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Improv comedians think on their feet

By JENNIFER HAWKINS, Middletown Press Correspondent

Javapalooza, an upbeat coffee house at 330 Main St., Middletown, will be hosting Off The Cuff, a comedy improvisation troupe this Friday at 8 p.m. and continuing throughout the year every fourth Friday of the month. The two 45-minute sets, at 8 and 9:15 p.m., will be family friendly and have elements of audience participation throughout.

Improvisational comedy groups were popularized in Britain, Canada and the United States in the 1980s, and provide a form of comedy that encourages participation and is distinct from the familiar stand-up comedy and the sketch comedy of "Saturday Night Live." Generally limited to working smoky bars, groups slowly established a common language of comedic situations ripe for improv.

Perhaps the most well-known improvisational comedy group was the American version of "Whose Line Is It, Anyway?," led by comedian Drew Carey. The show, which began as a British radio show, became a popular UK television program and featured some of the same comics that later starred in the American version and helped to galvanize enthusiasm for improvisational comedy.

Many of the situations and premises used in Off The Cuff draw from the canon of great improv situations and many will be familiar to audiences. The group was founded in 2001 from two core players of the former comedy troupe at Bill Jack Cafe of Comedy. Since then, Off the Cuff has become the longest running improv troupe in Connecticut and has played at corporate events, social clubs, and even improvised murder mystery theater.

"We like to start with suggestions only," says troupe member Bernie Leavy, referring to bar and restaurant gigs. "Then we move into the next five or six games with some audience participation. Freeze tag ends the set, you know -- two people in awkward position," laughs Leavy, "It gives us a way to go over the earlier punch lines, it ties everything up at the end."

While Off the Cuff varies the improv situations with different performances, there are plenty of classic situations in their repertoire for fans of the genre. Audiences can expect to participate in the Shout Outs that set up given situations, as well as in Sound Effects, Puppets and A Day in the Life.

The anticipated line-up of improvs include Movie Freeze and involve the troupe in parodies of film genres, often having to freeze mid-action and change styles.

The troupe often includes the improv classic, Alphabet, which requires the performers to enact a scene in which each sentence must begin with the letter following the first letter of the last sentence. The performers start with a letter chosen by the audience and must go through the entire alphabet.

Puppets, or Moving People, is another Off the Cuff audience participation piece, as volunteers must move troupe members into different positions as they act out the scene. Sound Effects is often done with troupe members performing with sound effects provided by audience members.

Off the Cuff troupe members occasionally hold auditions for their troupe, but with few changes, the members have been working together for over five years. Corporate and private events often make up the largest percentage of their paid appearances.

Audiences who come to the free Javapalooza events can expect to share in the fun with a different show with each performance.

"In our public shows, we don't generally include Props," says Leavy of the improv exercise, "but often corporate shows want us to work in their product."

"A lot of companies use us as the last night of training week entertainment," says Leavy. "We're brought in to spread some laughs and do some improvisations that are pointedly for the business and about building teamwork."

Javapalooza's phone number is 346-5282. For information on Off the Cuff, access the Web site at www.offthecuffimprov.com.