero: Dana, can I bowl on your team?